

Ilona Seifert

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Hungary

Interviewer: Dora Sardi and Eszter Andor

My grandfather, Bernáat Riemer was born in ÓObuda. He studied bakery as an apprentice and then became a baker's journeyman. He worked diligently, and later bought the bakery where he had worked. Next to the bakery there was a shop where different kinds of breads, baker's wares, and all kinds of other foodstuffs were sold. They made challah too. Besides this, grandfather had a soda-water workshop.

My grandmother Júlia Krausz was born in Vienna. Her mother tongue was German, but she could speak perfect Hungarian. They had eight children: three boys and five girls.

All the children finished middle school, but one of my uncles graduated from secondary school because he loved studying. My grandfather taught all his sons the bakery trade because he said it was a very good trade; because no matter what the world came to, people would always need bread and water. So, all of his sons became bakers.

The girls were brought up to work too, they had to learn to tend the counter in the shop and they worked there until they got married. There were four girls; two were always in the shop, in fact only family members worked there. Grandmother also worked in the shop and usually sat at the cash till. Apart from having to work, the girls were given everything: they got the nicest clothes, the best education, they learnt languages, played the piano, and went out with their mum. Grandfather and grandmother put a lot of emphasis on taking the children to many balls in the winter. The girls got beautiful ball gowns, and they didn't want for anything, but they were in the shop all year long.

Among the workers of the bakery there were Jews and non-Jews as well, but that didn't matter. Grandfather had such a good social sense, that everybody who worked there and all members of the family ate lunch at the same table at noon. This is what it was like: The apartment was almost next-door to the shop, and there was a long table in it where about twenty-two to twenty-four people sat every day. Everybody ate the same meal together, as grandfather didn't distinguish between family and the workers, however everybody had to be extremely punctual for lunch, because he was awfully fussy about that.

At grandfather's place, a cook made the meals and there was also a maid to care for the apartment, because it was quite large. There was a huge bedroom, a huge dining hall where the forty-two of us sat at Seder night, plus a parlor, and two or three bedrooms where the children slept. In the dining room there was a great big dining-room side-board and another smaller one, both packed with beautiful porcelain ware and glassware. Granddad and grandma went to Karlsbad for three or four weeks every summer, and they always brought back a lot of porcelain-ware, and, of course souvenirs for the children and grandchildren. My parents and the other children who were married at the time always got a porcelain set or a set of drinking-glasses. And we, the younger children got silk underwear, because there they could get this Milan underwear, which it was not possible to get here in those days.

Every day, a barber came to the house to give my grandfather a shave. My grandmothers (both paternal and maternal,) had hairdressers come every morning to help them with their hair; At the time they wore their long hair up, with a bun in the middle, and they couldn't comb it themselves.

At grandfather's they had several coaches, both open and closed ones, which they went out in. They had horses and a stable, and carriages for the bakery, because they delivered to other shops as well.

My grandparents were very religious; they were not orthodox, but they observed all the holidays. They didn't work on the Sabbath and the bakery and the shop was not open then, but they were on Sundays. At Pesach they had to "sell" the whole bakery. It was a kind of mock-sale, as it was always sold to one of the leading baker's journeymen.

At the holiday times, the family assembled. The children and grandchildren came, though other relatives usually did not, with the exception of one uncle, Miksa Riemer (my grandfather's brother) who was widowed. He was always invited.

Grandfather died in 1927, and following his death, the bakery and the shop closed down. None of his children took them over, because they all had their businesses own already. Grandmother lived until about the end of the 1930's. When she couldn't be at home any more, she moved into a very, very elegant nursing home somewhere in Zugliget. That was a strictly Jewish kosher place and she received the best care.

My maternal grandfather Samu Wollner was born in Ozora, and my grandmother in Szenc. They also had a bakery, and a bakery shop, too. But unlike the one owned by my paternal grandparents, it was smaller (they only had about 8-10 workers) and the common lunch was never introduced there and so everybody went and ate separately. The boys were taught the bakery trade, but the two girls didn't work, I think. Grandmother was in the shop on her

own, and when it was a business was brisk, there was a helper in the bakery.

