

Peter Reisz

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Interviewer: Dora Sardi and Eszter Andor

There were many Jews living in Obuda. And Trauhaxlers (that is, ethnic Germans, or Swabians) and Slovaks. They lived together very peacefully. My mother's grandparents moved to Obuda from what is now Slovakia in 1900, and lived here ever since. I remember that my grandmother celebrated every German acquaintance's holiday, and these Swabians congratulated her on Jewish holidays. The trouble started when Hitler sugared up the Swabs, and one or two kids were willing to break the family tradition and start saying evil things about Jews, and acting irredentist.

The Swabs farmed and had vineyards and sold things at the market. Many of the Slovaks worked in the textile factory, because there were numerous plants preparing things for textile factories in Obuda. Many of the Jews also worked in the textile factory. They learned the trade, first as workers, later as plant and economic directors. Other Jews were traders. There were very well known Jewish confectioners in Obuda. The Brull Confectionery, for instance, was very famous.

My maternal great-grandfather was a trader, and his father, my great-great grandfather was a trader, too. As my grandmother told it, my great-grandfather was illiterate, and if some client couldn't pay his bill, my great-grandfather registered it by putting a mark next to the client's name, and when he had the money they would do the accounting. My great-grandfather was born in Balassagyarmat, but my grandfather was born in what is now Slovakia (but then was northern Hungary).

My grandparents owned and operated a food shop before the First World War. But my maternal grandfather, Kalman Breiner, was a prisoner of war for a long time during World War I, and my grandmother had to stay at home with the three kids, so the business went under. After the war my grandfather worked as an agent for the Szent Istvan Feed Plant, and traveled around the villages near Budapest selling their goods. He died in 1938. After my grandfather's death the children were cared for my grandmother, who from then on, always lived with her children.

My grandparents were religious people. I know that because I had a place in the great temple here in Obuda, and not just on holidays, but on Friday evenings, too. What I learned of religious customs, and of reading Hebrew, I learned from my grandmother. My grandfather lies in a place of honor in the cemetery, because I believe he was some sort of representative of the congregation. There weren't really any kosher shops in Obuda, but my grandparents pretty well kept the faith. There was a kosher slaughterhouse, but later it closed. At first my grandmother went to a little market on the corner of Lehel road and Robert Karoly Ring-Road for kosher meat. Later, she went to Lipotvaros. My grandmother was completely kosher; she kept dairy and meat products separate. Up until the day she died, she never ate pork.

Grandma knew the Swabs well. She would go to visit them when someone in their families died, or when someone was born, and she also went to congratulate them on their holidays. She brought them gifts, and they gave her gifts, like shlachmones (any gift given at Purim). We never had a Christmas tree, but Grandma always went to congratulate the Swabs on Christmas. We celebrated Hanukkah, and if Hanukkah didn't fall on Christmas, then they would come to congratulate us. They would bring us something, pears, plums, grapes. But they didn't bring any other food, because they knew that grandmother and her family wouldn't eat it, but fruit they would eat.

My grandmother had six siblings. One of her sisters, Berta, was a trained candy maker. The Brull Confectionery belonged to her and her husband. They did really well financially, and bought a two-story apartment house.

My father's parents were barkeepers, and owned their own bar. Like my mother's parents, they came from Slovakia.

My father, Imre Reisz, was born in 1888 in Budapest. He was a man skilled with his hands. He graduated from high school and would have liked to study more, but he couldn't because of the Numerus Clausus (laws of 1920 limiting number of Jews allowed into university) Since he didn't have work here in Budapest, and he wasn't allowed to study, he went to Paris, or perhaps Lyons, and worked in a silk-factory there, drawing Hungarian motifs that were incorporated into necktie designs. He was abroad from about 1925-30. Then he came home, and married my mother in 1930. I don't know exactly where my parents met, but it could be that they got together because both their families came from Slovakia. They had a proper wedding in the synagogue in Obuda.

After their marriage, my father couldn't find work, so they went to Holland. My father was a zincographer, and the printers' trade union was very powerful, so he was able to get a job in Rotterdam through the union. My parents returned home before I was born, and my father found a job here in the Atheneum Printing House. His job was to make plates from the pictures that were to go into newspapers, journals and books. The Printers' Trade Union was part of the Social Democratic Party. My father was a member of some board, if I remember correctly, in the Social Democratic Party. That's why when the Germans came into Budapest in 1944 they came to our flat right away for my father. But he wasn't at home, as he had already escaped from forced labor and was in hiding. He obtained false papers, and hid here in Pest. The Social Democrats helped him. There was a shoemaker, a fellow with leftist sympathies, who supported him. After the War he continued his zincographic work.

My mother, Olga Breiner, was born in 1907 in Obuda. Until the war, she didn't work outside the home. As she tells it, there was an intensive cultural life in Obuda. A group of young Jews would go there for balls, to socialize and get to know each other. My uncle, my mother, and my aunt all went. Then there was the Brodi Coffee House. The Brodis were also Jews. They owned a distillery, an ice-making plant, an ash-factory, and the Brodi Coffee House - and Obuda's citizens would go there, the Jews among them. My father didn't go there much, because he had a job for which he had to report to work at 1:00 in the afternoon, and he would come home late at night, but my mother did visit the Brodi Coffee House from time to time. My mom and dad read Thomas Mann, Zsigmond Moricz, Jokai, and the European classics. When I was at school, my mom had more time to read. My father, when he was at home with mom in the morning, had time to read too. After the war there was a Joint Kitchen in Zichy Street where the Jewish school was located. My mother

started working there, and when that was closed, she went to work for the Wholesale Fabric Corporation where she became an administrator.

