

# Vera Szekeres-Varsa

*Vera Szekeres-Varsa, Budapest, Hungary*

*Interviewer: Mihály Andor*

*Date of the interview: February 2007*

*Translation: Antonia Szenthe*

Vera Szekeres-Varsa, a language teacher, is still active as head of a university department. She lives in Budapest, in the neat Lipótváros district, surrounded by noble and beautiful objects. Vera is an excellent, collaborative interviewee who is strongly motivated to preserve the memory of her family and especially of some of her beloved family members. She does not show her age, dresses youthfully, and her stature, posture, and movements are more that of a woman in her forties than of a 74-year-old.



One of my maternal great-grandfathers, Ármin Weisz, was a wholesale dealer in agricultural products in Komárom (Komárno)<sup>1</sup>. I don't know when he was born, only that he died in 1913. His wife was born Regina Weisz. Regina had a brother who moved to Vásárhely (Trhovište) and became a judge and member of the Upper House of the Parliament. There is a picture of him in the festive garb of Hungarian noblemen, with a sword at his side. I do not know Regina's date of birth, and I only know that she died sometime during the Great War. They were well off; all the family relics show it. I have a seventeenth-century rug from them, for example. I have never seen the house in Komárom; I only heard about it. It had many rooms, a coach house, a carriage, horses, and servants. A cook, a maid, a coachman, a Fräulein, a mademoiselle, a master for the children. They had five children; three got a fine education, and two had only a menial upbringing. The choice did not follow any patterns; neither the order of birth nor the gender of the children influenced it. I thought that maybe those two were not Armin Weisz's children, and he knew it because the family history says that when the husband came home, officers jumped out of Regina's window.

One of the five children, Ernő, came to Pest, changed his name to the more Hungarian-sounding Vadász, and became a banker. They were well-to-do; he and his wife went on holiday to Abbázia (Opatija)<sup>2</sup>, visited the Opera in Vienna. On the nineteenth of March 1944, when the Germans marched in, he hanged himself in his apartment. By then, he was divorced, perhaps partly due to his wife's lavish spending. According to a family anecdote, if she saw an outfit in a shop window in Vienna that she liked, she would check where the owner lived, go to his flat, make him open the shop and buy it. It didn't matter that this way it cost twice as much. They had no children.

The other child, Blanka, married Béla Leveleki, a Jewish forester, lumberyard owner, and wholesale dealer from Transylvania. They had a large apartment in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mures) and a summer house in Szováta (Sovata). Aunt Blanka was so much of a Hungarian that when Transylvania was reannexed to Hungary<sup>3</sup> she appeared in Bocskai<sup>4</sup>. My father desperately told

her that the re-annexation might not bring such a bright future. The couple was taken from the local ghetto to Auschwitz and never came back. They had three children. One daughter died early, before the Shoah.

The third child, Oszkár, did not get a noble upbringing; he befriended the coachman of the household. He was a printer and died quite young, in the 20's. His wife was a seamstress. His son, Ferenc Vadász, joined the Communist movement in Czechoslovakia and became a worker-correspondent for a Hungarian-language, crypto-Communist, or at least strongly left-wing newspaper called Magyar Nap (Hungarian Day). Later he became a journalist. As a young Communist worker, he got into Hungary, where he was arrested and sent to Kistarcsa.<sup>5</sup> Uncle Ernő helped his nephew and paid for a Christian lawyer because a Jewish lawyer would not have been credible. He was released from Kistarcsa, then somehow, he was arrested again, and first sent to Auschwitz, but not as a Jew, as a Communist. From there, he was taken to forced labor somewhere and survived. In 1945, he returned to Hungary, became the municipal party secretary in Kecskemét, and from there, he joined the newspaper Szabad Nép (Free People). In the terror of the 50's, he did not suffer any harm. After 1956, he stayed at Népszabadság (Liberty of the People); now he is retired.<sup>6</sup> He had two sons; I don't know what happened to them.

The fourth child was Aunt Mariska, also uneducated, and she preferred to befriend the servants. Aunt Mariska married the Jewish railwayman József Gombos, later stationmaster of Baja. Aunt Mariska was like a grandmother to me because none of my grandmothers were alive when I was born, and Aunt Mariska came from Baja when my sister and I were born. I remember her as a very nice, curvy lady wearing a pretty white apron. Her arrival at Auschwitz and her husband's Uncle Jóska's arrival are recorded. They were already old people then. They had two daughters, but they survived the war. One lived to be a hundred and three, the other a hundred and four. And both remained in good mental health. A strange compensation for the good Aunt and Uncle.

The husband of one of the girls was a Croatian Christian man who hid her. He also wanted to hide his sister-in-law and her family. Still, the brother-in-law said it was impossible, and they fled to Italy. From there, they made an adventurous journey to Switzerland, where three of the family of four survived. The sole victim of the war was not murdered, either, "only" killed by wartime conditions: his diabetes could not be treated properly. Of course, they were hardly allowed into Switzerland. My aunt told me they were standing at the border, a small group with a few children, and they didn't want to let them into the country. They all spoke German. The Swiss border guard officer told them to wait, to move a little, so they wouldn't be so visible. They heard him on the phone saying that he would resign and disarm if he had to deport them back with the children. After the phone conversation, he told them to wait until nightfall, and they were let in in the dark.

The fifth child, Gizella, my grandmother, was born in Komárom, in 1871 and died in 1921, in Törökbecse (Novi Bečej). My grandmother was raised as a lady, and as a child, she had a mademoiselle at home. In 1890 she married Izsó Garai, who lived from 1859 to 1937. His Hungarian-sounding name was changed from Grünhut. I do not know how they met, but I have a suspicion. Ármin Weisz was said to be a Freemason; I don't know if he was a member of the Komárom, the Bratislava, or possibly the Vienna Lodge. But I know that Izsó Garai was a member of the Lodge in Szeged. I assume that when he lived in Körmend, he must have visited the Lodge in Komárom, which was in the vicinity, and that is where the connection comes from.

All I know about the Garai branch is that my grandfather Izsó's father was Miksa Grünhut, and his mother was Erzsébet Mauthner. When they were born and when they died, I don't know. Miksa Garai was a steward or estate manager on the estate of a distant relative in Körmend or near Körmend.<sup>7</sup> They were well-to-do people. His son Izsó succeeded him in this cattle governorship. When he married my grandmother Gizella in 1890, they moved to Törökbecse.<sup>8</sup> This area is Vajdaság (Vojvodina). There, he was nominated director of the Postal Savings Bank, not only for Törökbecse but for the whole area.<sup>9</sup>

They had two children, both born in Törökbecse. The first was my mother, Ilona (1892-1972), and the second was my uncle, Laci. Uncle Laci was born in 1893, graduated from high school in Szeged, then from KERAK,<sup>10</sup> and then took an additional one-year course. He was a clerk in a mill, and he owned half the mill. In 1942, the Germans or the local Fascist shot him dead in Pancsova (Pancevo). I heard from a family friend who has since died in Israel that he was accused of being a partisan liaison, dragged out of his house, and shot dead. But that is unlikely, partly because I don't think there was a partisan army there at that time, and partly - and this is a fundamental point - because my mother told me he could not have been a partisan, as he wasn't that kind of person. Maybe a month or two before she died, my mother said to me in the hospital, out of the blue: "You know, if it had to come to all this, I would have liked Laci to have been partisan."

My mother remembered her childhood as a happy, heavenly time. She called her parents Mummy and Daddy. There was already a bathroom in the house in Törökbecse, but there was no running water. So, water had to be fetched from the well; a yardman regularly filled the tank. The sewage ran to a cesspool. It was just like running water for those who took a bath but not for those who carried it. The toilet worked the same way; someone filled the tank continuously. There was an ice pit in the yard as well, called 'katráka'. The farming area also had a sort of rack. And there was a rose garden. No farm animals were kept.

The furniture that I remember in the bedroom of our Pancsova home came from Törökbecse. As a child, I remember a huge painting I saw in Pancsova, which I can still describe. I know it came from Komárom, from the Weisz's, probably as dowry; my mother said it was from the seventeenth century. Later, when I became an art historian, I realized that if it was really from the seventeenth century, it must have been a Snyders,<sup>11</sup> the sort of which belongs to a museum, it was either a copy by a contemporary master or it was a workshop piece. So, it was probably a painting of great value. The picture always frightened me as a child, because it was a hunting scene, hounds just snatching a boar already half kneeling, bleeding. The painting was dark, like many from the German lowlands. It hung in the main bedroom, I had to sleep there in the afternoon, and this picture was formidable; I hated looking at it. I don't know why I didn't say so; they certainly wouldn't have made me sleep there if I had. Instead, I said I could sleep much better in that big leather armchair, and I indeed snuggled there a lot.

The house in Törökbecse had five rooms; my grandfather had some sort of office there. There was a parlor with a piano and separate rooms for children of different sexes. A Fräulein lived with them; my grandfather held that the children must learn Hochdeutsch<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the resident Fräulein had to speak Hochdeutsch. Trudi von Trutschler came to the house after my grandfather traveled to Berlin to select her personally. She stayed with them for a long time, but she was no longer there when my mother finished boarding school at the age of sixteen. So, both children spoke native German. They played a lot together. The two brothers and sisters were very close. Uncle

Laci had many friends. One of them, Oszkár Görgényi-Göttche, became a renowned pediatrician in Budapest in the fifties and sixties, it was him I chose as a pediatrician to my daughter.<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that within the Törökbecse middle class, there was no segregation. The Göttche's were Christian Swabs, and then there was a family among the friends, one of them, a young lawyer called Iván, had a card: "Dr. this and that, de genere Töhötöm."

They were very social. At least twice a week, they received guests at my grandmother's house. On other days they visited other people's houses. So, there was something happening almost every day. The gentlemen might not join each time but the ladies and children did. Just as an example, my mother's piano teacher was an Italian woman, Piccola, she came with a local gentleman to Törökbecse. And there was a tennis court; they used to play tennis.

These grandparents were not religious either, neither they were vehemently anti-religious. My mother went to a public elementary school for six years. The school was across the street, and it was the yardman's wintertime task to sweep the snow so Iluska could pass easily. When the road was muddy, he would lay planks across the puddles. By then, Iluska spoke good German and started to learn French from her mother. She had lots of toys, and a dog who was dressed in doll clothes they sewed.

When my mother was twelve, she started boarding school at the Public High School for Girls in Temesvár (Timisoara). It was a four-year school for girls, till the age of sixteen. They slept in dormitories of sixteen beds; one of the girls was a baroness of some sort. My mother arrived by the family's horse-driven cart. It was definitely a school for fine misses. For example, they learned to burn patterns in velvet. I still have my mother's pattern book, and I have the velvet case of the burning needle as well. And then, they learned housekeeping; how to instruct the cook, who obviously knew better how to do things. They learned literature, German, French, and music. Italian was also a choice; my mother enrolled. Once a week, they had a day off and could go out to the city. The college had a policy that children had to bring their own cutlery. They had to carry silver cutlery, and they had to engrave their initials and their dormitory number on it. I have a spoon with GI 48 engraved on it. The report card indicated that she was an Israelite, but I never heard anything about visiting a synagogue. Nor did she tell me of any conflict with her peers over her denomination. She liked it there a lot. They only went home during the school holidays. In addition, on Sunday afternoons, parents were allowed to visit. By then, my mother knew with certainty that she wanted to be a doctor. She was planning to take an exam as her school did not earn her the high school certificate required to enroll in university. She would have had to catch up mainly in Latin, which she agreed to without further ado. She would have had to go to a gymnasium in Szeged to take the exam and she could only stay if she could live with someone trustworthy there. But there were no relatives in Szeged. Back then, high school teachers used to take in boarders. But they couldn't find such a family with only daughters and my grandmother declared that she would never allow her to stay at a family with a boy. That was the end of my mother's education.

She did not rebel, but she tried to do something about it. She told me that the hardest time was when school started in the autumn for others. She was determined to learn all of Schiller's dramas by heart in German. She never got that far, of course, but she knew a lot, not just dramas. She told me how she studied in the garden; as the Sun sank, it was getting cooler but she did not stop reading. To catch the light, she followed the rays of the Sun. But she also studied Goethe, played the piano, and educated herself. She had a great appetite for culture.

After my mother came home to Törökbecse at the age of sixteen, she played tennis and entered the party life. Young men came to the house, played the violin, and she played the piano. They had scenes-of-life pictures taken, they dressed up as one thing or the other and let official photographers take the shot. My grandmother had already started to make sure that there were suitors. My mother was very rebellious, yet she had no conflicts with her parents. She probably believed they meant the best for her. But her rebellion manifested in turning down all the suitors. When she was twenty, she had already turned down the tenth suitor, Vilmos Engel. My grandmother sat down with her in the drawing room and told her: "My dear, what do you want to do with your life? Do you want to end up as an assistant pharmacist?" And then she realized that maybe that wasn't a perspective, and she said yes to Vilmos.

Vilmos Engel came into the family through Freemasonry. My grandfather [Izsó Garai] was a Freemason, a lodge member in Szeged. They told me that in 1912, he came home from a lodge meeting in Törökbecse and told his wife Gizus that there was a new member in the lodge, a sympathetic young man, and he would invite him. And they agreed to invite the young man, whose father, Dr. Mór Engel, a lawyer, was a founding member and also an officer of some sort in the Szeged lodge, one of the recommenders of Ferenc Móra. So, they invited Vilmos Engel, who, I imagine, saw my mother and fell in love with her at first sight. And I not only imagine, I know that this love lasted until death. We somehow inherited this love in a sublimated form because he showed unconditional, devoted love for me and then for my daughter.

Vilmos Engel was a journalist and co-owner of the newspaper Szegedi Napló (Szeged Journal).<sup>14</sup> I don't know what proportion of the paper belonged to Uncle Vilmos; it may have been less than half. The original owner was his uncle, Lajos Engel, who deceased, and his wife, Giza could not run the paper alone. So, she appointed Uncle Vilmos as co-owner and deputy editor-in-chief. Uncle Vilmos was a journalist. Aunt Giza was in her nineties when she was crammed into the wagon. I can only hope that she died on the first day.

When they got married in 1913, the journalists of the newspaper published the first and last issue of a "nuptial magazine" called Előleg (Advance), in which István Tömörkény, Ede Kisteleki, and István Ortutay, among others, wrote funny articles.<sup>15</sup>

After the wedding they were on honeymoon in Venice for six weeks. My mother tried to brush up her Italian while everyone around her spoke German. She had a good sense of language. After the honeymoon, they moved into a large apartment. Izsó Garai ordered the furniture for seven thousand four hundred crowns. According to the invoice, the order consisted of "Dining room (dark oak, with copper embossing): 1 credenza, 1 cupboard, 1 patent table, 8 chairs, 2 armchairs, 3 curtains, 1 tablecloth, 3 bonne femme,<sup>16</sup> 1 tablecloth. Bedroom (painted, lacquered, with some gild): 2 wardrobes, 1 bed 150/200, 2 bedside tables, 1 toilette table, 1 wardrobe with three doors, 1 bedframe in 2 parts, 1 horsehair mattress, 1 ottoman,<sup>17</sup> with linen cover, 2 chairs upholstered in silk, 1 table with glass top, 1 wall covering, 1 bed decoration, 1 armchair for the toilet table, 2 curtains, 1 bedspread, wall covering in fabric. Reception room: 1 sofa bed (lemonwood and ebony), 2 armchairs with mother-of-pearl inlay, 1 round table with glass top, 3 curtains, 3 bonne femme, 1 wall of coat stands."

The house belonged to Szegedi Napló; the publishing office was there, the printing house was in a side wing of the building, and the apartment was on the first floor. Besides the salon, there were



two or three other rooms. The salon was so large that occasionally it served as an exhibition room for the Szegedi Napló artists.

I have a letter from my grandmother from the end of 1913, which she wrote to my mother from Törökbecse, advising her who to visit and when. If possible, she writes, don't postpone your visit to the X's, else it will be cold to wear the outfit that is best for the occasion, the best to wear at the X's. The newlyweds had their own two-horse carriage. My mother already exercised at home and was a keen member of the Szeged Athletics Club, where she enjoyed rowing.

Uncle Vilmos was a lieutenant during the war. He got typhoid fever on the front, survived, and then got through the war relatively easily. When they married, Izsó Garai gave his daughter a monthly allowance of three hundred golden crowns. During the war, my grandfather and Uncle Vilmos purchased war bonds,<sup>18</sup> and lost all the money.

Since the Szegedi Napló was notoriously Jewish-owned and left-wing, Uncle Vilmos was in danger in 1919. He did not even live at home for a few days. Somehow the Szegedi Napló also got out of his hands, and he became an employee at the Athenaeum Printing House, first in Szeged, then, for a short time in Pest.<sup>19</sup> His father, Mór Engel, believed that if he was to prepare his son to lead the publishing house and the printshop one day he should go through all the stages of the process, so Uncle Vilmos also studied typesetting and bookbinding. And he knew languages, German and French. That's why he could work for Athenaeum and he was soon appointed head of their liaison-office in Rome.

My mother traveled with her mattresses because she said the beds in Italy were not good enough. She declared that she had to look modern in Rome, so she cut her hair. But she kept a piece of it so she wouldn't go with such unimpressive hair if she had to go to the opera. Then she would pin on her own supplementary hair. They traveled with incredible luggage, but after six months, they came home because my mother couldn't take it. It was my father. Her love for my father started before they went to Italy. He lived with Uncle Vilmos in Szeged for maybe another year after that, and then my mother moved to Pest in 1927. Uncle Vilmos later sold his interests in Szeged; he also moved to Pest where he had a small printing press. They were always good friends; even my father was good friends with him.