The Wollner grandparents had an apartment with four rooms plus a hall, which I can also remember. It was nicely furnished too, but they didn't have as large a collection of porcelain as my other grandparents did, because they didn't go to Karlsbad. There were very nice carved pieces of furniture, a standing clock - which was fashionable then - and a lot of silverware. I remember that the display case was always full of silver: trays and tableware. They had only one coach, and they had a coachman for it, too. They did not have financial problems either, although they were not as rich as my other grandparents.

Although grandmother loved cooking, they had a cook for a while. And later, when they were left alone with grandfather, then they didn't need a cook. There was a general housemaid, one of the little village girls grandmother liked to train. And there was the washerwoman, who did just one great big wash every month, though this took about 2-3 days.

I spent much more time at these grandparents. They lived much closer than the Riemer grandparents did, and grandmother allowed much more. For example, if somebody bought a kilo of bread, I could take handle the money. Or when, at the weekends, the cholent was brought in dishes and a number had to be labelled onto each pot, and the owner of the pot got the same number: I was allowed to cut the number off the block, stick it onto the pot and place it in its owner's hands. So she was much more grandmotherly. The other grandmother was rather distant and more spoiled - we had to kiss her hands in the formal way. I visited them about once in a month with daddy.

We liked being there (at our maternal grandparent's) a lot. Grandfather taught me to play chess and we would play for hours. He had time for me during the day, as he didn't have much to do then, although he was down in the bakery at five in the morning. He always used to take a nap in the afternoon, and then go to the baker's casino every day (my other grandfather went there less frequently).

They were very strictly religious, but they were also not orthodox. My grandmother was the most religious of my grandparents. She began to make the kosher dishes for Pesach months early. They belonged to the Páava street synagogue-district, and they donated money for the construction of the synagogue.

My mommy had four siblings, three boys and a girl. The first one was Pali, who died for his country in World War I. Then there was Oszkar who married my daddy's younger sister, Iréenke. The third boy was Sáandor, who was a baker too, and also had a shop next to the bakery. My mommy's sister was

Klára. She married a man named Sándor Beck and gave birth to a little boy. They also had a bakery, and Klára worked in the shop.

My father was born in Budapest in 1894. He also learned the bakery trade, just like his brothers. My mother was born in 1897, also in Budapest. They got married in 1917, and they bought this house then. It was a single story house and they extended it by building more stories on top. We lived in it, and it also housed daddy's mechanized bakery and soda-water workshop. My father's bakery was the first one to use a steam oven for baking bread. There were two additional floors above the bakery. On the first floor potatoes were kept. People liked potato bread a lot at that time, and every day many hundredweight of potatoes arrived; There were about forty women who peeled the potatoes. Then they were boiled, and put in the potato masher, and sent straight down to the ground floor where there was the trough in which leaven was mixed with a mixing machine. On the second floor were at least eight apartments for the permanent staff members. These apartments had all modern conveniences, including kitchens.

We had a lot of workers, and carriages and horses, there were about 22 horses, if not more. The workshop was in the backyard along with a stable for the horses and a carriage-house for the carriages. We already had an automobile quite early in the beginning of the thirties. There was a live-in chauffeur, who took us to school every day and then brought us back home again later. Father also drove and mommy took the 'automobile driver's examination' as well, but when they went out somewhere, the chauffeur drove; That was chic.

There was a terrace rather than a roof, on top of the house and my parents had a garden made for us there, with a child's sandbox, a flower garden and beautiful garden furniture set. There were eight rooms in our apartment: bedroom, children's room, parlor, dining room, drawing room, living room. The parlor was beautiful. It had golden furniture in, including two large standing mirrors with golden frames. Then there was a drawing room for daddy - with a suite of furniture, bookshelf and a filing cabinet. The living room was a great big room and we actually spent the whole day there. We even dined there sometimes.

Then there was a huge dining hall. It was a special room with lovely furniture and carpets, which had to be taken care of: you couldn't drop crumbs or make them dirty every day. We used the dining room when we had company at the house. There were plenty of guests in our house because at the time social life was very fashionable. My parents usually invited factory owners like themselves, wholesalers, merchants, district borough members and suchlike. I loved the guests, and we were dressed nicely on these occasions. I sang, and mommy played the piano. My sister did not often come in, because she was shy. After supper the women usually went

into the parlor had a chat there, and the men stayed in the parlor or went to the drawing room.