My mother, now Mrs. Engel (Engel Vilmosné), lived in Pest, in the Fifth District, in Pannónia Street. My father already lived in Pest when she moved up. My mother opened a lingerie shop in her apartment. She had a Singer sewing machine. A lady must have had a sewing machine at home because every week or so, a seamstress came to the fine households to cuff, hem, take in or let out, sew the fallen buttons, etc. In Temesvár, sewing was part of the curriculum but not tailoring, so she never could obtain a license. But she did meet a tailor, a brilliant, well-educated Jewish woman, Mancsi Hillinger, with whom she remained excellent friends until her death. She tailored, and my mother sewed. Mother made notes printed to the ladies of Szeged, saying, "If you come to Pest, I will be glad to be at your service."

Meanwhile, in 1928, my sister Klárika was born. They were not yet married, but she was already called Klára Varsa. At least, I think so. They married in 1932. I don't have my mother's letter to her father and brother before she remarried, but I have the reply. It says: "Come home with the baby; we can support you in Szeged. But we are not able to support you in Pest." Apparently, they accepted the situation. My grandmother was no longer alive, having died in 1921.

After the death of my grandmother, Gizella Weisz, my grandfather and Uncle Laci moved to Pancsova (Pancevo) [20](#) Uncle Laci worked in the Pancsova mill; later, he became co-owner, and Izsó retired. The two men lived there alone; Uncle Laci had never married. I remember the house in Pancsova; we spent every summer there until the war. The house was a four-roomed, single-storey building with a porch on Fő Street. Uncle Laci had no separate bedroom; he had his bed in the gentleman's room, but Grandfather had his own room. There was a big kitchen, an elegant bathroom, and black stone or marble bath. You could make hot water in a tall copper cylinder. There were wood-burning, tiled stoves. There was a resident cook and a maid; they lived in the same room. I was firmly told to be polite to them, to call them auntie, and to nicely ask for whatever I needed. For example, cylinder sugar, snow-white, shiny sugar cones, they always had them at hand. There was a dog, a very interesting little fox terrier. I loved dogs, and I didn't have one of my own. The kitchen was huge, at least five by five, with two shiny stoves. The fire was always on in one, so we had hot water. There was a separate oven, but that wasn't used. The bedroom had two big windows on Fő Street and a sofa with many cushions in front of the window. I could kneel on it and look out to the street, which was amusing because it was so close – a very different view of the Pest one, where we lived on the sixth floor. And there were horse-drawn carriages and ox carts. It was also interesting to see the cows coming home, but since they didn't come to the house, I had to ask to be let out to peer at them. The garden wasn't big, but it was very nice. There were many kinds of roses, and my grandfather knew their names. All he cared about was his roses.

Before I go on with the story of my parent's life together, I'll share what I know about my paternal side. My grandfather's father was Ferenc Weisz, and his wife was Erzsébet Lechner. I don't know when they were born or died, but I know that the myth of the family's Kuruc traditions [21](#) begin with Ferenc Weisz. His landlord was a great patriot, and when "Lajos Kossuth called" [22](#), he announced among his serfs that whoever joined the army would get a piece of land from him. According to my father, Ferenc joined the 1848 War of Independence and received land for that, maybe two or three acres. So, he became a landowner, but the plot was too small to provide a living. He probably did some trading as well. I know of three children: my grandfather, Farkas Weisz, and a brother and a sister whose names I don't know.

My other great-grandfather was Áron Kesztenbaum. The family legend says that his wife, Erzsébet Molnár, was a Unitarian Christian who converted to Judaism. I don't know much about them, but perhaps the newspaper article in the 14 December 1935 issue of the newspaper Egyenlőség (Equality) about Áron Kesztenbaum's brother or uncle tells us something about the family:

"Kesztenbaum, the Singular Man from Zemplén

In Sátoraljaújhely, the Jewish school of Kesztenbaum, nearly a century old, has deservedly risen to fame. It was established by the county authorities based on the will of the generous Jewish philanthropist from 1825. Kesztenbaum bequeathed 100,000 Forints to erect a suitable school in the synagogue courtyard in Sátoraljaújhely, Zemplén County. The noble Mr. Kesztenbaum wished to offer proper education for the area's Jewish youth and dispensed free tuition to the orphans of his brethren...

The testator, Márton Rafael Kesztenbaum, was a simple man. In his lifetime, no one would have guessed how noble-minded he was. He wore peasant clothes and was known to be thrifty if not

avaricious. Rumor has it, on the county meeting days, he went to Sátoraljaújhely from Pelejte, where he was a landowner,<sup>[23](#)</sup> and chewed some dry bread for lunch, sitting on a stone in front of the county hall...

Kesztenbaum had no education, little friendship with reading and writing, and his knowledge of Hebrew was limited to reading and writing. Still, he was friends with almost all the respectable men of Zemplén County. ...

In 1825, with the foreboding of his imminent death, Kesztenbaum prepared his last will and testament, in which he was forever inscribed in the history of Hungarian Jewish philanthropy. The will was deposited in the County Archives. However, it was not until 28 November 1829 that Kesztenbaum closed his eyes in the arms of his friend and lawyer, Mihály Resko. ...

At that time, the Jews of Zemplén could hardly understand the idea of founding a school, and the execution of the will and finally the opening of the school can only be attributed to the officials of the county."

Farkas Weisz was considered a rebel in the family. He should have enlisted as a soldier in 1865, but instead went to work illegally among the fishermen of the Tisza and only emerged after the Compromise.<sup>[24](#)</sup> By then, his father Ferenc had died, and the tiny piece of land was inherited by his brother and his sister, who had married in the meantime, and he had nothing left. The siblings were good and bought him a horse and a cart. So, he became a hauler. He was hard-working and certainly intelligent, for later, he had a small business in the outskirts of Miskolc with several horses and a cart. At one time, in addition to transport, he also rented a pub in Miskolc, where his wife, Erzsébet Kesztenbaum, also helped him. Erzsébet was born in Taktaharkány<sup>[25](#)</sup> in 1849. They lived meagerly. I know from my father that their house had a dirt floor. Farkas continued the Kuruc tradition, was strongly anti-Habsburg and militantly anti-religious. All I know about his wife, Erzsébet Kesztenbaum is that she came from a poor family, so she was not educated, and she was the only religious one in the family, with the vigor of a neophyte. Erzsébet died sometime in the 1920's, and is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Miskolc. Still, when I looked for her grave in the late 1960's, I couldn't find it. In his old age, Farkas moved to Pest to live with his daughter and died in 1932, and he is buried in the Kozma Street Jewish Cemetery.

They had eight children but only four made it to adulthood: a daughter and three sons. The three sons changed their names to the more Hungarian-sounding Varsa sometime in the early twentieth century, between 1905 and 1910. I don't have the document about hungarizing<sup>[26](#)</sup> the name, but my father's graduation picture in 1911 lists him as Varsa. Their sister was married by then, so she remained Róza Weisz. The children went to a Hungarian school. The eldest was Róza, my aunt, born in 1871; she was not educated. I don't know why she didn't attend four years of elementary schools. As far as I know, she only attended for two years.<sup>[27](#)</sup> I saw her letters, her spelling was terrible. She married Ignách Gajdos, a wealthy textile merchant. They lived in Rákóczi Street in Budapest, and the shop was in that house. Her husband died in 1934, Aunt Róza in 1941. They had two sons. The elder, Alfred, was born in 1899 and lived in Paris in high esteem until he was eighty-eight years old. He was an excellent doctor. He came to Paris because after graduating medical school in Pécs, the only job he could find was as an unpaid assistant doctor in the countryside. His wife was also a doctor, her chances of finding employment in Hungary were even more dire. In 1931, they went to Paris. Alfred had to graduate first, then pass all the medical exams again. He



did it all in three years.<sup>[28](#)</sup> Meanwhile, his wife Marianne, also a medical graduate, worked as a beautician and supported the family. They had a child already when they emigrated; another was born there quite soon. When Alfred became a French doctor, Marianne graduated in French, and attended medical school. In the meantime, she gave birth to a third child and later worked as a research biologist. Then she had a fourth child, in 1944. They escaped the war by hiding their Jewish identity. They looked Jewish, so they said they were from the south of France. The name Gajdos might have been Basque or Catalan, it helped a lot. They spoke French with quite a strong accent until they died, but one could reasonably expect some complicity from the French authorities, while the Germans couldn't detect their alien pronunciation in any case.

The younger son, [Gajdos] Sándor, was also very talented but not hard-working. He preferred horse races to studying, played cards, and had had bourgeois whims. When he was sent to university in Vienna, he bought two beautiful greyhounds instead of taking the exams. Eventually, he became a lawyer and lived a somewhat frivolous, bohemian life in Pest. After the war, he became a merchant for export-import. He divorced his first wife. His son from that marriage worked in foreign trade as a mechanical engineer. Sándor died in 1986 in Düsseldorf, where he had defected with his second wife, in 1957. He somehow managed to make it legal. I remember him telling me that when he was a captive as a forced laborer, he caught a moment alone with a guard escorting him from one place to the other, and said to him: "Look, I have nothing, I can't give you anything, but the Russians are already here. If you let me go now, and then you come to me after the liberation, I will reward you handsomely." He was let go, survived, and the guard came to claim his reward after liberation.

After Róza, the eldest son, Varsa (Weisz) Imre was born in 1873, so he was nineteen years older than my father. When he finished elementary school, the teacher visited them and said, "My dear brother Farkas, the child Imre needs a chance at further schooling." And then they put him in a public school, and he became a printer, a proofreader. He took part in the First World War, was at the siege of Przemyśl, and was taken prisoner. He wrote about it, and some of his books were published. (The family had some literary talent; my father also wrote poems. Bad poems, but they were still poems. He might have written good novellas.) His wife was Aunt Zsófi, and they had three daughters, Klári, Magda, and Erzsébet. They lived with the quality of life of the lower-middle-class; I think they had a three-room flat in Józsefváros until the girls married. As I remember, the flat was dark, and the doors were dark as well. Their eldest daughter, Elizabeth [Varsa], was born in 1899 and died in the early 1990's. She was a beautiful girl, married twice. The first husband was at least twenty years older than her and was a senior official at the Hungarian State Coal Mines.<sup>[29](#)</sup> Her second husband was a mechanical engineer. She had a daughter who still lives in America, her husband, János Beér, who took part in Wallenberg's actions when he was an undergraduate, and taught at MIT in America. [Varsa] Klári's first husband was a Christian military officer who, in 1942 was nice enough to divorce her as his career was hampered by a Jewish wife. There were no children from that marriage. Klári remarried after 1945, and there were children and grandchildren. I never knew her husband; they lived together briefly, and he died. She did not remarry. Magda [Varsa] had no children. Uncle Imre was in a camp in Austria with his daughters, where they were forced to do long marches on foot.<sup>[30](#)</sup> His daughters pushed him home from Austria in a baby carriage; he was so weakened. He died in the winter of 1945, after liberation. Aunt Zsófi had a mild stroke in 1944, and when the family was deported, she could not get out of bed. They left her there, and, somehow, she survived. I met her again in 1957.

A few years later, the teacher returned to the Weisz's and said, "My dear Farkas, the Dezső child, he has to be educated, too." And so, Dezső finished KERAK after public school, a two-year trade school, a kind of vocational school.<sup>31</sup> I think he went to Nagykikinda to work in a bank as an accountant.<sup>32</sup> He got better and better jobs in the same bank, so he moved from Nagykikinda to Szeged and then to Budapest. He worked in a bank until my father opened a law office.

Uncle Dezső married a Christian woman, Erzsébet Bogdánffy of Bogdánfi. My religious grandmother was devastated and made my father, who was still unmarried at the time, swear never to marry a Christian woman. My father swore. Uncle Dezső converted before the wedding and gave a reversalis vow, but the grandmother did not know about this.<sup>33</sup> Uncle Dezső's two sons were brought up as Christians, and no one ever knew that their bloodline was not entirely clean. One of the sons was Ferenc, married a Christian woman. How little anti-Semitic her family was, is illustrated by the following: in October 1944, when the Hungarian Nazis came to power, Ferenc had already disappeared, as it was later discovered he had been taken prisoner by the Americans. His mother-in-law showed up and said to my mother, "Ilus, pack your things; you come with me and stay with us." Even though she already had a three-year-old daughter at that time, and they didn't know whether the father, the only family link to them, was alive or dead. But she certainly knew their life would be in danger if she sheltered us. I will never forget her offer. Still, we didn't go. My mother said, "If Jóska comes home, he'll look for us here."

Both my cousins [Ferenc Varsa and István Varsa] were engineers. During the '56 revolution, István was in Moscow on an official business trip. When he returned, he defected at the end of the year. He didn't dare taking his two sons and wife with him, and the family followed him in a very adventurous and strange way years later. They ended up in America, divorced there, and István remarried. He married the widow of Colonel Koszorús, who has a marble plaque dedicated to him opposite the Dohány Street Synagogue.<sup>34</sup>

For 13 years, the Weisz couple took a long break, but then my father was born. When my father finished elementary school, the same teacher came to my grandfather again and said, "The Jóska child really needs further schooling." But then my grandfather, who was already in his sixties, said it was impossible. He couldn't have him educated. My father's younger brother, Dezső, thirteen years older, who was already a married bank official in Kikinda, took him in and had him educated. They must have lived in a big flat because when he arrived as a little boy, the couple already had two small children. Still, he had a separate room.<sup>35</sup> Uncle Dezső also paid for his clothing. He was treated as if he were their child and had more rights than the little ones. The little ones repeatedly mentioned that they learned a lot from Jóska. He spent the holidays at Aunt Róza's in Pest, as this was her pledge. The two boys there were closer to him in age, and they regarded him as their brother. Alfréd [Gajdos], who also wrote poetry and published a volume,<sup>36</sup> often told me that he learned his love of Hungarian poetry from my father. My father recited many poems by heart. The two Gajdos boys and my father spent one or two weeks with their grandparents in Miskolc every summer. This is how I know the house was small and had dirt floors. All my father told me about these holidays in Miskolc was that they went swimming somewhere in the neighborhood. For these children living in bourgeois comfort, these holidays were exciting, and they were free to roam wherever they wished.

He didn't tell me much about his high school years. He didn't like going to school; he didn't like Latin or German. Only Hungarian and history. And athletics. There were athletics clubs in

Nagykikinda. In 1911 he graduated from the Public High School in Nagyikinda and wanted to go to university, but my uncle couldn't afford to do it. He knew that his uncle had to educate his own two sons, as well. So, my father, who wanted to be a Hungarian literature and history teacher, became a law student in Budapest, at the Pázmány University.<sup>37</sup> It was the only university in Hungary at that time where it was possible to study, as we would say today, on long-distance courses.<sup>38</sup> He took various jobs in Szeged as a clerk because, in the meantime, Uncle Dezső moved from Nagyikinda to Szeged. My father did not like law, but he did it properly. He did a lot of sports: athletics, including long and high jump. He was so good at sports that around 1913, even his participation in the 1916 Olympics came up, but the war intervened. The drafted students were allowed to take the final exams earlier, so in 1914, my father finished his studies and filed in. He received his diploma signed by Ruzsem Vámbéry in 1918.<sup>39</sup>

In 1915 he was shot in the lungs on the Eastern Front and was hospitalized. He recovered too soon, thanks to his strong, athletic body, and was sent back to the front. He spent six weeks in the trenches, where everyone had a cold or flu, and he caught TB. Then he was taken prisoner of war <sup>40</sup> and in early 1916 he was sent to Krasnoyarsk in Siberia. He was sent to the officers' section of a vast prisoner-of-war camp. He told me how they tried to get rid of the lice. They buried the shirt, stuck a straw in the ground, and the lice would crawl through it. Then they dug up the shirt, dirty but free of lice. From time to time, there was no food, and that was terrible. He made friends with a certain József Fénykövi (he changed his name from Sonnenstein shortly before the war), who had a cube of sugar. It was their dinner-for-two because Fénykövi shared it with him. They moved around quite freely within the camp. For example, they amused themselves by setting up plays; of course, the boys played the female parts, too. Then there was a typhoid breakout. He never told me this, but when I met Señora Fénykövi in 1973, she told to me how my father had visited Fénykövi and cared for him when he was lying in the infected barrack. She, in turn, had never heard the story of the cube of sugar. So, these two men had done a lot for each other, but they only shared the stories of the other's good deeds.

After the October Revolution<sup>41</sup> the Russian army dissolved, and very slowly, with many difficulties, he came home relatively sound. He traveled for a day, then waited for two days in some Siberian village, then traveled again, then waited again. Eventually, he came home. But Fénykövi chose to go to China and ended up in Spain, where he became very rich.

When my father arrived home in 1918,<sup>42</sup> everything was already falling apart here. Because he had always wanted to be a literary man, he enrolled in the Faculty of Arts. But he dropped out in the first year because that was when the Jew beatings started at the universities.<sup>43</sup> In Szeged, he passed the bar exam after one or two years and worked in a bank. He even started athletics again, but it was obvious that he would not be an outstanding sportsman, although he seemed in perfect health. He played sports for a long time, hiked a lot, and was even a coach at the Szeged Athletics Club. When he passed the bar exam, he took a job in a law firm. In the late 1920's, he came up to Pest. By this time, he had already begun a relationship with my mother. It started in Szeged around the Athletics Club, where my mother rowed. Vilmos Engel was also a member of the Athletics Club, but he did not exercise.

So, my father came up to Pest in the late 1920's and opened a law office in Aunt Róza's apartment on Rákóczi Road. He lived there, and there was room, as the boys were no longer at home. A cousin, Mariska Kesztenbaum, was the secretary. She died four or five years ago; I kept in touch

with her. She was the only one of my paternal grandmother's family I had contact with. She was the daughter of Erzsébet Kesztenbaum's brother.

As I said, my mother came up, and my sister was born in 1928. They married in 1932 and established a home together. They lived at 14 Pannónia Street briefly, then moved to Alag,<sup>44</sup> because my father always said he was from the countryside. He was born in Miskolc and lived in Nagykikinda for years, so he was not a countryman par excellence, but he felt that he should live in the countryside, not in a forest of stones. He always longed for somewhere outside. They rented a villa in Alag. My father came to work from Alag to Pest. My mother had a lot of furniture and things, and they took all of it with them. It was the furniture that Grandfather had bought for her in 1913, in Szeged, when she first married. In Alag, I don't know why, one of the places was no good, and after six months, they moved to another place. And when that one was no good either, my father said, well, if my mother feels so miserable, they should return to the city. So, we moved to the Phoenix House in Újlipótváros, in 1935. After six months, my father wanted to leave there, and my mother said no: my father could move, but she and the children would not. So, we stayed there permanently; I moved out in 1979.

My father's office stayed in the Gajdos' apartment on Rákóczi Street until 1936-37, then it moved to Uncle Dezső's apartment on Hold Street,<sup>45</sup> to the 'throne room,' as they called the hall, which even had interior columns. Uncle Dezső left the bank and became my father's partner in the law firm. He was not a lawyer but did many things for my father. From 1933 onwards, my father spent much time in hospitals and sanatoriums. When he was in the Budakeszi Sanatorium, Uncle Dezső visited him, they discussed the cases, and my father told him what to tell whom and where to go. So, what he could do instead of my father, he did. He was smart; he understood things. Of course, only my father stood at the bar, but Uncle Dezső ran the office; he was a jack of all trades. There was also a typist, a lovely young girl.

I was three and a half years old when my sister died in September 1936. By then, she had been bedridden for a year and was never a real playmate. Anyway, there was a period when I was ill and in hospital. I had tuberculosis and, at the same time, whooping cough. The doctors didn't give a penny for my life. They told my mother to take good care of her older child. They thought she had a better chance of surviving. I don't remember much about my sister. In the photographs, until she was three or four years old and became ill, she looks like a little blushing, cheerful child. Then there comes a period when she seems very sad. She started school at Alag local elementary school. My mum and dad thought she had gotten sick because she had been vaccinated in school, even though the family pediatrician had vaccinated her earlier. They questioned why they had not been asked about it. My sister finished the first class, and then her school career ended.

My father became temporarily religious for about three years after my sister died. Before that, he was not a believer at all, so much so that when I was in my first year of elementary school and I heard that we had to light candles on Friday nights, I took out a glass tray from my mother's room, took two candles from the pantry that we had saved in case of a power cut, and lit them. My parents scolded me; my mother said the glass tray would crack, and my father said this was a pagan thing to do. That was my religious upbringing. My sister's death was even worse than expected because she got tuberculosis from my father, who interpreted it as murdering his child. I learned from my cousin Alfred a few decades later that they feared he would have a breakdown or commit suicide. He could not do that because I was three years old. I think his sudden religiousness

was a psychological solution to all this. The family was so irreligious that when they wanted me to pray in the evenings in memory of Kláríka, no one knew a prayer either in Hungarian or Hebrew. Then after three years, religion somehow dissipated from my father, parallel to the growing influence of Nazism in Hungary. (Hot-tempered poems bear witness to his feelings.)

Then, religion came back once again. In 1948, my father was in the hospital, obviously knowing that he didn't have much of his life left, and suddenly he asked for a rabbi because he wanted to return to the Jewish faith.<sup>46</sup> My mother argued a little, but not much. The rabbi was called, and my father converted back. And then he got it in his head that my uncle Dezső had to return to the Jewish faith, too. My uncle was over seventy then; his children and grandchildren were all Christians, so he didn't want to make such a fuss. My father told him he did not want to see him again if he would not convert back. My uncle, who raised him and loved him very much, almost like his own sons, was heartbroken. I remember my father's bed was on the mezzanine of the hospital in Amerikai út, there was a ledge outside, and my old uncle, suffering from spinal pain, wearing a corset, climbed up there to lay eyes on his beloved, dying brother, knowing he would not receive him. My father knew he had weeks or months to live, and when he learned that my uncle was not returning to the Jewish faith, he asked Uncle Vilmos Engel to take care of us. And Uncle Vilmos kept his word. He visited us, cared for us, and loved us.

My earliest memory is when we moved into the Phoenix House. Huge people carried a huge wardrobe, and my mother told them where to put it. To keep me calm, I was given a bag of honey candy. Otherwise, they were meticulous about when, what, and how much I ate. And every time I reached into the bag, I got a broken piece, even though I could see there were whole pieces. I was two and a half years old.

The apartment in the Phoenix House had a bedroom, dining room, salon, hall, maid's room, kitchen, bathroom, toilet, and pantry. Hot water all day round, central heating, a spacious garden in the courtyard, divided into four sections. Every spring, four big flower beds, and tulips of different colors were planted in them. In the middle stood a fountain with a female figure, a big statue. During the siege, her head was knocked off on the pedestal by an impact, and it always served well as a swing. I think the house was built in 1931, and my mother was very proud of her modern apartment. The apartment was furnished with furniture from Szeged, some of the carpets were so big that they didn't fit, so they were rolled up.<sup>47</sup>

I don't know what cases my father's law firm dealt with. The Kecskemét Canning Factory must have been his client because we received many canned apricots. They were delicious. I once overheard my mother and father talking about somebody wanting to entrust him with something. My dad offensively said he wouldn't take it, "You don't think I'm going to take a case where the client is wrong!" Then I am aware of one more case of his for sure. Near Balatonalmádi there was a settlement called Budatava where a development sold plots. They were sold at a down-payment of half the price, and then in installments over two years. My father was the lawyer for this transaction, and instead of a fee, he asked for a plot of land at half price. He got it. We didn't use it for anything because my father was ill, and after 1945 it was expropriated. After a long litigation process, my mother somehow got it back in 1954. Of course, by then, someone had already built a house on it, so we got another one. The village was no longer Budatava but Almádi; it had public utilities. So, he was dealing with civil cases like that, not with criminal cases. Maybe even divorce cases.



In the meantime, my mother was mainly a housewife because my father and sister were ill. That alone made life very difficult. She was always trying to do something about it. A certain Aunt Mancsi, with whom she ran the lingerie shop for a while, worked as an employee in someone's fashion salon on Katona József Street. Sometimes, when there was too much work, Mama would get some to do at home. She sewed beautifully. But she sewed very little and earned very little.

I started school in 1939, a private school. They didn't want to send me to a private school, and my mother told me very proudly and self-consciously that she was sent to the public school for girls. But when my sister died, and no one in the family was sane, I was taken to Kozma Street Cemetery for the funeral. It was a traumatic experience. The first was that all the ladies had black veils in front of their faces. The second was seeing my father's shoulders shaking with sobs. I started to cry loudly. A maid, a country girl with common sense, lifted me up, took me in her arms, and carried me away. And then I saw right into the pit just as she took me in her arms. I understood that that's where they'd put my sister. I was terrified. I cried uncontrollably for a long time, and then I stopped talking. By then, I was babbling a lot, reciting long rhymes by heart. I was a very talkative little kid. I was already being taught German by my mother, who was very attentive to my Hungarian. When I was three, she decided it was good enough to start German, and she started teaching me. So, after my sister died, I stopped talking. I talked to my parents, the maid who lived with us, and the children I met in the park, but I didn't speak to adults. Not Uncle Dezső, not Uncle Vilmos, no one. Until then, I chatted with each of them easily. My family was frightened. They called a psychologist and a doctor and tried to work it out. I heard what they spoke about me – children are always aware of talks about them – so, I hid under some furniture when someone came to examine me. They only could get me out by force, and they didn't want that. When the doctor left, I would come out and go on playing with my dolls and teddy bears. So, they couldn't send me to a public school because you can't send a mute child there. This is why I went to a private school on Pozsonyi Road, Erzsébet Répánszky's private school, where there were four of us in a class. It was actually a four-grade, undivided elementary school. There was a pretty big room. All four classes were there. In some classes, there were only two or three kids. We had to go to the other room during music class because that's where the piano was. We didn't have gymnastics, but we went for walks every day, the whole school, all twelve kids. Miss Erzsi also had a helper, Miss Sári, who taught English. When I think back, I think eighty percent of the children were Jewish.

At home, I was always with my mum. She minded me, we played, we talked, she recited many poems to me. Early on, she read to me from the book "The Adventures of Muki and Bubu from the Jungle to the Garage" by Mózes Gaál.<sup>48</sup> This was a thick volume, a wonderful novel. I was a very bad eater, and my mother made it worse by cramming food into me. She was afraid of what might happen if I fell ill as well. I really liked raw things, kohlrabi, carrots. Why they didn't give me those, I don't know. So, I'd sit there at lunch from half past one to half past three, munching, and my mother would read to me to give me patience to sit there. And then she told me a lot of things I didn't understand, but she said it was no bother if I didn't understand, she'd just go ahead and tell me now. My mother could tell stories with passion. About the French Revolution, for example. She used to walk with me a lot, and to keep me from getting bored, she used to recite poems to me. By the time I became a teacher of Hungarian, I knew a lot of poems by heart, but I always had to be careful not to include the few mistakes I learned from my mother. She also recited poems in German. She also taught me French, enough at least so that when I read a French name, I might be able to pronounce it.

Nonetheless, my father played some role in my upbringing as well. He once told me that he really wanted me to learn a poem. This must have been in 1942, when he learned that he would certainly not be able to raise me. It didn't matter if I didn't understand, he'd try to explain it and I should try to remember it. Every day I would learn a passage and tell him. I could tell he was happy. It was "The Old Gypsy" [by Mihály Vörösmarty]. But he also made a serious pedagogical mistake. Once, when he heard my mother speaking to me in German, he asked her why she was teaching the child German and not English or French. My mother knew French quite well, and she knew some English, but far from the native speaker level at which she spoke German. The next time my mother spoke to me in German, I said I didn't want to learn German, I wanted to learn English. My German lessons stopped and of course the other language did not come too much, either.

My father was a great influence on me. If he said something, I took it very seriously. But the occasion was rare, because he spent months in a sanatorium. When he was at home, we weren't allowed to go near him. I didn't spend much time with him, but sometimes he would take me for a walk because in the open air my mother would sooner let me, and then I would want to walk as much as he did. He was, however, the one to teach me how to ride a bike. I got a small bike. I got a lot of things, even though we weren't well off, precisely to offset my father's constant illness. What I needed for my development or my education, I definitely got, I had plenty of toys, lots of books. I learned to swim in Mátrafüred, at the age of ten, where the lifeguard put me on a string. The year 1944 the training was discontinued, then in 1945 my mother took me to Lukács Bath and there I finished on my own.

At first, we had a maid, later it became unsustainable to pay and feed her as well. At that time, there was this "the tarp is spread for market but there's nothing to sell" solution, which was called "couple for cleaning". A couple moved into the staff room, a certain Mariska and her husband. The wife did the housekeeping, she was not paid a wage but was allowed to live there with her husband. She was with us from 1938 to 1944. But Mama never left me, she took care of me herself.

A normal day would see me at school in the morning and home at noon. It was a three-minute walk to school, but my mother would pick me up, because every half hour a vehicle would pass along Pozsonyi Road. After school, she would take me for a walk or to the skating rink. The winter of 1942-43 was terribly cold, it was twenty-eight degrees in Budapest at one point, and I was the only one on the skating rink. My mother told me to go inside after every turn to warm up. I had skates with a buckle. Then we went home, we had to eat lunch, then I sat down to study.

When I was born, I was given a railed cot and slept in it until I was ten. I couldn't fit in it anymore, and if I wanted to stretch out, I had to stick my legs out through the bars. For my tenth birthday, I got an armchair bed that I had to open up each night. I slept on it until I was twenty. The apartment was so cluttered with furniture that there was not a nook, I played under Mama's toiletry table, and if I made a doll's room out of the doll's furniture, I was never allowed to leave it out.

On weekends, when my father was well, we would go on a trip to the Buda Hills. I didn't like hiking, but my father would show me the birds, which was fun. Before the war, we used to go to Pancsova in the summer, and we always spent two months there. In 1939, as the First Vienna Decision brought back Felvidék (Upper Hungary), we moved to Rozsnyó (Rožňava) and rented a room there. I liked it very much, because there were oxen in front of the house and an older girl lived opposite, who was at least ten years old, but she accepted me as a playmate. During the war, between 1940

and 1942, my mother and I stayed in a boarding house in Balatonalmádi three times for six weeks. My father would come down at weekends. In 1943 we spent three weeks in Mátrafüred.

I had piano lessons, and I always had to go to Uncle Ernő's to practice, because there was a piano there. I went to Fodor's gymnastics school in Hollán Street, where fencing was still possible and I was enrolled in fencing.<sup>49</sup> They spent a lot on my education, more than they could afford. I learned languages at home. I was not a good student, but I did not need to be tutored.

My mother studied piano for ten years, she played the piano beautifully and was very musical. She was always listening to classical music on the radio. She wanted me to be a music lover too, so when I was quite young, about seven years old, she took me to a concert once. I know it was Beethoven's Symphony No. IX, I was bored to death, and was relieved when they started singing. Unfortunately, that spoiled it and I didn't accompany my mother for a long time. But once, Imre Ungár gave a concert, and my mother told me the background information that the pianist was blind, so I became interested.<sup>50</sup> But I was already ten years old. My parents used to go to the theatre a lot, especially to the Vígszínház (The Comedy Theatre of Budapest), and my mother would run home during the intervals. But I wasn't alone, Mariska was there. I went to the cinema with my mother, my father didn't come. After Klárka died, he didn't do certain things. For example, from then on, he only wore a black tie and a black watch strap. Once my mother and I went to see a comedy and I was rolling with laughter. Then my mother told my father that he had to come and watch the kid laugh, and he did. One of my father's business associates was connected with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer<sup>51</sup> and we got tickets to see The Wizard of Oz<sup>52</sup> at the Royal Apollo Movie Theater, later named the Red Star Movie. There I got little dolls of all the characters in The Wizard of Oz, made into brooches. I had them for a very long time, my daughter scattered them somehow.

My parents were not out in society very much. My mom had girlfriends; my dad had one very good friend, a lawyer. We socialized with my father's family quite a lot, Uncle Dezső, Uncle Imre. We also kept company with the Engels. I had children come to my house, schoolmates. I went to other people's houses. We had children's parties at ours and elsewhere. When I went to a party, my mother tried to dress me up very nicely and put a lot of bows in my hair, which I hated. I had one in each of my two pigtails, one in the middle, and who knows where else. I was a good girl, I didn't say anything, but when Mama didn't see, I took the bows out and stuffed them in my pocket. That was my greatest rebellion until 1944.

In 1943 I finished elementary school, and in the autumn of 1943 and it was no longer easy for a Jewish girl attending whichever school her parents chose. There were two options: either a civil school or the Jewish Gymnasium [see glossary]. There was a disagreement between my parents because my father said that the child should not go to a denominational school. My mother said that the child should go to a place where she was sure not to get any diseases. She would be more exposed to illness in the civil school. So I went to the Jewish Gymnasium, but not to Abonyi Street, because we didn't get a spot there. There was a private school called Lázár Piroska [see: Lázár Piroska's Public Educational Institute for Girls in Budapest], an external branch of the school on Abonyi Street, on the first floor of an apartment building in what is now Balassi Bálint, then Személynök Street. Fifty-five of us studied in one class, and two rooms were opened into one. The hall and one other room had been turned into a gym earlier, but it could only accommodate half a class, so the timetable was set as German/Gymnastics, Gymnastics/German. While half had Gymnastics, the other half had German, and then they switched. This school year didn't even last a

year.

I remember my parents' shock when the Germans marched in [see: German occupation of Hungary] and how they said, "We have a very serious problem." Not quite a month later, a letter came:

"The plenary meeting of the Board of the Budapest Bar Association held on 14 April 1944, pursuant to § 5 of Decree No. 1210/1944 of the Hung. Royal Ministry of Justice hereby removes Dr. József Varsa, attorney-at-law, from the register of lawyers as recorded by the Budapest Bar Association. The decision ordering his removal shall be published in the Budapest Gazette after it becomes final.

#### REASONS

The Board of the Budapest Bar Association has established that the lawyer named in the operative part of this decision is a person to be considered a Jew pursuant to Article 9 of Act XV of 1941, and therefore, pursuant to Article 5 of Decree No. 1210/1944 M.E., he should be removed from the register of lawyers kept by the Budapest Bar Association."

I have a copy of a letter my father wrote to one of his clients on April 20th 1944:

"Highly esteemed Mr. Rocskay,

If I remember correctly, in 1938, but in any case, at the very beginning of our business relationship and in several subsequent discussions, you, Mr. Rocskay, made generalizing statements about the unreliability of Jews in general. Whether out of conviction or based on unpleasant experiences, I do not know, but doubtless in the belief that I am not a Jew.

For the sake of sincerity, however, I must also state that on more than one occasion during our various discussions, you, esteemed Mr. Rocskay, made remarks which proved, if not your pro-Jewish sentiments, at least your humanist mindset. Because, as you, Mr. Rocskay, emphasized, a man should never be judged by his origin, nationality, or religion but by his deeds.

Your statement about the unreliable character of Jews also applied more specifically to Jewish lawyers; however, as I said, in a generalized way. I did not want to refute it at that time for many different reasons.

One reason was that I had never engaged in political or ideological debates with my clients or others. Another was that I considered such debates pointless. First of all - I am convinced - it was not by words but deeds that such beliefs and statements, which I thought to be misconceptions, had to be refuted. Also, I considered it pointless to enter into such a debate because any argument, agitation, or proof against such misconceptions would appear to be a futile struggle.