The children's room was furnished with white pieces of furniture. Our 'fraulein' slept there with us. There was one room just for the live-in cook and another small room for the maid. Nobody slept in the kitchen.

Naturally there was a bathroom with running water and a tub connected to a bathroom stove that had to be heated up. At that time people took a bath only on Sundays, and if someone took a bath every day she was considered kind of a bad girl. But we took a bath least every other day or so.

I was born in Budapest in 1921. I was named after one of my aunts. She had died in 1918 during the Spanish flu epidemic, and my grandmother asked her daughter-in-law that if her child was a girl, she should be named Ilona, in her honor.

Not long after my birth a German 'fraulein' came to us from Graz, Austria. Herta spent eight years with us, and our first language was German. We spent the whole day with our 'fraulein': we spoke, sang and played with dolls. We went for walks with her; 'Ferenc téér' was close to our home, and I loved going, because there were always so many children there. There were times when we went for a walk with mommy, and we would go to a confectioner's and drink hot chocolate, or coffee with cream.

We observed all the religious holidays before the War. We were not orthodox, but we took chicken to the shochet we bought meat in kosher shops. We observed the Sabbath: there was no lighting, nor were the meals heated-up. Later, after the war it was no longer that strict. In our house the typical Friday night meal was gefillte fish, meat soup, and, I think, breast or back of goose, mashed potato and pickles. I remember as it got closer to Pesach, they began preparing the ovens for the holiday and there were special Pesach dishes. Seder nights too, remain unforgettable. Every other year the first Seder was always held at my maternal grandmother's house and the second at the paternal grandmother's, and in the following year, the situation was reversed. There were more children at my paternal grandparents', so there were about 34-36 of us there, and 28 at the other place. We children had small colored drinking glasses and we got a tiny drop of wine, and we had fun together at the end of the table.

We spent every Sunday with our parents. We talked a lot and we also went to the movies, when we were a little older. I remember we went to the Corvin cinema every Sunday, where a ticket cost one pengó, and we always sat in the same place. We were taken to theatrical plays that were held on Sunday afternoons and on such occasions our 'fraulein' also came along with us. My parents went to the theatre but not often. Sometimes when the weather was nice, we went to Lake Balaton, but we never had our summer holidays there.

We went to Abbazia (Opatia, in Croatia today) and to Semmering (Austria) for summer holidays from early childhood until quite late. We went to Semmering supposedly to give us a better appetite, because we were so skinny. Daddy came to Semmering only at the weekends. We spent a month at both places. In Abbazia, he was with us for a few days, sometimes even for two weeks, but we were there with mommy for a month (and in Semmering too).

The whole extended family went down to Abbazia at the same time. We went there by train. Oh, that was a big journey, it took almost a whole day, and we also had to change trains at Fiume (Rijeka today, in Croatia) with our large amounts of luggage. We all lived in Breiner Hotel, which was a strictly kosher hotel. I remember that the meat table and the meat section were set with red covers, and the milk ones with nice blue tablecloth. You could eat meat or milk-based meals, but the two parts were separated. This one was the only kosher hotel in Abbazia, so all our Jewish acquaintances also went there. The family all went together, my mother and the two of us children, the two of us (and of course the fraulein - if she worked all year, it was natural that we didn't leave her out and go on holiday without her!) My mother's younger sister with her two sons went, as did the grandparents, and I think, others as well. There were a lot of children in Abbazia, acquaintances, lots of relatives and neighbors. Everybody knew everybody. There was also always a rabbi, who spent his summer holiday there, because the place was kosher enough that he could come. And he gave a religious service every Sabbath, as there was a synagogue there too.

I went to elementary school in Mester street. That was a prole (working class) neighborhood; children of workers went there and we, who came from better-off houses, were told to bring double portions of elevenses (second breakfast) so the children who didn't get it from home, could also have a share. It was assigned who should bring two of what, and we gave it all to the schoolmistress in the morning, so that no-one actually saw who got whose elevenses, but the poorer children got the same thing as the children of richer households. In the elementary school I didn't make many friends among my classmates, because when we came out of school our fraulein was always already waiting for us, and we went to Ferenc square and played there, where we had friends who were Jewish too.