And finally, I had not refuted such statements because I had adopted such a stance. I could not have spent the last 30 years or more on anything other than the perpetual and fruitless pursuit of such arguments.

During my career as a lawyer, my years as a volunteer, the First World War, and the long years of captivity, I considered all refutations unnecessary. On the contrary, if I had chosen to argue against the ill accusations, I would not have followed my conviction to refute them by deeds, not words.

Whether this perception was right or wrong is not for me to decide. Still, the fact is that my most insistent clients were those who – at the beginning of our acquaintance - uttered views similar to yours, Mr. Rocskay, even though I later told them the truth about my status.

However, I do not want you, Mr. Rocskay, or anyone else who may read this letter, to be misled and think my silence was intended only to attract and keep clients. On several occasions during my practice, the condition of the engagement was that the lawyer must not be Jewish. In such cases, I have regretfully declined my engagement, without regard to any financial or other advantage and with a statement of my religion.

Not so very long ago, while we were still in contact, I was recommended by a high-ranking state functionary as legal adviser to a large Dutch firm here. However, when I learned the Dutch firm sought a Christian lawyer, I immediately informed my patron that I did not meet this condition. I did not visit the director of the Dutch firm at the arranged time and place for the reason I have just mentioned. I was then given the advice I did not follow: to take the case because they would waive the condition above after seeing my work. But I did not apply, even though I knew that this firm alone would have provided me with more income than my entire clientele, as it was.

Generally speaking, I declared my religion to the client if the case was of significant financial interest, especially if it was an out-of-court procedure. If asked, I would tell the truth in cases of minor benefits or economic advantages. Still, as in your case, if I was not asked, I almost made a sport of my conduct, not referring to my religion. Indeed, such cases often resulted in strange situations, but I followed the principle that deeds are the proper arguments against untrue accusations instead of words. After the cases were closed, I told them I was not a Christian, whereas the clients told me not to make a fool of them because they would not believe it.

Also, there have been occasions when I have had to pocket the following remarks with bitter satisfaction: "Only a Christian lawyer can conduct a case so fairly and objectively."

Despite its irrelevance to the matter, our long and pleasant cooperation, Mr. Rocskay, requires that before you misjudge my conduct, I declare I have never denied my religion except in one case. When I was a prisoner of war in Russia, I had to choose whether to stay with my comrades with whom I was one and with whom I was lying on the front line in the Carpathians and then in the sands of Galicia. If I had not denied my religion, I would have ended up in a European camp and not in a Siberian one, but if I had denied it, I could have stayed with my comrades. Of course, I denied my religion without hesitation.

I know this is not a merit, nor do I wish to make it sound like one; I only bring it up because generalizations are always untrue. After all, it was not only I who denied my religion on this occasion but all my fellow officers of the Jewish faith in that camp, without any hesitation or discussion.

As for the mentality of Jewish lawyers, I can only say that many of my Jewish colleagues think as I do in the conduct of their cases. Still, I have no wish to prove this because I have already stated that fighting against this epidemic is futile.

Despite what I have said, you may still question, Mr. Rocskay: why I am only telling you all this now? Why not earlier? Perhaps the above explanation would be good enough. I want to add



another thing: I have been preparing to tell all this - if not in such detail - for some time. On the one hand, I have been ill for about two years and spent most of the time in a sanatorium, so we hardly met.

On the other hand, you, Mr. Rocskay, had only two legal cases with me, one in 1937 (the naturalization) and the house purchase in 1939. In these two cases, if I remember correctly, I earned 1600 pengő, which is money for me, but not enough to explain my silence until today. The purpose of writing this letter is that on the 4th of this month, you, Mr. Rocskay, asked me to represent your interests in purchasing a new property on the proceeds of the house purchase.

In the shadow of the yellow star, I have not yet declined the commission because, although I am aware of your cautious attitude in these matters, I wanted to help with my advice. Even with this resolution, I decided that if the case came to completion, I would not bring the matter to a legal conclusion because, with a yellow star on my chest, I did not wish to be a member of a body that once had Kossuth, Jókai, Eötvös and other undoubtedly great Hungarians.

I came to this position not only in your case, Mr. Rocskay. I have decided not to take any case since 5 April because of my above resolution.

Whether Mr. Rocskay's planned transaction will become topical or not, I do not know, but if it does, I will not take the case even within the grace period (until 31 May) because, as I have said, I do not wish to act as a lawyer shamed and stigmatized.

However, based on fellow feelings for you, Mr. Rocskay, if the case is still on the table by 31 May, I will happily provide guidance free of charge. After that, I cannot advise you, not even free of charge. Although I would be happy to help some of my former clients, including you, I want to avoid even the appearance of conflicting with the law.

This matter would have needed a more detailed explanation. I chose to write because a meeting with you, Mr. Rocskay, would have brought you a startling surprise, which I wanted to avoid.

Mr. Rocskay, I have always respected men of honesty and faith like you. I have reached the point of saying all this and, in some respects, of putting an end to the conduct which I have practiced in some cases - again, whether rightly or wrongly, I do not know - but de facto have done so.

I hope you, Mr. Rocskay, will keep me in your good memory, just as I will keep you and your whole family in my memory.

I send my compliments to Madame and Gizike and extend my warmest greetings to you, Mr. Rocskay, and your sons.

Yours sincerely, ... "

József Rocskay sent the following reply:

"To Mr. József Varsa.

Dear Mr. Varsa, dear Counselor, it is miserable to read the lines of your letter in which I seem to be hostile toward Jews. I will only state two facts. For years, my lawyer in Nice was Rozentál, and in Paris Salamon, both honest people, and my manager was a certain Mr. Kertész for nine years, all

Jewish people. A faithful Roman Catholic considers all men brothers and could not even consider harming them. I learned to love you as much as if you were a dear brother to me, which is why your letter makes me sad. I only ask that in the future, if I need your advice, you allow me to show you the contract personally before signing it. Meanwhile, I also apologize if I have offended you in any way or other.

Sincerely,

József Rócskay

Budapest, 5 May 1944."

School continued for a while, maybe until April or early May, but they no longer let me take my Hebrew-letter prayer book with me, for example. Personally, I never experienced any anti-Semitic incidents until 1944. Or another example: Mariska cleaned with the shutters closed because we were not allowed to have Christian employees.<sup>53</sup> My father told me that fortunately Dezső was in charge of the legal cases. Dezső was Christian. Uncle Vilmos's little printing shop, which was in Vasvári Pál Street, was apparently taken over by the printer he had employed.<sup>54</sup> Then suddenly the 'star'<sup>55</sup> came in and my mother started manufacturing stars on the sewing machine. Summer was coming soon, and then she sewed a beautiful silk star on my pretty little batiste dress. For the coats, she made stars from a thicker material. She sewed it well, because one doesn't sew anything poorly.

In May, we had to move in to a yellow-star house.<sup>56</sup> Initially there were extenuating circumstances. For example, doctors and lawyers were allowed more space. One day, a colleague of my father's came to see us, who had received two gold Signum Laudis in the First World War,<sup>57</sup> and was exempted from changing flats.<sup>58</sup> He suggested we switch flats. His apartment was in a yellow-star house, and he did not want to stay there, and ours had not become a yellow-star house. So, we moved to the yellow-star house at 4 Tátra Street, where we had a room and a half, which was very good at the time. This didn't last long, of course, because soon there were thirty-five of us living in the flat, and I was sleeping under the piano with another little girl. We were at 4 Tátra Street until November. By then the Engels had arrived there, too.

Back in the summer of 1944, my father was persuaded to convert. It was a tough family battle, they blackmailed him with me. So my parents were baptized in the Lutheran church on Deák Square, where my uncle had made some contacts, and I was to learn a few prayers in order to be accepted as well later on, but history swept that away. At the same time, they bought two authentic evangelical birth certificates. My father was István Vágner, my mother's name was Margit Stettberger, and I was Veronika. The story goes that they did not accept money for the false papers, but asked for objects. I remember mainly those that concerned me, namely a gramophone I received for my tenth birthday with four English Linguaphon records and my bicycle. The only thing I remember of my father's belongings is the typewriter.<sup>59</sup> My mother saw conversion as a life-saving gesture, who would care. She is a Hungarian who is also Jewish. My father suffered. Additionally, we had a Swiss passport, we had a Spanish passport, a Swedish passport, and there was a Vatican passport in the pipeline. But we didn't use any of them.

Because of his illness, my father was not taken for forced labor service, either, and I have an official document with the following text:

"Dr. József Varsa, resident of Tátra Street 4, V. district, Budapest, presented himself for enlistment in accordance with warrant number 24467 of the order of the Hung. Royal Ministry of Defense, and was found unfit for rubble clearance work in the medical examination undertaken. Budapest, August 1944. 11."[60](#)

On October 15, 1944,[61](#) my parents and I went to Uncle Dezső's house at 15 Hold Street,[62](#) and we wanted to stay there. My aunt, who was Christian, didn't want us to stay there. She was afraid. That was the first time I understood that it was really a matter of life and death, after my mother said: he who gains time gains life. We went back to the yellow-star house, where three days later an interesting incident occurred, as the following record attests:

"Protocol

Recorded in Budapest on 18 October 1944 at 6 o'clock in the afternoon at 4 Tátra Street.

The undersigned, as officially appointed housing supervisors, report that on 18 October 1944 an individual dressed in military uniform appeared and introduced himself to Lili Pintér, a tenant on the second floor, as Valiant[63](#) Hunyadi, and informed her that the Jews are to be taken away at 3 p.m. At the same time, the aforementioned Valiant Private Hunyadi also called on István Jakab, the house supervisor, and told him the same thing as he had told Lili Pintér. István Jakab, the house supervisor, asked Valiant Hunyadi if he had written authority to do so and on whose orders the Jews were taken away. He only replied that he had no written order, but that in the afternoon, when the Jews were taken away, Lieutenant Somogyvári would be here and he pose such questions to him. At this point, Valiant Hunyadi left.

At 3.45 p.m. two soldiers dressed in military uniforms appeared, one wearing a tin hat and the other a cock-feather hat. Both held their firearms at the ready. They repeatedly shouted in a shrill voice that all Jews were to line up in the courtyard within 5 minutes with their hands up without any luggage. They declared that anyone who did not immediately assemble in the courtyard would be shot on sight.

The assembling was done, whereupon the assembled were ordered to put all their cash, watches, gold watches, pocket knives and all valuables immediately before them, as they would strip everyone naked, search their homes and anyone found with valuables on their person or in their home would be shot dead on the spot.

Some people who reported leaving money or other valuables in their homes were ordered to go back to their homes immediately with their hands up and retrieve their valuables.

Meanwhile, while these valuables were being collected, two other individuals dressed in uniform, one of whom was wearing a security guard's uniform, appeared.

When they had finished collecting money and other valuables, they issued an order for everyone to go to their homes, take food, but no additional clothing or backpacks were tolerated and everyone was to reassemble in the courtyard within minutes.

As the house was five stories high, and there were many sick and feeble people among the occupants, the assembly could not take place as quickly as desired, whereupon (we cannot say whether one or two soldiers) used their guns to fire shots into the air.

It is also submitted that all persons were allowed to have 10 Pengő. and some who claimed to have small children were allowed to take luggage with them.

Some of the residents wished to excuse themselves using various forms of identification, and were told that the captain would be here shortly and it is to him that they will show their identification.

After the gathering had taken place, a line-up was ordered and all the Jews at 4 Tátra Street were assembled in front of the house, but while they were being lined up, and almost all the residents were already on the street, Mr. István Kaesman Baritz, head of the V. Party Service, happened to pass by and asked the assault officer, who had already been here at noon and called himself the Valiant Hunyadi, what was happening and on whose orders. Apparently, the Party Service Leader could not get a reassuring and satisfactory answer, so he took action. He placed two beweaponed men, wearing Hungarist armband<sup>64</sup>, who had appeared meanwhile, to guard the Valiant Hunyadi until he returned and to use their weapons if he resisted.

A few minutes later, Mr. István Kaesman Baritz returned and gave orders to the armed Hungarist party brothers, who had gathered in the meantime, to seek out the four individuals in uniform in the house and arrest them, because an individual action had been taken and, instead of going to the front, here they were, looting and desecrating the Hungarist idea at home. On his orders, the house was searched from cellar to attic and two of the four individuals wearing the uniforms of the Hungarian Guard were arrested.

A list of the valuables recovered, classified by apartment and name, is attached.

The present report was closed at 7 p.m. on 18 October 1944 and signed by all the house supervisors."

Later it turned out that the Arrow Cross men who chased away the marauding soldiers were from Hashomer, that is, pretend-arrowcross members [see: Halutz Youth Resistance in Hungary]. The appearance of the Hashomer members was not exactly coincidental. They would cruise in twos, and if they saw some action somewhere, while one was watching, the other would run off to get back-up. The way I found this out was that there was a parade in Budapest on the first of May 1945. My mother, who was under the spell of the French Revolution anyway, said, 'come on' when she heard there was going to be a parade. In front of us were a bunch of neat kids, about sixteen years old, and they were carrying a banner that said MADISZ<sup>65</sup>. Later, at number 2 Szent István Boulevard, I saw a sign saying "MADISZ on the first floor". I went up and said I wanted to take part. I was twelve years old; maybe I looked even younger, so they told me to come back in a few years. I was just about to leave when one of the "Arrow Cross" men came out of one of the doors. I was petrified. He saw it immediately, understood, and asked, "Wasn't I once in a situation where they wanted to take me to the bank of the Danube? Did I happen to live in this neighborhood? Am I by any chance a little girl from a Jewish family who had something like that happen to her?" And then the story became clear. Later I heard that this boy had been arrested by the Rákosi regime on charges of Zionist conspiracy.<sup>66</sup> I was about forty when it dawned on me that I should look for this boy. I attempted it, but I couldn't find him.

A few days later, despite the certificate, my fifty-two-year-old, seriously ill father was taken to dig trenches. It was then that Uncle Dezső wrote this letter to my mother:

"Dear Ilus, You can't imagine how terribly depressed I am, and I am wracked with self-reproach for not having taken a firm stand on the matter of your stay. Just imagine the feeling that overcame me when I found out that Jóska had been taken away. I won't attempt to console you, but I have it on good authority that they only took them for three days' worth of labor and they are to be replaced by a new transport after three days. The Aryan couple's decree was withdrawn, so I'm home. Be sure to send me a few lines with the super and let me know what you need so I can at least be here to help. I will discuss certain things with the super and try my best to rectify the infinitely mindless mistake I made. Don't be discouraged; hang on tight, I hope everything will soon be all right. I kiss you and Vera many times. Dezső"

My father was to be taken further west from a place called Hosszúhegy, but first he was taken to the brick factory in Óbuda. Fortunately, he had enough money to send a letter to my uncle with a guard telling him he was there. Then my mother and Uncle Dezső and his uncle planned his rescue. I remember the rehearsal for the "play" at 15 Hold Street. My aunt had the look of a Hungarian grand dame. She had to wear her best fur coat, her best rings and her boa. They put money in an envelope and rehearsed the expected situation. They repeatedly rehearsed what to say and how to say it. Then, dressed as smartly as possible, she went out to the brickworks and said to the soldier on guard, whom the high-ranking lady was to address as a private and refer to him on a first name basis, "Lead me to your commander, son." He did. There was some young officer. What my aunt had to do was to pull off her gloves to show the many rings she wore, and put her hands on the table so that the envelope peeked out from underneath, and say "Give me Varsa!" He let him go free. That's how my father came home.

What was life like in the yellow-star house? The parents have assessed that there's no way school will start in September. They said, the kids could not go without education for long months. My mother taught a little literature, my father taught literature and history, we had languages, and there was also a teacher who came twice a week, Mr Vajthó, the famous teacher at Berzsenyi Secondary School.<sup>67</sup> It was difficult for so many people to manage cooking individually, until Uncle Vilmos's wife arranged for three women to cook one day, three other women the next, and we would all eat at the same time. She divided it up, she decided how many spoonfuls everyone got. Uncle Dezső and his grandson, who was three years old, came to pick me up several times and took me for a walk on Margitsziget (Margaret Island). I took off the star on those occasions. I was capable of behaving without the star. He also took me for a walk on the day of Horthy's attempt to exit<sup>68</sup> but we didn't go back to Tátra Street, he took me to their house, and my parents came to Hold Street as well. I remember that the radio was on all afternoon, and they kept saying that General Beregfy should come to Budapest immediately.<sup>69</sup> That night we did not go back, but slept there.

In Tátra Street, there was a house superintendent who had six children, the eldest was a member of the Arrow Cross, running around with an armband of red-and-white stripes, but the father was quite normal, especially when he got his money. At the beginning of November, we went to Uncle Dezső, in Hold Street. This was done with my father and mother in the front, with very little belongings, and far behind, but within sight, the superintendent took me. The order was that if my parents were arrested, the caretaker would take me to Uncle Dezső as if nothing had happened, and I would not say a word. But nothing happened. I protested a little, but I remember there was some reference to the fact that I was more important than they were because I would still have



children.

We spent a few nights at Uncle Dezső's, but by then we had a key to the flat. And it turned out that the Christian wife of one of Uncle Dezső's sons, Sárika, was related to a military doctor with the rank of General Staff, Lajos Návay of Náva. The general was taken West with the army, and his wife went with him. Mrs. Návay gave the key to his apartment to her niece, Sárika, who gave it to us. It was a large, elegant apartment at 5-7 Királyi Pál Street, on the first floor. This was where we weathered what was to come. We already had our papers; we were the Lutheran Vágner family who had fled from Gyöngyös. My parents decided to do so because Gyöngyös was already under Russian control, and on the other hand it was the only rural town I knew. They didn't buy me a paper, but I was on their papers. My name remained Veronika since, although they could see that I was reliable, if someone shouted my name and I would lift my head in response, it would be a giveaway. There was an amazing coincidence. When we moved there, we found out that Mrs. Lajos Návay Návay's maiden name was Mária Wagner. Only she spelled it with a "W". According to our papers, we were also Vágner, so we moved in with the landlord saying that Mária was my father's cousin. We felt relatively safe there.

I don't know where we got our food from, we were refugees, and obviously we were given ration cards.<sup>70</sup> Anyway, I remember the moment when we went around the kitchen and the pantry and found three leeks. My father said that three leeks equaled three days. And then we had canned tomatoes, little Golden Pheasant brand tins from the Kecskemét canning factory. We also had some flour. We baked "bread". It reminded me more of a matzo ball. At that time, we already had the feeling that it would not last terribly long, that we would not starve. We didn't go out into the streets much, lest we be stopped. If we did go out, my mother told me to put my two big red pigtails under my coat and to cover my head with a cap, because red hair is characteristic. To this day, I still don't understand why they didn't cut off my pigtails instead.

In those days, in every doorway, on large cardboard tablets, you had to write the names of all the inhabitants, their mother's name, their father's name and their grandparents' names, so two generations up. I learned all the fictitious grandparents very well; I even knew when their name day was. My father looked at this sign and saw that a lawyer called Pethő lived there, who was one of the vice-presidents of the far-right MÜNE (Hungarian National Association of Lawyers)<sup>71</sup> and, as far as my father knew, denounced Jews. And they knew each other. So, when the siege closed around town, there was already shooting in the streets and we had to move down to the shelter, my father decided not to come down. The women were cooking in the garden, and one of them said: "Mrs. Vágner, you know, there's so much nonsense in the house. For example, someone said that your husband must not come down to the shelter because he was a deserter. Then it was clear that this could not go on any longer, and my parents came to the following conclusion. Lawyer Pethő had two daughters, one the same age as me, with whom I played several times, I was at their place, she at ours. Then I had to go up to the second floor, and whoever opened the door, I had to say that I hadn't come to play, but that I wanted to talk to the Counsellor. When we were alone, I had to say that my dad would like to go upstairs to see the Counselor, but he wanted the Counselor to open the door himself. After a minute, my father went up and spoke to him privately. You know my little girl, Counselor, she used to play with your little girl. I only ask this of you: let us not know each other. He said, I'm in. And he kept quiet. This probably was partly due to the fact that in December 1944 no one with an ounce of sense could have thought that the Germans could

win this war. Then, when he was not certified after 1945, he asked my father to be his redeeming witness. My father went and spoke up for him. Pethő was later interned. Possibly my father's testimony helped him to go through with just an internment, not imprisonment. But of course, there's no way of knowing for sure. Later, when I was teaching at Trefort School, I saw on one of the little girl's report cards that her mother's name was Pethő and that she lived in Királyi Pál Street. Gee, I said, I know your mother. I forgot all about it, but the next time I had open hours, an elderly man came up, introduced himself and said humbly that he only asked me not to hurt his granddaughter, because of how he had behaved back in the day... I rejected this with indignation, asking what kind of a person he thought I was. The child was quite mediocre, but I always had to give her one grade better. The others couldn't understand why I was making exceptions.

The apartment had one entrance from the staircase and one from the hallway into the kitchen. When we weren't in the shelter, we were in the kitchen because it was warmer there and the windows in the rooms had shattered already. In the back wing of the house there was a three-room apartment overlooking the courtyard just a few stairs further up from our place; you could access it through the hallway. There was the Arrow Cross headquarters of the fourth district - because it was the fourth district at the time. Day after day, these Arrow Cross men would pass by us, and they would come in and ask us: 'Madam, with respect, have you seen Brother Nagy?' We knew Brother Nagy very well, because he regularly came to the bomb shelter and delivered speeches, telling us that if anyone knew of anyone in hiding, they should report it, because a family had been caught next door and shot dead, along with their children. I remember he held at least four or five of these speeches with the general theme of "by pain of death."

We were liberated on the seventeenth of January, and late in the evening of the sixteenth a figure came, dressed half as a soldier, half as a civilian, wearing Bilgeri boots.<sup>72</sup> He asked if there were any military men. Not many, but my father counted as one. They gathered around him. He said that he was a partisan, fighting with the Russians, and that they should synchronize their watches. They adjusted their watches, and the guy left. The next day, the thick iron door to the shelter was flung open and the Russians came in. "Nyemeckij, fascist?" There were neither Germans nor fascists. It was a big house with a big shelter, and because it was a genteel house, there were few people, the shelter was not crowded, so the Russians stayed, and installed their radio there.

I used to go out in front of the house during the day, although my mother forbade it, because the fighting was still going on in Buda and we still lived in the shelter. In front of the house gate there was a shot-out field kitchen that I used to climb up on to sit. One day I saw Brother Nagy sneaking into the house. Not dressed up, of course, not even wearing boots. Probably went upstairs to get the treasures. I had been inside the Arrow Cross office once, where there was so much looted stuff that even a very rich carpet shop had a tenth of what was piled up there in Persian carpets. And silver boxes, cutlery. I thought Brother Nagy had to be caught. I rushed to the shelter, grabbed the first Russian, whom I named Ivan, dragged him upstairs and pointed at Brother Nagy. Brother Nagy shot at him, and Ivan shot back, at the same time slamming his left arm against the wall to protect me. The others arrived at the sound of shooting and Brother Nagy was dead.

A week after the liberation, the "partisan" suddenly appeared. He said that he had nowhere to live, could he go to someone's house. My father said he could stay with us. He slept there one or two nights. A few days later, Hungarian detectives appeared, dressed in semi-military clothes, for example with a waist belt over their jackets. They came into the apartment, went straight to the

colonial bookshelf in the living room, took down one of the encyclopedias, shook it out by the hard cover, and a lot of foreign money fell on the floor. The "partisan" had hidden it there. Then the guy was hanged. His name was Brúnó Depner, he was roaming in the city and committed several murders and robberies. There was a short piece in the newspaper about him being hanged.

After a week or two we went back to Tátra Street. In our apartment in the Phoenix House, there were refugees from Transylvania. We went upstairs and my father told them that this was our flat, they should leave. They left. They found a place in the house; we were on decent terms. They were not evil people, they did not harm anything. When we left, my mother had closed the dining room, there was the dining room table with a heavy crocheted tablecloth, and when she took the tablecloth down, the whole pattern was there in dust. So indeed, no one had touched it. Then all of a sudden, I had a 40-degree Celsius fever. The tension of the previous months must have come out on me. Brúnó Depner's and Brother Nagy's brains, as I saw them spilling out. Two days later I was fine.

In March, school started twice a week. In April, even more frequently. At that time, there was an annex of the high school on the corner of Wesselényi Street and the Erzsébet Ring, on the fourth or fifth floor, in an apartment. Why it was not continued in the school of Lázár Piroška, I don't know. There were two big rooms, one for the freshmen and another for the sophomores, which could be accessed through the freshman's room. The teachers and other classes were in the house on the other side of the boulevard. One of my classmates, Kati Liebermann, got it in her head that we won't learn German. Everyone agreed. When we saw from the window that Aunt Flóra, the German teacher, was crossing the boulevard and starting to climb upstairs, we stepped out the window into the hallway and crept down the back stairs. Back then, the boulevard still had advertising pillars with small doors that you could slip in through. We spied on her from there, and when German class was over, Aunt Flóra went back to the teachers' room, and we went back to class. When we told them we refused to study German, they asked us what we would study. We said English. English it was. That's where we had school until June. In the school year 1945/46 we moved to Hollán Street. I attended for one more year, because I liked it less and less, because everyone was Zionist, even though I really liked going to the Jewish High School, liked my classmates and the school was of a good standard (for example, mathematics was taught by Rózsa Péter, so that even I understood maths then). I didn't like that because I was brought up to be very Hungarian. By then I had read half of Hungarian literature. At the age of thirteen I read Eötvös' novels. Then I realized that Mikszáth was even better to read, and I read at least thirty or forty volumes. My father was very happy that I was reading serious stuff. That was my culture. It would never have occurred to me not to live in Hungary.

Then I fell into two different ideological systems in quick succession. First, I became Anglomaniac. In 1947, I saw an exhibition at the embassy about the English way of life. The civilization, the traditions. I liked it very much. I was already learning English. One day my mum was called in by the English teacher, she complimented me and told me to find a special English teacher for this child, because it could be a profession. Then my mother said that if it could be a profession, she should have an English teacher. In 1947 it was not easy to find an English teacher in Budapest, but they did. I went to an uncle who was not English, but South African and devastatingly racist.

In 1947 I told my mother that I didn't want to go to the Jewish High School because there everyone was Zionist. She was relieved that I didn't want to go to Palestine. Okay, she said, and agreed to let

me go to Varga Kata.<sup>73</sup> At that time I had already moved on from my Anglomania and was flirting with Communism. In Varga Kata, the girls danced quadrille during the break. And I was thinking about worldwide revolution. I was a terrible student, I had a lot of C's, my only strong subject was English. So much so, that when the teacher went on sick leave for three days, I had to teach the English class. But I really didn't like the spirit of the school. Besides, I was in a very strange situation. The majority were well-off, they had seasonal tickets to the opera, they were library members. And we were so poor that such things were out of question. When I had a hole in the sole of my shoe - I had a patent shoe - my socks were always getting terribly filthy. My mother used to scold me all the time, how could someone be that way, stepping in all that rubbish, how could my socks be so dirty. And I didn't tell my mum that I had holes in the soles of my shoes, because she couldn't buy a new one anyway, and she would have just felt bad about it. I felt so humiliated. And then I met a friend from elementary school at the pool (I did have a pool pass because health came first) and asked her what school she attended. She told me that she went to Szemere Street, to Ráskay Lea, which had just been renamed Kossuth Zsuzsa. In Szemere Street, one half of the building was an elementary school, the other half was Ráskay. I asked how the school was, she said it was good, I asked how the DISZ<sup>74</sup> was, she said it was good. I took this as my cue and in the autumn, without telling my parents, I enrolled at Ráskay. I told my mom afterwards. A woman with a beautiful bun of brown hair, Mrs. Béla Aradi, was the Hungarian teacher. (Later, I found out that in 1944, when the teachers assigned to perform public services, she was giving out ration cards. Looking up from her work she saw a Jewish student of her's, Éva Gerő, standing there. She pretended not to know her. She asked her name. It was Juliska Molnár. Yes, the ration cards are registered to Juliska Molnár. And she did the same for several others.) She asked me what language I was going to study. I thought, English would be a waste, so I said French. I sat in the French group; there were eight of us, because the class was divided into three. The others had been studying for three years and I only knew what I had picked up from my mother. When Ms. Ilonka, the French teacher, noticed this, she told me that I had to take a special exam in January. At the end of the year, I was the only one who had a 7 in French (because that year there were seven grades according to the Soviet model).<sup>75</sup> Then I stayed at this school until I graduated. I graduated in 1951 and looked to the bright future as a faithful communist youth activist.

While all this was going on with me, my father was readmitted to the Chamber, the office was up and running, there was unfinished business that Uncle Dezső could take care of by correspondence. Some small flow of money trickled from that source. And already beginning in the autumn of 1945 we received IKKA packages from Fénykövi.<sup>76</sup> He was so rich that he had a hunting lodge in Morocco. He was a keen hunter. At the entrance to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, visitors are faced with a stuffed elephant, and it is inscribed with the words "A gift from Fénykövi". For two or three years the packages came regularly, four every month. It was a fantastic treasure. Chocolates by the kilo, and a 100 g bar of chocolate, my mom swapped it for a kilo of flour. And we had sardines. So, we weren't starving.

The trench digging, cellar life, and all the excitement only further worsened my father's health. And although he was the first person in Europe to receive streptomycin<sup>77</sup> - which temporarily improved his condition - in 1948 the disease rapidly worsened and he died in October. He lived for fifty-six years. For a long time, I felt like a tree swaying in the wind. I was held in place by two roots, and now I lost one.

After my father died, I'm unsure what we lived on. On thin air, most likely. My mother sold certain things. She had been doing a bit of sewing, but then she started working in earnest. But she didn't sew underwear, she sewed carrying bags. She sewed very nice bags on the Singer sewing machine and here and there she sold them. Besides, she had some kind of widow's pension, two hundred forints, if I remember correctly. And my father had been declared a war invalid, which also meant some extra money, maybe fifty forints. We got along very modestly, but managed somehow. I taught English from the age of fourteen and a half. First to a girl who was younger than me and who was about to fail her exams. I got twenty forints a month and a cup of cocoa every time. That made a difference, too, because ten forints and eighty pennies was the tram fare for a month. From then on I got no money for trams or school fees. Except at the beginning of the year. But if I had to replace pencils or notebooks, I bought them. The next year I had two pupils. We were so poor that when I was still at Varga Kata, and there were well-to-do girls from middle-class backgrounds, one of whom invited me to her birthday party, it was obvious that I had no clothes to go in. I went in the second-hand clothes that my mother's friend who had emigrated to Canada in 1920 sent me in a parcel. And then my mother sewed something for me from the lining of the curtains in her Szeged apartment, which she dyed in the bathtub.

I had a good time in Ráskay. I didn't mind failing the odd class, because I was doing what I was interested in. For example, there was a self-study group, only it wasn't called a self-study group then, it was called literature group, history group, and I had all sorts of tasks there. Those were the subjects I liked. Meanwhile I did a lot of work in the movement because I felt that was what was really important. But not primarily in school. In those days people were organizing everywhere they could. They called it "the division". Each district had more than one base organization, in the thirteenth district there were thirty-six DISZ base organizations. In 1949, naturally, I joined the DISZ, not at school, but in district organization XIII/29, on the basis of residence. I spent at least twenty hours a week there. After a while, in 1950, I became secretary of XIII/29 and I imagined that I was doing very important work and I also believed that I was defending peace. That was the main motive for me. I marched in inordinate quantities. We were paraded whenever possible. For example, during the council elections, we walked the streets at dawn, singing loudly to encourage the population. I couldn't fathom not taking part in that. Consequently, I did not have much time to learn. Other people went to balls, went dancing, I've never been to a ball and I didn't care. All I was interested in was protecting the peace. This had two roots. One is the Shoah. After the Shoa, hearing the lyrics of the anthem of the Democratic Youth Movement (DISZ) "Wherever you have a homeland, whatever sky looks down on you" had an elemental effect on me. And also, the words "There is no richer, more beautiful country - All men feel that they are free!"<sup>78</sup> Of course, how could we have known what the Soviet Union was like, how everyone there felt. We knew nothing. And I believed it all. And this sentiment grew stronger when my father died. Maybe I was thinking that we had to show our colors as a family and I had to take the torch from my father. And then this commitment to communism grew in me, which lasted for four or five years. So much so that when Tito became "the chained dog"<sup>79</sup>, I wondered what might happen if you were caught by the UDBA (Yugoslav political police) and tortured. I thought I should test how I could resist something like that. I tried to hold my thumb to the gas flame. I was sixteen years old. It was going to the point of insanity. As DISZ secretary, I was busying myself there constantly, I spent all my time there, but I believe we achieved nothing at all. We were running our mouths. I sure did a lot of talking.



I graduated with honors. In four subjects it was obvious that I was going to get top marks: Hungarian, History, Latin and French. I got a C in physics and by some strange miracle I got an A in maths. I was immediately admitted to the Russian Institute at the university. When I applied, it was the Russian Department of ELTE, and by the time I went in the autumn it was called the Russian Institute. It was completely separate from ELTE. Then, in January it was called the Lenin Institute.<sup>80</sup> It was established because it had been decided a year or two earlier that Russian would soon have to be taught in all schools, but the trivial detail that there were no Russian teachers was forgotten. Many Russian teachers had to be trained; there were three hundred of us in our year. When they started, they were based in Mikszáth Square, in the building of the former Piarist grammar school. We occupied the entire building. By the time I was in third year, it had moved to Szabadság Square, the former Stock Exchange Palace.

I had wanted to be a psychologist before, but as psychology was a bourgeois pseudoscience, I thought languages would be very good for me, languages and literature. I flirted with English, but I was told that a comrade ought to be a Russian major, this was extremely important. At the time I believed that I knew English, and I knew French, but of course later I realized that, at a child's level. I also knew a little German. And my mother had the clever idea that if I could speak English and French, and I could take on a third language family, that would open up very good opportunities.

The training started as a single-track teacher training. No one spoke Russian, we had to learn the language from scratch there. After a year, we all spoke it. We had twenty language classes a week, five times four hours, very witty and well-scheduled, with very good teachers. I had two excellent teachers, one was a native speaker, Anna Petrovna, the other, Tibold Timon, was good at linguistics and grammar, and they worked together. And we had a lot of lessons; we studied Russian thirty or forty hours a week. Hungarian literature was taught by Pál Pándi.<sup>81</sup> He was an excellent lecturer. In addition to language, we studied Marxism, and then there were exercises in national defense. I could never dismantle the damn machine gun.

My bustle in activism stopped at the university. I had imagined I would get even more serious about the movement when I got to university but they ignored me because I was an intellectual, and that took its toll. There were enough working-class cadres, and a lot of them were workers without a high school diploma, but had acquired admittance to university via exams in a limited number of classes. Being from an intellectual background was not taken very well. Many of those with special admittance were juiced while still at university, but many broke down afterwards, or left the profession. There were György Konrád, Imre Pozsgay, János Berecz and Ferenc Kunszabó.<sup>82</sup> Ferenc was also on special admittance, but he was smart. He wrote love poems to a classmate and asked me to check for spelling mistakes. Then there were Serbian partisans, Greek partisans. A former Serbian partisan escaped after the decision of the Information Bureau<sup>83</sup> and he was employed by the SAO to befriend the other defected partisans to make sure Tito won't send a spy. But he didn't do it secretly, everyone knew about it.