After the elementary we both my sister and me got into Veres Pálnée High School. We had to wear uniforms at school. They were a dark-blue 'bocskai' [Hungarian national dress] for weekdays, striped linen in the spring, and for holidays, there was a white blouse. There were more Jews in the class than non-Jews: There were about 42 in total and 24 of us were Jews. But there was not a single Jew amongst the teachers, except the religious studies teacher. However the Jews and the non-Jews got along perfectly well with each other, so well that the class have been meeting almost every three months or so since graduation right up until the present day. There

was only a single anti-Semitic statement by someone but she has since protested a million times that it was a misunderstanding. When we wore rosettes of the national colours on March 15 (national holiday of Hungary, anniversary of the revolution in 1848) she said: " It's a good mask for you Jews, that you wear it, too." Veres Pálnée was an excellent school. It was the school of the National Woman's Training Association, and the first all-girls high school in the whole of Budapest.

During high school years, from 1937-1938 there were so-called house-parties. I remember that we had Jewish company and not many Christians were there. From the parties we were not allowed to go home alone, and the parents would come to fetch us. We went to the theatre too, but then as well, the father or mother of one of us always came to collect us afterwards, as we were not allowed to go alone in the evening. Later, when we were about 16-17 years old, we were allowed to go on hikes and biking too.

I was about 14-16 years old when I went to Gizi Utasi for a few years. She had a school, where she taught stage dance and acrobatics. I always loved gymnastics, and loved going there. At the end of the year, there always was a performance in the operetta-theatre of the capital, in which the students sang and danced. There were at least 10-12 of us. We learnt to play the piano at home as the piano teacher always came to us and we learned languages (French) at home too.

While I was still at high school I got accepted to the singing faculty of the Academy of Music, because I had a very good voice, I went there for two years, and then as a consequence of the anti-Jewish laws I did not have the opportunity to study further.

In 1939 I graduated from high school and I went to work in my father's workshop. I was in charge of the whole soda-water workshop, because my father, who was the president of the trade - didn't have enough time for it himself. He was awfully proud of me. I learnt a lot there, such as determination, leadership skills, and it really determined my whole life.

(Mrs Seifert declined to talk of the Holocaust or of the family members she lost)

I was neither in the Budapest ghetto, nor deported during the Holocaust; I just went into hiding. My sister and I were hidden in many, many different apartments and we were helped by very many non-Jews. Mommy was hiding too, mostly with daddy. Some sort of instinct suggested not going anywhere where many Jews were being gathered together. On the 15th of November 1944, I was drafted into the national clothing collecting unit, which was situated in the former Jewish school in Abonyi utca. The whole family went there and it was from there that we were liberated.

In 1945 my parents reopened the soda-water workshop in place of the old one, which had been looted. In the mornings I went to the district of Pava utca. Out of the old believers only a very few came back and a couple of the children were found. But there was nowhere to put the children, and the adults could not work. So I proposed to building a nursery. I learnt that the first delegation of Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) had arrived in Budapest, and I went to them to ask them for their help with the nursery. They offered to open not only a nursery but also a day care home for older children. They also set up a kitchen, and covered all its costs.

The nursery was ready in a very short time. Most of the leaders of the Jewish community of Budapest came to the opening and people came from abroad too. When the inauguration was over, the district ceremony's speaker was asked to thank Miss Ili Riemer for the huge amount of work she had done. I didn't know who was going to do this, but shortly I found out that it was Dr. Geza Seifert, (attorney at law). His family lived there in the district, and he attended the synagogue in Pava utca, too. When I first saw him I said to myself: "I've dreamt about a man like him my entire life, and he, and only he, could become my husband." And then I went along to the synagogue with daddy on Friday nights, and after prayer daddy kindly lagged behind and so my future husband always walked me home. A few months later he asked me if I was willing to board a ship of which he was the commander. I replied that it would be the most beautiful moment of my life. Our wedding was in 1947 in the Dohany utca synagogue. Our daughter was born in 1948. (She now works as a graduate and has a son who has also graduated from university.)