I only really attended university for a year because I got married and became pregnant. The marriage came about when I was fifteen and a classmate of mine met a boy at a dance school and we bumped into each other at the swimming pool. At the dancing school,<sup>84</sup> boys were properly taught how to approach girls. I was fifteen years old, Sanyi Virág seventeen, but he greeted me with respect and we were on formal terms with each other. For at least three weeks. It was love at first sight. He played water polo for Vasas.

We had been going out for a year when he graduated and became a medical doctor. He approached me in mid-September saying he had been offered a Soviet scholarship. He asked if I would wait for him. Because by then we had already decided to get married. I said sure. But my answer was motivated in part by a young communist activist's sense of honor. As soon as he decided to go to the Soviet Union, he was moved to a college called Oleg Kosevoy.<sup>85</sup> He lived there for three months and studied Russian. They went out in December and started the first semester at the beginning of the second semester. They were told that the real good comrades would come home as soon as possible to build socialism, so whoever agreed could stay there for the summer, finish the second semester and continue with the sophomores in the fall. He took the opportunity, so he came home for the first time in almost twenty months. I had already graduated in the meantime. When he first came home, he was a bit of a stranger, but I didn't think much of it at the time. Of course, we corresponded during the twenty months, but a letter took at least two weeks to arrive, so if one of us asked a question, the answer came in a month. He was home for a month, then he went back and we continued to correspond. He came home again at the end of the third year, by which time I had completed my first year. I was supposed to go abroad on a scholarship as well, but then I wasn't allowed. They said that the current state of class struggle did not allow intellectuals to go to the Soviet Union.

When he was home for the second time, he suddenly asked me, what reason is there not to get married right away? Really, why not, I asked with innocent eyes. Though I had no room, my bed was the old sofa bed, which kept collapsing. My income was as low as my wages from having three private pupils. The mother of one of them could not pay, but she was a seamstress and made clothes from my outgrown rags, sometimes two old rags into one dress. That was our quality of life. We got married. His parents were very happy, my mother was happy. My mother had wanted to be a doctor, and then she wanted me to be a doctor, and I didn't want to hear about it, so now there would be a doctor in the family after all. And she loved Sanyi. She did have some concerns about whether it was a bit premature. We didn't want the baby right away; it was an accident. I went through the pregnancy alone; he was in Leningrad, no money. My mother and I rented out a room in the flat because we couldn't afford the overhead costs. And the staff room was occupied for a long time, until 1956, by a couple who had moved in at some point to clean. My mother used to say that if you had a decent flat, you shouldn't give it up, because it would come in handy one day. Besides, she was terribly attached to her furniture.

I had a bad pregnancy; I didn't go to university much because I was told I had to walk a lot. I had a faithful walking companion, György Konrád. He used to skip university and walk with me. Then later he was expelled from the university on the charge of concealing the fact that his merchant father had had several employees. In truth it was no more than hiring a few hands during the busy season.

The child was born in April 1953, precisely on my twentieth birthday, and his father first saw him when he was six weeks old. He was very happy. He said he would graduate in two years and come home to his family. But he was a stranger by then. We were still formally married, but it was over. It was his last year when we divorced, the divorce trial was quite weary, and it was not entirely risk-free to divorce a good comrade who had studied in the Soviet Union.

Marriage and a child also put an end to the movement, but it wasn't just that. In fact, it had ended a year earlier, because the university wouldn't let me, though I would have liked to attend. When

Stalin died in 1953, I cried a lot. I only stopped because my mother told me it was bad for the child. When Imre Nagy came, along the new government program, I didn't figure out anything. I just concluded that mistakes had been made, but now everything will be corrected.

My mother, of course, saw the world very differently. Not one hundred percent different, because I think she accepted that the future was communist, but she couldn't accept the details. For example, I distinctly remember a conversation in which she said that the Impressionists were very good painters. And she wasn't all that sure that 'Letter from the Front',<sup>86</sup> or whatever the title of that Soviet painting had been, is better than Renoir. My mother had problematic taste.

I have a strange memory of the first thing that could not be believed blindly. Stalin supposedly said that Mayakovsky was the greatest poet who ever lived and ever would live. I believed the first half, but the second made me wonder. How can you know this in advance? That was the first small crack for me. It didn't bother me that there was a ration card and soap could only be bought against a ticket, but it did bother me that I personally knew displaced people<sup>87</sup> who I knew could not be exploiters. We were also sensitive to people just being thrown out of their homes, even if they were not being taken to their deaths. These were all little cracks. But it was only in 1955 that I really began to wake up. It wasn't just me, there were smarter people than me, like Konrád. He believed it too, he took it seriously. Even though he was expelled from university. We had gone through such thorough brainwashing that we accepted it. Then in 1956 came Khrushchev's speech,<sup>88</sup> from which we could finally learn a few things. By then we had become ardent supporters of Imre Nagy.

My fervor for the movement seemed to have been cut off clean in 1956.<sup>89</sup> I joined neither the KISZ nor the party. Later, in the sixties, when things were gentler, when there were no more murders, when people were no longer in prison, I felt that I would give an arm and a leg for some activist organizing. I thought about the peace movement. The greatest experience of my life had been war, so I know what peace meant. But I decided not to give my name to these people. At times in certain situations, I was told that it would be better if I was a party member, but I said I didn't want to be. For example, the deputy director of teacher training at Trefort retired and told me to apply for his job, he would support me, but I would have to become a party member. I said no. But by then it was safe to say that.

By the way, Sanyi's family background is very interesting. His maternal grandmother was a Vend peasant girl who became pregnant and fell from her family's grace.<sup>90</sup> And the father "ran away to America". Maybe he didn't even know he had a child. The poor girl somehow wandered up to Budapest with her child, was married by a good industrialist who adopted the child. This child was the mother of Sanyi Virág. She married a fireman, an organized worker, an active social democrat, a very intelligent man. When there was a B-listing, he was always the first to be dismissed. Therefore, they lived in real proletarian poverty in the Tizenháromházak.<sup>91</sup> Apartment with kitchenette, outhouse in the yard. And then Sanyi's mother, who was a very clever woman, said, enough of this proletariat fate, we'll raise the child as a gentleman. She envisioned that he would graduate from high school. They put their son in high school. He never tasted chocolate until he was fifteen. He knew there was such a thing, but there was no question of buying it. But he wore decent clothes and they bought him a zoo pass. He was a very good student, bright and hard-working. And he understood exactly what he had to do.

His parents became good cadres after liberation. His father became the general director of the Spa and Thermal Baths Company.<sup>92</sup> His mother, who was a laundress before the war, became the manager of the Rico bandage factory. She had never worked in the textile industry, but she was a clever, resourceful woman. At one time she was even a member of parliament. Besides, there was not the slightest trace of anti-Semitism in the Virág family or in Sanyi. Her father, an organized worker, was by principle against anti-Semitism. His wife later said something like 'she was a nice woman, even though she was Jewish', which my daughter strongly objected to, but she could not be said to be anti-Semitic. And it should also be said that after Sanyi divorced his second wife, his third wife was Jewish again.

I couldn't go to university because of the pregnancy, but I took my exams, finished my second year and still did quite well. I started my third year, my mother helped me around the baby. It never occurred to me that I could do anything else but go to university. My mother agreed. Up until the point where it became clear to me that I found out that a child had to be fed, you had to buy a bottle, a stroller. I always had students, but it was a terrible effort. That's when things got rough. The pediatrician told me that I had to give lemonade to the child, who was six months old at the time. Sometimes you could get lemon, but it was very expensive. It turns out you can't raise a baby from nothing. I realized I had to go to work. And the Virág parents didn't mention any such thing as 'you just study for now' and they would help support their grandchild instead of their son in their son, who was being educated by the state anyway and wasn't contributing to the child's upbringing anyway. Their two manager's salaries would have paid for it. Instead, they said they would help me find a job. And they helped indeed, as getting a job was not easy, either. I went to work for the IBUSZ<sup>93</sup> in November 1953. I was hired because I knew languages, but I didn't need them very often. When my work didn't concern languages, which was most of the time, I worked in the ticket office on the Oktogon Squire. It was a miserable job, quite tiring, too, and if you were at the cash register and you made a mistake and came up short at the end of the day, they would deduct it from your pay. I was paid seven hundred and sixty forints a month. I worked for ten months and saved a thousand forints. I decided to continue my studies in the 1954/55 academic year and to take out a hundred forints from my savings every month, in addition to the scholarship. I quickly passed the exams for the first semester of the third year by October and continued my studies from September. By January I had to pass my second semester exams of the third year, and in the meantime, I was studying for my fourth semester of the degree in Literary Translation. We had very good teachers, for example Imre Makai<sup>94</sup> or János Elbert.<sup>95</sup> Makai was then translating "War and Peace". He set an example of what intellectual honesty is. For example, for months he did not translate a single line because he had immersed himself in Freemasonry in order to understand it better when he translated the part where Freemasonry appears.

Then, at the end of the 1953/54 school year, these excellent teachers were fired as petty bourgeois vestigialities. The next school year a comrade named Vilma Sarkadi came. She was one of the political prisoners who were freed from the Soviet Republic in exchange for Soviet captives in Hungary in the council republic era. She had found her way to the Soviet Union sometime in the 1920s, and no longer spoke Hungarian well enough. She brought Soviet cadres with her, and they often did the dirty work. For example, one of them went to my mother and tried to persuade her to make me leave university voluntarily. I don't know what reason I might have had to do so, but that's what happened. And then I was unexpectedly failed in my theory of literary translation course. I was generally an excellent student, and even at that very forced pace of taking the

second semester of the third year and the first semester of the fourth year at the same time, I still got near excellent marks. You may not be able to tell whether you got an A or a B, but you can judge whether you knew something or knew nothing at all. And I knew the theory of literary translation quite well, even adding my own thoughts. And then there was a course called the Practice of Literary Translation, for which I got a B, and when I got my index back, the grade was crossed out in red and it said invalid. And then the head of the study department whispered to me that Comrade Sarkadi didn't want me to attend any longer and that I shouldn't mess with her. She advised me to transfer to the teacher training course of study. I wanted to be a translator, but I could accept switching to a teacher's course. However, I was missing a lot of exams. I had to start taking all the teachers' exams. I took exams every three days. If one had gone awry, the whole construct would have collapsed. Some of them were very nice, for example Erna Pál, an excellent linguist, came in on the fourth of April, allowing me to take the exam.

I never found out what comrade Sarkadi's problem was with me. Much later, my third husband, György Szekeres, made sense of it: it must have been that when the Virág parents found out that I wanted a divorce, they told some old comrade to cross me. Because there, at the university, I didn't get up to any trouble. Maybe I was a bit of an eye-catcher. I didn't have any nice clothes. A pretty young girl usually likes to dress nicely, but I was always in terrible rags. I did have some colorful scarf that I got from my cousin who had a loom, and I didn't wear that scarf the way I should have. It was inside my coat, but part of it was hanging out between two buttons. This extravagance was the subject of a DISZ meeting. So, I may have caught the eye of this woman from the Soviet Union even without outside influence. Or maybe she didn't take too kindly to the fact that I could cite English, French and Latin examples. But it's more likely that my mother-in-law gave her a hint.

Finally, in 1955, I graduated as a teacher. My thesis, which I completed for the department of art translation, was accepted. I wrote it during my time working at IBUSZ

We officially divorced in 1955, but we split up in 1954. When we had our last hearing, Konrád and I went to the registry office in the Fifth District to register for marriage. By then we had already booked a room in Tihany. I had to hand in my identity card, and it said that I was married. The registrar looked at me stunned and said, "But you are married." I said I was divorced. "Well, there is no trace of that here. When did you get divorced?" "Yesterday." He said to postpone it until a little later, when it becomes legally binding. Or we could run to the courthouse, tell them not to send the decree per post, but to give it to us, and come back the day it becomes final.

By that time, I already had a room in my mother's flat, because when Judit was born, we put the subletter out and I covered half the rent. My mother adored the child, but the divorce made her terribly desperate. She loved Sanyi, she didn't love Gyuri. She thought that with Sanyi, my life was set. A doctor and a good cadre. And he's a fired philosopher who's a bohemian. When Gyuri moved in, they weren't really on bad terms, more polite and cool.

After graduating from university, I was placed at the Csanády Street primary school, which was close to our flat. I was there for six years and I learned a lot from it. I taught Russian, and later English and Hungarian. I earned a qualification for that as well, because in the meantime they realized that this one-subject degree was stupid, and they announced Hungarian and History as additional subjects. It was a version of the evening university, with the alleviation that you could do



it in three years instead of six. The reason I was able to do this was because I had read a lot before, so I didn't have to read fifteen thousand pages for an exam, just, say, three thousand.

At first, I didn't like this school because the headmistress was a dragon. I ran into another one of those scarf things. I still didn't have any clothes, and I was still wearing what came in a package from my mother's friend in Canada, and there was a blouse that had no collar. I didn't like it; I bought a tiny scarf and tied it around my neck. And then she asked me what this scarf was. I said, kitty-scarf. That's what they called it. We're not kittens, we're teachers. That's how it started, and then it went on to the point where we had to fail a kid. I failed him, she ordered me to appear for a report and asked me 'what you did to keep him from failing.' She actually used incorrect conjugation as she asked me this. Unfortunately, I gave an impertinent answer: I taught him. From that moment on, she picked a quarrel with me for everything. For example, for writing illegibly in the class diary.

After six years, a job offer appeared for a senior teacher of Russian at Radnóti. They needed a minimum of five years of work experience, and I was going on my sixth. I applied and waited. One day I got a phone call in the headmaster's office, because that was the only phone there, and the headmaster of the Endre Ságvári School (Trefort) asked me if this application was only for Radnóti, or if I would like to be a head teacher in general. In general, I said, and that's how I got a job there. Even though by that time we had a new director who really appreciated my work.

The marriage with György Konrád lasted seven years. We split up because it turned out that we were not compatible. He is quite an excellent man, but he is not suitable as a husband, at least he was not at the age of twenty. Soon after Konrád and I split up, I got married to Szekeres. Konrád met György Szekeres at the Parliamentary Library. Everyone was interesting to Konrád, he was genuinely interested in people. Every day he came home saying, 'I met such an interesting person'. He was colorful and good at telling stories, I listened to him, but after a while I stopped taking him seriously. He offended a lot of people because he listened to people and asked questions so cleverly that they grew convinced he was becoming their friend. And the next day, he just says hello sweetly, but clearly without interest. Now, when he called Szekeres interesting a second time, I started paying attention. Then when he came home the third time saying how interesting he was and that he was a French partisan, I started to take an interest too. Of course, you also have to know that for me a partisan is a very high quality. Someone who has done something against what is to be hated, even though he personally was not under threat. We must not tolerate anything being done to us. I was always of the opinion that we should not just stand by while we are thrown out of our own houses. There's always the kitchen knife, even if one doesn't have a gun. And we just left our homes when we were told to, we just put on the star when we were told to, other people got on the wagon when they were told to. By the time you were in Auschwitz, there clearly was nothing else left to do. But until then! So that's why, in my eyes, anyone who took part in the French Resistance was very valuable. I used to go to the library a lot too; I thought I'd have a look at this Szekeres next time. Once, when Gyuri and I went to the library together, he introduced us. Szekeres didn't have an apartment; he worked in the library, in the so-called 'typing and researching' room, where one could use a typewriter. That's where he did his translation work. On the surface, he wasn't a hero, but a very smiley man, gentle and polite.

György Szekeres was at the Sorbonne in 1940, and when the war broke, he volunteered. In 1941 he joined the French resistance movement. With high military honors, he was a major general and

commander of all the foreign fighters in the partisan army, and in 1945 he was discharged, came home and became the foreign affairs columnist of the "Free People", but he hated it, he kept asking to be allowed back to Paris. He didn't even like being a journalist. And to top it all, his boss was Oszkár Betlen.<sup>96</sup> He also hated the atmosphere because it was not French. He was sent back to Paris, where he was a correspondent for the "Szabad Nép" for a year and a half. In the meantime, he went back and forth, because the peace treaty was being drawn up at the time, and Gerő needed an expert for each partner country. He became the French expert. In 1948, after a year and a half in Paris, he was called home, received personally by Rákosi, who told him that the ambassador in Rome was a man with "not a bad record", but that he still needed the accompaniment of a reliable comrade. He was sent as a counselor and became the second man in the embassy. Then either the ambassador was recalled or he came home on leave and was not allowed to return, so Gyuri became the chargé d'affaires. He had a small scandal: the ambassador's wife went back to Rome to get her jewelry, which was in the safe. Gyuri had the key to the safe and of course he gave her the jewels. He was reprimanded verbally for this, and demanded the reprimand in writing, but they never put it in writing. After the regime change, I found the informer's reports that one of the embassy employees had reported about him. In the autumn of 1949 he was called home, but he did not come. By then he had his ideas of what was going on here. Shortly before, in April 1949, he had been home and had dinner at a friend's, János Beck's, house when Beck was arrested. They came with a search warrant and said they would take him away for a while to clear up certain things, and he would be back before the end of dinner. He was back five years later. Beck was a communist, graduated from university in Bologna because of the Jewish laws, and was ambassador in various places in the late Kádár era.<sup>97</sup> So in 1949 he was called back home. He received a letter from Andor Berei saying that they had been thinking for a long time that he should take an important position and that he should come home to discuss it.<sup>98</sup> He decided not to come home, but to go to France instead. He decided to end his involvement with politics and start writing instead. French communist friends refused to recognize him on the street. They crossed over to the opposite sidewalk, and that's not a figure of speech, it actually happened. Pierre Courtade scolded his wife for inviting Szekeres' little girl to their little girl's baby shower<sup>99</sup> Semprun describes in "What a Beautiful Sunday!" how he met Szekeres:

"...In 1949 I received a phone call from Roger Vailland. He called on Courtade's behalf. He was instructed to inform the comrades, he said. Szekeres is in Paris, but he is not to be spoken to. Szekeres has become a traitor, Vailland said. He had left his post as counselor at the Hungarian embassy in Rome and had ignored the Hungarian party's summons that ordered him back to Budapest. ... I was buying a newspaper in front of the Deux-Magots café on the Saint-Germain Boulevard. Vailland had phoned a few days before. I turned to one side- Szekeres was standing next to me. I looked at his face, not wanting to pretend I hadn't noticed. I wanted him to know that I had noticed, and even though I had noticed, I was ignoring him. I wanted him to understand that my gaze and my silence were telling him to go to hell. Or rather into nothingness."

(Semprun later apologised to Szekeres. I have a very interesting letter, but he apologized verbally several times as well.)

The French secret service figured, here was a person who could be blackmailed. They offered him citizenship and even said he could take a French name. Three times he was called in, and each time they demanded something a little more lenient. They did not ask for anything too base, just a

statement of why he no longer wished to serve the people's democracy. This too, he refused. He was then told that the expulsion order was here. Effective immediately. At the time, the Minister of the Interior was Bidault, who knew him well from the Resistance.[100] Szekeres asked for a one-day postponement, but was told no. All they did was accompany him to where Jeannie was on holiday with the child. They let them have ten minutes alone. He told Jeannie to inform Annie. Jeannie understood. Annie Hervé was Bidault's secretary in the Resistance and godmother to their little girl Sophie. As soon as Gyuri was taken away by the agents, Jeannie rushed up to Paris to see Annie, who went straight to Bidault's apartment. It was a Sunday. She told Bidault what the situation was, Bidault sent his own personal secretary by car to Strasbourg. From Paris, instructions were given to the station that the train was not to leave Strasbourg until the secretary of the Minister of the Interior arrived there. He did reach the train, bringing Szekeres a paper stating that he wished to settle in France. All he had to do was sign what he had been doing, what he wanted to do. He wanted to stay there. But by that time he had gone completely wild. What are you thinking! To do this to him in France! And then he was handed over to the Russians at the border of the Soviet occupation zone. From there he was taken to Dresden, then to Prague, to Pankrác prison, and then handed over to the ÁVO at Rajka. He was taken to Andrássy út 60, from there to the prison in Vác, where he remained until May 1954. He later reconstructed that it may have been Gerő's peace commission that saved his life, because in the autumn or winter of 1950 some young lieutenant at the ÁVO took out his pistol and, while playing with it, tried to make him accept the accusation that he had collaborated with the Gestapo during the war. Then suddenly this young lieutenant disappeared, was never seen again and he never heard this accusation again. Gyuri thought that Gerő was defending himself, that he could not have a colleague who worked for the Gestapo.

When he came out of prison, he had no home. In Vác he was asked where his relatives lived. And he said Pomáz, because that was where his sister lived after she had been relocated there. Whether it had been because of her landowner husband or because they had a decent flat on the Körút, which someone took a liking to [see: resettlements in Hungary], I don't know. So they put Pomáz down as his place of residence. He went to Pomáz, and then he started looking for a flat in Pest, but it turned out that he couldn't come to the capital, Pomáz was designated as a compulsory place of residence for him. He was not allowed to live in Budapest until the summer of 1956. He could not get a job. He was shoveling in Törökbálint at the brick factory. Every day from Pomáz to Margaret Bridge by HÉV, from there to Móricz Zsigmond Place by tram No. 9, and from there to Törökbálint by another HÉV. He shoveled for eight hours and then commuted back. And he was already forty years old. He couldn't physically cope. He was rehabilitated in 1957. He asked his friends for translation jobs, but they were scared to give him work. But Viktor Lányi was translating "Les Misérables" at the time and had got pretty bored with it. He gave him the rest of the book to ghost-translate. The first edition was published as Viktor Lányi translating the whole thing, but in the next edition Viktor Lányi correctly confirmed, then from abroad, that from this page to that page György Szekeres had translated it.[101] In 1960 he was given a half-time job as a Czech proofreader at the Europa Publishing House.

We couldn't get married yet, because the divorce with Konrád hadn't been officially finalized. To top it off, it was complicated because Szekeres was married on paper, even though he had never really been married. What had happened was that when Rákosi sent him to Rome in 1948, he had a French partner, Jeannie Chauveau, who was then deputy editor-in-chief of Elle magazine, and

they had a little girl. However, even Westerners were not allowed to move freely between countries at that time, and in order for his partner to go to Rome without all the visa hassle, a diplomatic passport was required. So, Gyuri asked for a diplomatic passport for his wife in Hungary. She got it. In 1948, it was not so striking that a French journalist did not bear her husband's name. And when he got out of prison in May 1954, he received an identity card which attested that he was married. But having never actually been married, he could not divorce. In the end it was George Aczél who settled the case. We had been living together for four years before we were able to get married in 1964.

We never moved in together, because he had previously acquired a co-tenancy in the house I was living in, from which he had split off a one-bedroom apartment. It was the first apartment he ever occupied as the main tenant. We divided my mother's apartment in 1957 and it became two small apartments with separate entrances. So, as a family, we had three small flats in the same house: my mother and I on the sixth floor, Gyuri on the first. We lived like that almost all the time.

My mother was ill for seven years. She maintained herself very strong, up to a few weeks prior to her death she taught whenever she could, went to concerts, museums, everything interested her, on her deathbed she learned Goethe by heart, lest inactivity, as she said, make her senile. She lived for eighty years. I know now that she had a much stronger influence on me than my father.

After my mother's death, my daughter was nineteen years old, and as Judit had been registered at my mother's flat for years, she was given the flat by the council. And then Gyuri and I decided that the sensible thing to do was to swap. Not officially, but in practice. And we lived like that for about three quarters of a year, until Gyuri died in 1973. He lived for fifty-nine years. A sudden heart attack killed him. He died standing up, as the Russians say: he died a righteous death. The disappointment in his ideals took him, he could not bear that.

In the meantime, I was doing a degree in psychology at university. There was a period in my childhood when I wanted to be a psychologist. Around the age of fourteen, Uncle Vilmos gave me Wundt's "Child Psychology". And he mentioned Freud. He gave me a volume, but I didn't read it until a few years later. And it kind of interested me. However, when I went to university, there was no psychology because it was declared a bourgeois pseudoscience. I got my high school teaching diploma without the word psychology being mentioned. When I started teaching, I felt that maybe someone ought to. My resolve was further strengthened by the fact that I got my diploma as a teacher of Russian language and literature without Dostoevsky's name being mentioned. Not only did we not study his work, but his name was not pronounced. The only reason I read *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* was because my father had it in his library. I saw that it was the same with psychology. And then in the second half of the fifties I read Benedek's "Golden Cage", he mentioned Szondi. Then I read Szondi, and then I got the Freuds out of my father's library, so I got more and more interested. Eventually I enrolled at university and did a degree in psychology as an individual correspondent. Individual correspondence meant that you graduated in five years, not six, and had to attend the classes of the full-time course of study.

I finished the first year while I was still teaching at Csanády. At that time, we taught on a morning-afternoon rotation, and I only attended university classes every other week. They accepted it. I graduated in psychology in 1963.

In 1965 I received a picture album of material from the Cairo Museum and fell in love with Egyptian art. So, in 1968 I started a degree in art history, also by correspondence. I thought we would start with cave paintings, since it was about the history of art. But we started with the Renaissance. Egypt was out of the question. In the first class, Professor Vayer casually said that of course we ought to be able to read German, English, French, Russian and naturally, Italian.[102] And you mustn't despair if you see a Latin text. Now, the students were lucky to speak one foreign language, some knew none. One of our classmates quickly put together a team of five, and we always studied together. We would assign who reads what and then report back to each other. So, I was on good terms with these kids fifteen years younger than me, and the friendship lasted. In 1975, one of the girls received two invitations to the summer university in Eger. She invited one of her friends, but she had just got a passport - she was refused to have a passport for the prior five years because her brother had defected - and she wanted to go abroad. She asked me. But I was going to go to France in the summer of 1975 to do research for the book I was writing about Szekeres.[103]

The trouble was that in the autumn of 1974 Konrád was arrested at my house. One day he came to say he wanted to stay at my place because he was wanted. Stay, I told him. He stayed there for a few days, but he couldn't help himself, he went for a walk. The next day, after one of my classes, I was told to go to the principal's office. There were two men in civilian clothes, they showed me their search warrant, put me in a grey Volga and took me home. Gyuri was taken away within five minutes. Ten minutes later they came back with another search warrant and completely ransacked my apartment. They even rummaged through the tea boxes with a pen to see if there was anything in them. They took some books, my typewriter, my film recorder. The only consequence of this was that I was not given a passport,[104] so I quickly told my former classmate that I would go to Eger. And there I met András Román, whom I hadn't seen for twenty-five or thirty years.

The first time I met him was in 1946, when I was thirteen, my mother had something to do at the Postal Savings Bank, and she sent me out to Liberty Square because I always had to be out in the open air for fear of tuberculosis. I sat on the bench with a book in my hand and read. Next to me sat an auntie who was grazing some kindergarten children. She turned to me and asked, "Aren't you Vera Varsa?" How do you know? She said that Auntie Manci Hillinger (my mother's tailor friend) was her cousin, and she told me that Varsa Vera had two big pigtails and was always reading. Then my mother came along, the two women got to know each other. They, together with Aunt Manci became best friends until they died. That lady had a son who was already in dancing school. I didn't attend, so the aunt offered for her son to teach me how to dance. The dancing lessons were at our house. Of course, there was no tape recorder or anything like that, they whistled the tunes. This boy was András Román.

András Román was an excellent expert of monument restoration, and an excellent man. He was a member of the board of ICOMOS, UNESCO's heritage organization, for six terms, eighteen years, and for two terms, six years, he was vice-president. He also served as President of the Hungarian chapter of ICOMOS. He has been invited to lecture in many places and has worked plenty in his home country. His work included the rescue of Hollókő, two villages in Transylvania (Torockó, Énlaka) and the synagogue in Mád. In 2001, Mád received the Europa Nostra prize for the restoration of the synagogue, and András Román played a major role in this. So he is, among other things, an honorary citizen of Hollókő, an honorary citizen of Torockó, an honorary citizen of Mád.



He has written three books on the protection of monuments and many articles. The summer university, where we met again, was renamed András Román Summer University of Historic Preservation last year [2006].

I married András Román only later, because I insisted that Zsófi, my granddaughter, should be my witness, but in 1979 we moved in together in a special way. I gave my apartment in the Phoenix House to his ex-wife, who was still living there, and we divided his apartment into two. When I moved here, I was forty-six years old and I wanted to be independent. Plus, András had a daughter who was going on marrying age, and I was on good terms with her, but I wanted to take all precautions for peace. András, his mother and daughter lived in three rooms and I had two rooms. We had two kitchens and two bathrooms. The door between the two apartments was not walled in, but filled with a bookshelf. Then in 1981, the daughter got married, they went away on their honeymoon and never came back. They went to America. Later my mother-in-law died. She was still working two weeks before she died. She was a lovely lady.

After the regime change, when it was possible to buy flats, András said he'd like to get married then. Zsófi had also come of age, so there was no obstacle. In 2005, after five bitter years and eight operations, András was overcome by illness. He fought hard. He only gave up in the last three weeks, until then he worked, taught and travelled. He died in his own bed, in the apartment where he was born. In addition to the summer university, a research center for historical monuments will be dedicated to his name in the autumn.

While I was a senior teacher at Trefort, I worked as a lecturer at the School of Drama and Film from 1974. In 1979, I left Trefort and was employed solely by the university. In 1987, Mrs. Miklós Radnóti, the former head of the lectorate, retired and I was appointed, even though I was not a party member. In 1987, it didn't matter so much anymore, and it had always been a free-spirited university. For example, in 2002, during the elections, only two people wore a rosette with the national colors, including teachers, students and technical staff[105]. Or another: the Minister of Culture, Andrásfalvy, came to our opening ceremony and gave a speech. When the students thought it was too long, they started clapping and drumming, so he had to stop.

Even though I was done with my activism after 1956, I still had a longing for it. In 1967, the Hungarian Pedagogical Society was re-established, and I was invited there by Nándor Szávai, who was the president of the high school section. I became active there for a while, only to later realize that the tasks were nominal. They gave us all sorts of tasks, asked for our opinions, and then it turned out that they had already made up their minds. The next time I had this experience was in the period before the change of regime. In 1988 I went to the founding meeting of the Social Democratic Party. There were very nice old organized workers there, old social democrats. I left the meeting with the idea to become a party member by the time I got home. But I didn't, because fortunately I realized in time that I would be in a place where I would be out of my element again. Then I looked into the Hungarian October Party of Gyuri Krassó, but it was clear that this was not my place either, even though I had known Gyuri Krassó for a long time.[106]

Then I checked out another party, they called themselves 4-6-0. This referred to the first world war lasting four years, the second six years, and the hope that the third would last zero years.[107] I liked that. It sounded nice enough, but they were mostly sixteen-year-old kids. And then I joined SZDSZ. I've been a member of SZDSZ ever since. I got on the list of candidates before the first

municipal elections and became a representative in the fifth district. I was the chairman of the cultural committee. In France, in Saint Paul de Vence, I organized an exhibition of artists from the Fifth District. Saint Paul de Vence is the Mecca of modern art. I served one term as a member of parliament and one term as an external committee member. I was also briefly a trustee of SZDSZ district unit. In the second term, by the way, András was elected, and at that time FIDESZ was in power in the district, and hardly anyone else was allowed a seat. But they did not dare to make the vice-president of ICOMOS sit among them and not be the councilor for cultural heritage management.

When I left municipal government, I was looking for something for myself. I was already in contact with Amnesty International; I was corresponding, because correspondence is one of Amnesty's main tasks. Its objectives are quite impeccable, and there is a lot that is right, but there is one problem: an organization of that size inevitably becomes bureaucratized and superficial. I did not notice this until we had the scandal in 2000. At that time, I had been the President of Amnesty International in Hungary for several years.

The President of Amnesty International/Hungary, Vera Szekeres-Varsa, issued the following statement:

"An official of Amnesty International/Netherlands published a regrettably premature advertisement in a Dutch newspaper informing the Dutch public that children's teeth had been knocked out by the Hungarian police. I learned about the advertisement from the Hungarian news media, as the national chapters do not deal with cases arising in their own countries. We receive the cases we work on via our international secretariat in London and they are always related to cases in other countries. Both the international secretariat and the AI organization in Hungary immediately stopped further publication of the advertisement, calling on the Dutch section to apologize (if it could not credibly prove its claim) and to state that the news was unfounded. On 22 December, the Director and Press Officer of the Dutch section sent a statement to the Centre for Country Image, apologizing in full for their error. Amnesty International consistently fights against all human rights violations (the annual report published in the summer of 2000 unfortunately included a case in Hungary), but we insist on our credibility, and because of the unfounded nature of this case, both the Hungarian organization and the London Secretariat demanded a correction and apology from the Dutch section, which was made."

I resigned shortly after this incident, because next, the Slovenian section published an unfounded news item. Already after the first scandal, our rural groups, which we had worked for years to set up (all as volunteers!), collapsed, we had withstood a lot of unkind attacks and harassment. I don't fight my own pack. But I missed them very much for a long time, and I still regret how things turned out to this day.

Letter from the former President of the Republic of Hungary:

"To Mrs. Vera Szekeres-Varsa,

President of Amnesty International Hungary

Dear Vera!

I am deeply saddened that you have resigned as President of Amnesty International Hungary. The whole "affair" was blown out of all proportion. In my opinion, the way it was handled did neither the country nor Amnesty International any good, and the only smart thing you could have done was to resign. Anyone who knows a little about the workings of the organization knows that the domestic branch has neither the initiative nor the capacity to take a position on abuses in its own country.

This war - perhaps I would call it a 'PR' war - was a terrible waste to take on, it would have been child's play to elegantly fend it off. This way, however, it was costly and left a bad taste in the mouth of everyone who had anything to do with it.

I greet you with warm friendship, and allow me to thank you, albeit only as a former president, but with a sincere heart and affection, for what you have done over the years - I dare say for the benefit of the whole world - in this supposedly "insignificant" international organization!

Árpád Göncz"

I practically brought up my daughter on my own. The child didn't mind my divorce from her father, because she never lived with him. When the marriage was still somewhat intact, he was in Leningrad. She loved Konrád Gyuri, and of course he made friends with her, they played a lot, as he was only twenty years older than her. What hurt the child was when Gyuri and I divorced. She didn't make a big fuss about it, but it bothered her. I remember in those months we sat on the floor for hours a day, building blocks, because I knew I had to make up for everything. Otherwise, my mother helped me raise the kid. I had no role model as a mother. I was too young and everything was very different from the way it was when I was growing up. I was the child of elderly parents, and in addition, in my life there was a huge historical cataclysm and then, a huge historical shift. And she was the child of a very young mother. But ultimately, I am an educator.