We kept a kosher house with my husband (it loosened up only after his death). I had a cook who knew everything about the kosher household. She said she had served only good houses and wouldn't have been employed if she hadn't known so much about how to manage a kosher house. And she even said that she wouldn't work for anyone but Jews, because she'd once been at a non-Jewish family where the staff hadn't had the same meals the family ate, and it had really hurt them. At Jewish households however, this was not the case: what the family ate, was also eaten out in the kitchen and the meals were not portioned, there was always plenty to go around. Then I had somebody to look after the child, which was her only task the whole day, but I was the only one to take her for walks.

From the time I got married, my husband didn't allow me to work. He said: I earn enough that we can live very well, and what I like is that when I come home my wife is there, so you shall just be my wife and our child's mother. Until he closed his eyes forever, I had never had a job; I had only taken part in Jewish matters, and helped him. But I was always busy doing something.

My husband had his own attorney's office. It was a co-operative at the time, but he asked for, and got, permission to work his office hours at home, since the apartment was large enough. Two weeks after we were married I went to learn typing and shorthand. He already had two secretaries and two trainee lawyers in the office, but I adored him and I wanted to be at his disposal in every way. So on Saturday nights and Sundays he dictated to me. During the week I went to the court and I copied out the files of my husband's client's in his criminal cases. My husband also entrusted me with managing releases and such.

We received a car quite early on, the basis that my husband simultaneously administered the duties of the deputy president of Jewish Community of Budapest (Israelite Community of Budapest.) and his position at the lawyer co-operative. Since he was first elected president then deputy president and he was elected to be the vice-president of the National Representative Board of Hungarian Israelites in 1966. (He performed this duty until 1976 when he closed his eyes.) So we got "the Moskvich". We used to be very proud because when we went walking on Vaci utca after the office, he'd always return to the car to find 10-15 people around it: squatting, looking underneath it. We would just watch them. Later better cars came along, but none of the others attracted the same admiration as the Moskvich had.

I spent my entire life in service for Jews. Since I was a young girl, I had worked in the youth group, which was under the auspices of the district woman's group. Since there were poor families at that time too, (not everybody was rich or wealthy) every boy and girl in the youth group was allocated a family in great need. Naturally, we asked money from our parents to support them, and they gladly gave, because they were happy that we were learning about social Jewish life, and that giving to help others is one of the most beautiful things. So we supported them. Izrael Klein was my family, they had seven children. But I provided them with everything.

After 1945 I participated in rebuilding Jewish life as a member of the youth group. Later I became a member of the Jewish community woman's group. I began in Páva utca, then the central woman's section of BIH (Israelite Community of Budapest) was formed and when the president died, I was elected and went on to be the president of the woman's section for twenty-something years.

When my husband was elected, first as deputy president, then as president, he was invited abroad a lot for Jewish matters, owing to the leading role he played in the Jewish world congress. I always went with him, as he accepted these invitations only on the condition that he could take me along. We went to almost all the cities of Europe.

After the death of my husband I was invited (by the State Office of Religious Affairs) to be the general secretary of the Israelite Community.

I told them that I would take the position only after asking the orthodox president and the chief rabbi, and they agreed to this. When I went and I told them the offer I had been made, the chief rabbi said: " It doesn't say in the Sulkhan Arukh that the general secretary of the BIH has to be a man, so why can't a woman do that? But on one condition: that you walk the same path your husband did". And then he said afterwards: "Let me be the first one to bless you" So, in 1976 I was elected to be general secretary, and I filled this position for 15 years. Then I went to work for Joint. This is how it happened.: The Joint came to Hungary in 1945, to help rebuilding Jewish life here. When after the Six-Day War, the Israeli ambassador was sent home, the Joint was also closed down. And when Jewish groups came here from abroad, there was nobody to welcome them, and they always phoned me from Joint to do it. This way I played a key role between the Jewish community and the Joint and they knew me well.

When the 15 years as the general secretary of BIH was about to end, Joint asked me how long I wanted to stay general secretary. I told them that I would be resigning at the next election. To this they replied: "so, it may be possible for you to come over to us?"

I said: "To be honest: it has been my dream and desire all my life, to work for Joint, because there is no more beautiful work than helping people." So the Joint came back, and they asked me to open the office on the first of July 1990. Since then I have been a protocol chief, and with God's blessing I managed office affairs and foreign relations.