First, I sent the child to the district primary school, Fürst Sándor Street. Then I transferred her to Csanády Street, where I also taught. I transferred her because the company of children at the old school did not seem to be good. There, learning was not a priority. When I transferred her to Csanády, I knew who the teacher was going to be, and I knew she was qualified. Still, my daughter didn't go through primary school there, because in the meantime I was transferred to Trefort. In Trefort, there was a primary school, even so, I didn't want to take her out of her environment. But I found out that Trefort had much higher standards, so, to make the adjustment to high school milder, I transferred her after seventh grade. My considerations were justified; she only had to be tutored in music, arithmetic, geography and biology. As for extra lessons, the language lessons were at home: English, French, Russian from me, a little German from my mother. She learned to play the flute, but then she didn't feel like it. I taught her to swim, and then she did well in the sports club, but she didn't play competitively. She also played tennis. Finally, she graduated with honors, and was immediately admitted to the ELTE, the Faculty of Humanities, with the highest marks. There was no question that she would go on to university, not vocational school. She was admitted to study French and Russian. My ambition was to send her to both language regions before admission. Of these, only French was successful. I couldn't organize the Russian. In the era of Socialism! But his father, who had graduated in Russia, was a renowned doctor, a member of an international research team, went to the Soviet Union every three or four months, and we asked him to find a pen-friend with whom we could switch places. And he was unable to find one. Among all those doctors, he couldn't find one with a decent apartment, with a nook where they could put a

guest child. Then he finally found one, but at the closing banquet, the doctor-dad drank himself belligerent, so he came home saying Judit couldn't go there. She graduated from university in 1976, but in the meantime, she had already taken art history as a subject as well. I was two years above her with my art history studies, and she really liked it. So, she had three subjects, and she wanted to skip a year with one of them, to avoid having three final exams at the same time. They wouldn't let her do that, so she dropped Russian. So, she did a degree in French Art History and went to the Kiscelli Museum, where she had to organize the collection of drawings. It was very little work. She said it's okay, as long as her kids are young, it'll be fine. Then, shortly before the regime change, she moved to a private gallery, and from there she moved to another private gallery, and then she had her own gallery. She mainly sells paintings and old Zsolnay porcelain. She is very successful. So are her daughters. One is an economist, the other is a sociologist and my third grandchild is still studying. The two older daughters already have beautiful babies, one each. May they all live in perpetual peace.

My daughter considers herself Jewish, but she is completely devoid of faith. And she has never had any anti-Semitic incidents. When I discovered that she considers herself very Jewish, I blamed myself for a moment, thinking that I had made her life difficult. Because it is easier to be non-Jewish than Jewish, and if one is half this and half that, one could move in the either direction. If you're being raised by someone who is not Jewish, it's probably doable. I didn't raise her as a Jew, she didn't see us go to Synagogue as we didn't, not even my ancestors were religious. Still, it is inevitable, and should not be avoided, that the next generation knows or hears about the persecution. Because I am most deeply convinced that it is also for their protection that they should know about it and be taught that it is necessary to put a halt to any dangerous developments at the first moment. There must be no compromise. Not only out of morality, but also out of self-defense. I never articulated this to her when she was little, but inevitably these sorts of issues came up, and of course we never hid it. The stories from the time of the Shoah also surfaced.

I myself have an absolutely biased attitude towards Israel. I don't care about anything, whatever happens; this state needs to live, to flourish, to be strong. I first visited Israel in 1988, eight times in all. The last time was last year, in 2006.

## **1 The present-day names of those localities which no longer belong to Hungary are mentioned when they first appear**

2 Opatija - a town in Croatia. It became a popular spa resort after the construction of the Trieste-Fiume railway in the 19th century.

3 Second Vienna Decision

4 Blanka's wearing a Bocskai attire indicates the success of assimilation.

5 Kistarcsa Internment Camp

6 The History of Hungarian Literature 1945-1975, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1981-1990.)

7 Körmend was a large municipality in Vas County, with 5,300 inhabitants in 1891; 7,200 in 1910; 8,100 in 1920 (district magistrate's office, district court, notary's office, tax office).

8 Törökbecse (Újbecse) - district seat, a large village in Torontál County. In 1891 with 7300 (69% Hungarian, 27% Serbian; 66% Roman Catholic, 28% Greek Orthodox), in 1910 with 7600

inhabitants (district court, notary office). After the Trianon Treaty, it became part of the Serb-Croat-Sloven Kingdom. Today it is in Serbia.

[9](#) Article IX of the 1885 Law on Royal Postal Savings Bank provided for the establishment of a [10](#) trade schools

[11](#) Frans Snyders (Snijders) (1579-1657) - Flemish painter, who painted, among other things, dramatic hunting pictures.

[12](#) Hochdeutsch is the standard German language that evolved from the Central- and Southern dialects in the 18th century.

[13](#) Oszkár Görgényi-Göttche (1895–1972), pediatrician, pulmonologist, university professor. Between 1932 and 1944, he was chief physician at the White Cross Children's Hospital in Budapest, in 1944-46, he was head of department at the Szent János Hospital, and retired between 1946 and 1950. From 1950 he was chief physician and later scientific director of the Szabadsághegy State Children's Sanatorium. He published numerous scientific publications and several books.

[14](#)

[15](#) István Tömörkény (1866–1917) – writer, associate of Szegedi Híradó, later Szegedi Napló. 1897, Kálmán Mikszáth invited him to „Országos Hírlap”-as an external associate. From 1904 until his death, he directed the Szeged Library and Museum. Ede Kistelegi (1861–1931) – writer, poet, journalist in Budapest and later in Szeged. Associate of the Pesti Hírlap, the Pesti Napló and, from the beginning of the 1890's the Szegedi Hírlap, later the Szegedi Napló, as an inner associate. He wrote several volumes of poems and novels. István Ortutay – writer, journalist, editor of the Szegedi Napló, (father of Gyula Ortutay).

[16](#) A chair with a seat woven from reeds.

[17](#) A sofa with backrest, without armrests.

[18](#) war bonds in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy

[19](#) Gusztáv Emich (1814-1869), a publisher and bookseller, opened his National Bookstore in Pest in 1841, published

[20](#) Pancsova was a town in Torontál County with municipal rights. It had its own royal court, district court, notary's office, tax office, district magistrate's office. Its population was 11,000 in 1850, 16,900 in 1870, 17,900 in 1891 (43% Serbs, 40% Germans, 11% Hungarians, 2% Romanians, 1% Slovaks, and 1% Croats; by denomination 44% Greek Orthodox, 38% Roman Catholic, 9% Evangelical, 4% Reformed and 4% Israelite), and 20,800 in 1910 (42% Serbs, 36% Germans, 16% Hungarians; 45% Greek Orthodox, 36% Roman Catholic, 10% Evangelical and 3% Israelite). In the end of the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century, the town had a public upper high school, a public school, a public and a Serbian upper school for girls, and an apprentice school. The Trianon Treaty ordered the territory to the Serb-Croat-Sloven Kingdom. Today it is in Serbia.

[21](#) Kuruc was the name of a movement that fought against the Habsburg domination from 1671 to 1711. Kuruc is also used to refer to a member of this movement.

[22](#) Excerpt from a drafting song of the revolution.

[23](#) A small village in Zemplén County, with a population of 700 Slovaks and Hungarians in 1910. From 1918, it belonged to Czechoslovakia.

[24](#) Compromise of 1867

[25](#) Large village in Zemplén County, in 1891 it had 1,400 inhabitants.

[26](#) Most Jewish family names sounded German. From the mid 19th century, Jewish families changed their names for Hungarian sounding ones, in order to better assimilate. In the shadow of the growing anti-Semitism, this process speeded up from the 1920's.

[27](#) According to § 49 of the 1868 law on the People's School,



[28](#) Alfréd Gajdos wrote a textbook published in Paris in 1967, titled "Médecine et Biochimie," which went through several editions.

[29](#) The Week, 1913, page 883).

[30](#) Death marches to Hegyeshalom.

[31](#) trade schools, Secondary trade vocational education.

[32](#) several large brickworks (one with 500 workers), several gas mills (one with 300 workers), starch factories, machine factories, etc. After Trianon, the town was annexed to the Kingdom of Serbs-Croatian-Slovenes, and in 1921 it had 25 800 inhabitants. Today it is part of Serbia.

[33](#) If the parties to the marriage were of different religions, they agreed on which religion their unborn child would follow. Reversalis refers to an agreement that the children would follow the Christian denomination. Usually, boys followed the father's denomination, and the girls followed the mothers.

[34](#) gendarmerie coup.

[35](#) József Varsa must have been placed with his brother Dezső in 1903, who was 24 years old at the time. His children were born between 1905 and 1909.

[36](#)

[37](#) The university took the name of Péter Pázmány in 1921.

[38](#) The term

[39](#) Ruzstem Vámbéry (1872-1948) - lawyer, criminal lawyer, publicist. In 1903, he was a private lecturer of criminal law at the University of Budapest; from 1915 to 1918, he was an extraordinary professor, and in 1919, he was a full professor. After 1920, he was deprived of his chair. From 1922 he was a lawyer. 1938 he emigrated to London and later moved to the United States. He was one of the first scholars of criminology in Hungary and dealt extensively with juvenile delinquency.

[40](#) On 15 May 1915, as shown in HUVSZ052.

[41](#) The Socialist Revolution of 1917 in Russia.

[42](#) 6 June 1918.

[43](#) anti-Semitic public sentiment in the early 1920's

[44](#) Alag was a large village bordering Rákospalota in Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County. At the end of the 19th century, it was still considered a wasteland, famous as a venue for horse races organized by the

[45](#) Gróf Klebelsberg Street

[46](#) As it will be revealed later, he had converted to Lutheranism in the summer of 1944.

[47](#) Iván Bächer's vignette,

[48](#) Author, youth novel author.

[49](#) Károly Fodor (Mózes Freyberger) (1856-1927), fencing master and journalist, founded his first fencing school in Budapest in 1896, where - well ahead of his day and age - he also started fencing for children. (from the Hungarian Biographical Encyclopedia)

[50](#) Imre Ungár (1909-1972) - pianist and teacher, Kossuth Prize winner (1949), Liszt Prize winner (1962), Merited Artist (1956). From 1924 he regularly gave concerts at home and abroad. In 1932, he won first prize at the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw, and in 1935 he gave concerts in the USA with great success. He taught at the Liszt Academy of Music from 1949 until his death.

[51](#) One of the five major Hollywood film studios, formed in 1924 by the merger of Metro Pictures Corporation, Goldwyn Pictures Corporation and Louis B. Mayer Pictures.

[52](#)

[53](#) Jewish Laws in Hungary

[54](#) stooges

[55](#) yellow star

[56](#) On 16 June 1944 the Mayor of Budapest, Ákos Farkas Doroghi issued the first decree on the relocation and concentration of Jews in Budapest, which designated the yellow-star houses for each district. A deadline of three days was given for the relocation, later changed to eight days.

[57](#) decorations, medals.

[58](#) exemptions from Jewish Laws

[59](#)

[60](#) forced labor service

[61](#) Arrow Cross takeover

[62](#) Gróf Klebelsberg Street

[63](#) A Hungarian Order of Merit founded in 1920. During the war years, anti-Semitism was prevalent among its members.

[64](#) White and red striped armband with an arrow cross on it. The Hungarist movement was the ideological movement behind the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party (National Socialist Party).

[65](#) Hungarian Democartic Youth Movement, founded in 1945.

[66](#) Zionism in Hungary after 1945

[67](#) László Vajthó (1887-1977) - literary historian, literary translator, editor, teacher.

[68](#) see Horthy Proclamation

[69](#) Károly Beregfy (1889-1946) - General Beregfy, commander of the 3rd Hungarian Army in 1944, then Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff after the Arrow Cross takeover. In 1946 he was executed as a war criminal.

[70](#) ration card system in Hungary (1940-1951)

[71](#) Lawyers in Hungary

[72](#) Soft, laced boots named after Austrian Colonel Bilgeri.

[73](#) The predecessor of the Varga Katalin Gymnasium, the Mária Terézia Gymnasium for Young Girls, started as a girls' secondary school in 1875. In 1902 it moved to its later building at 63-65 Sugár út (later Andrássy út) in District VI. In 1905 it became a senior girls' school and girls' secondary school. In 1921, it received the name Mária Terézia Hungarian Royal State High School and Gymnasium for Young Girls. In 1923, the high school was closed, from then on, the school was called Mária Terézia Hungarian Royal State Gymnasium for Girls. From 1946, it continued to function as the Katalin Varga Gymnasium. The grammar school was closed in 1968 and replaced by a vocational school.

[74](#) Alliance of Working Youth (Dolgozó Ifjúság Szövetsége).

[75](#) In the school year 1948/49, the seven-grade system was introduced: a 7 was 'outstanding', a 6 'excellent', a 5 'good', a 4 'average', a 3 'satisfactory'. By the 1950/51 school year, the five-grade system had been restored, but in contrast to the pre-war system, a '1' was the worst grade.

[76](#) The IKKA voucher (short for IBUSZ Foreign Trade Action), which could be obtained through relatives in the West or on the black market, was a kind of cheque that could be used to buy foodstuffs that were completely absent from retail trade in the early 1950s, (

[77](#) Streptomycin is an antibiotic discovered in 1944 and the first clinically effective treatment for Tuberculosis (Wikipedia).

[78](#) Excerpt from the Soviet patriotic song "Wide is my Motherland".

[79](#) In the 1950s, Soviet leaders and their Eastern European henchmen called Tito the

[80](#) In the spring of 1952, the University Russian Institute, which had been given faculty status in 1951, was transformed into the Lenin Institute and was separated from the ELTE Faculty of Humanities. It was dissolved in 1956 and re-merged with the Faculty of Humanities in 1957.

[81](#) Pál Pándi (1926-1987) - literary historian, critic, editor, university professor. In the 1960s and 1970s he was one of the leading cultural politicians of the MSZMP. As a literary historian, he was concerned with the literature of the Hungarian reform era (from the Hungarian Biographical Encyclopedia).

[82](#) János Berecz (1930) - party functionary, head of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ), then from 1974 head of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP), editor-in-chief of Népszabadság (1982-85), ideological secretary of the Central Committee and the Agit-Prop. Ferenc Kunszabó [(1932) - ]writer, sociographer.

[83](#) KOMINFORM, the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties. Founded in 1947, its aim was to exchange information between the parties, coordinate their activities and promote the revolution in the countries of the region. At the inaugural meeting, Zhdanov, representing the USSR Communist Party (USSR), in a speech considered to be the opening of the Cold War from the Soviet side, discussed the division of the world into two camps. The organization was based in Belgrade until 1948. However, as Yugoslavia sought independence from the Soviet Union, the Information Bureau issued a resolution condemning the policies of the Yugoslav Communist Party, the headquarters of the organization was moved to Bucharest and Yugoslavia was excluded from the Cominform. Subsequently, the Soviet Union and other socialist countries severed their relations with Yugoslavia, and Tito was branded an

[84](#)

[85](#) The institution on the side of Sashegy - formerly a convent - was a Soviet scholarship preparatory college.

[86](#) A 1947 painting by Alexander Laktionov, in the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

[87](#) displacements in Hungary

[88](#) Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Party Congress

[89](#) see 1956 revolution

[90](#) The Vends - a Slovene ethnic group living in south-western Hungary.

[91](#) Thirteen Houses, a former settlement in Angyalföld, near Váci út. It was demolished in the 1970s.

[92](#) Budapest Spa Directorate).

[93](#) Foreign Trade-, Procurement -, Commerce-, and Travel Agency Ltd. (Idegenforgalmi Beszerzési Utazási és Szállítási Rt.)

[94](#) (b. 1920), literary translator

[95](#) János Elbert (1932-1983) -

[96](#) Oszkár Betlen (1909-1969) - journalist, historian, editor-in-chief of Szabad Nép from 1951-1954, deputy member of the MDP Central Executive Committee (1951-56).

[97](#) In 1988, as a retired ambassador, he signed the founding appeal of the Publicity Club.

[98](#) Andor Berei (1900-1979) - after the fall of the Council Republic he participated in the organization of the illegal communist movement, for which he was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 1921. In 1922, he was sent to the Soviet Union as part of the prisoner exchange operation. In 1934-46 he was a leader of the communist movement in Belgium. After returning home, he worked in the Party apparatus, and from 1948 he was State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then First Deputy Foreign Minister. In 1948-56, he was a member of the MDP's Congress of the National Unity Party (MDP KV).

[99](#) Pierre Courtade - journalist, editor of the foreign affairs section of l'Humanité, was a member of the French Communist Party leadership.

[100] Georges Bidault (1899-1983) - from 1943 he was President of the National Council of Resistance (CNR) in the French Resistance movement, Foreign Minister (1944-46, 1947-48, 1953-54), then Prime Minister in the second half of 1946 and 1949-50, and Deputy Prime Minister in 1951-52 (from the Hungarian Encyclopedia).

[101] Viktor Lányi (1889-1962) - composer, writer and literary translator. From 1926 he was the opera director of the Municipal Theatre, from 1931 he was a permanent music editor and glossary writer for the Pesti Hírlap. He translated more than 50 opera texts and works of fiction into Hungarian. From 1957 he lived in Brussels (from the Hungarian Biographical Encyclopedia).

[102] Lajos Vayer (1913-2001), professor, head of the Department of Art History at the Faculty of Humanities of ELTE from 1955-1983.

[103] Salamander in the Fire - was published in 1985 in the Facts and Witnesses series by Magvető Publishers.

[104] Likely, the passport was refused on the basis of Article 3, paragraph 2 of Decree-Law No. 4 of 1970 of the Presidential Council -

[105] In 2002, Fidesz campaigned for its supporters to wear rosettes featuring the national colors. The rosette, historically a symbol of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution, was traditionally worn exclusively during the National Holiday commemorating the Revolution.

[106] György Krassó (1932-1991) -

[107] 4-6-0 defined themselves as a