I was born in 1935, and spent my childhood in Obuda. I attended the Jewish grade school there because you could feel that the country was turning fascist from 1938 on, and the Jewish laws had appeared. I got chased here in Obuda, when I was still a school kid. The majority of the proletarian children would specifically hunt Jewish children, and when they found out I was on my way to school, they would chase me, and when they caught me, they would beat me.

The grade school was on Zichy Street. There was only one two-story house on that street, and the congregation had a four-class grade school in it. The synagogue was very near the school, and I went to temple straight from class. I started school there, I started learning Hebrew there, and I could pray well from a prayer book. I only attended that school for three years, however, because of World War II (editor's note: meaning 1944 in Hungary).

My mother, my aunt, my grandmother, my parents and I all ended up in a yellow-star house. My mother, together with my aunt, was driven out of the yellow-star house to the brick works in Obuda. From there they walked to the Austrian-Hungarian border. At the border, a Christian priest told them that anyone waiting for a Schutzpass should stand aside. They stood to one side, and were brought back to Budapest by train, ending up in a yellow-star house, from where they were liberated.

One day, my father showed up in the yellow-star house. He was dressed as a peasant, had grown a mustache, was wearing a peasant jacket, and told me to call him Uncle Jozsi, and to stay 10-15 meters behind him. That's how he got me on foot to somewhere near Nyugati Train Station, into a protected house. From there, I ended up in the ghetto, and that's where the Russians found me with my maternal grandmother, when they came and liberated us.

After liberation, my parents enrolled me at the State Arpad High-School, which was a very modern school with very good teachers. After two years my father took me out of that school, because he noticed that the spirit of the past was still so alive there, and he thought it would be better for me to attend the Jewish school on Wesselenyi Street. Before the war children of high officials attended this school, and certainly not the children of workers from Obuda.

My grades were pretty mediocre. My parents didn't understand how it happened that I fell so far behind in my grade-school studies. When my father, who was an outstanding artist, drew my homework assignment for me, and I got a bad grade anyway, my father was sure that because I was among the first Jewish kids in that school since the War, there was no place for me there. I didn't have many friends in Arpad High-School, but I didn't get any flak for being a Jew.

I ended up going to the Jewish general school on Wesselenyi Street with the kids who had been my classmates at the Jewish school in Obuda before the war, and after that, I went on with them to the textile industry technical school. There were about twenty-five of us in the class, both girls and boys. I don't remember my classmates too well, but I remember that my teachers were outstanding. At school, and at the Obuda temple, they prepared me for my Bar Mitzvah. That was a great celebration, and I wasn't the only one having a Bar Mitzvah then, several other kids did too. They congratulated us and gave us presents. I got clothing from my parents.

Right after the war, my mother worked for the Joint Kitchen on Zichy Street, where the congregation was, and where Joint had a home. We went there every day, because there we could get something to eat. Through Joint I got into a Zionist home belonging to Hashomer Hatzair, where they intensively prepared us to go to Israel. It was a live-in school, as if we were in a kibbutz. I went from there to regular school in the mornings. Afternoons and also during the summer and winter breaks, they taught us in the home. We learned dances, we learned songs, we learned Israel's history, and Hebrew. When there was a break, we were prepared for the holidays. We would talk about what the holidays mean. And we went to camp every year. At camp we would go for walks, play, listen to lectures, and learn songs. My parents were happy that I was at camp because at home we didn't have enough to eat, and at camp they took good care of me. But then I stopped going, because I couldn't stand leaving my parents.

After I finished the eighth grade at the school on Wesselenyi Street, I attended the textile technical school. It was really interesting, the way I ended up with a career in textiles. I had never had anything to do with textiles, but there were so many Jewish kids whose parents were in textiles, that I went into the trade too. My parents didn't interfere with my career choice; they were happy that I could study, because they saw the fulfillment of their desires in that.

There were a lot of Jews in the textile technical school--I think 30% of the class was Jewish. And there were rich Jews, too, who had small factories before the War, whose kids went there. We didn't talk much about being Jewish because it wasn't a topic then. But after 1956, when we had class reunions, we found out that there were many Jews among the students and the teachers, too.

After finishing technical school, I continued my studies at the Technical University, in the textile department. After graduating from the university, I worked in textile factories, as director of the maintenance department, and later, because they paid the textile workers really badly, I ended up at Ganz Mavag, as an engine designer in the Engine, Wagon, and Machine Factory. From there I went back into the textile business, and I became the Associate Director Engineer of a factory.

After 1935, when my parents returned from Holland, my father didn't really go to temple. I went with my mother and my grandmother, and, of course, in Jewish school with my class. We weren't kosher at home. We didn't eat pork, but we didn't keep the dairy and meat products separate, and we didn't buy kosher meat. But, say, a chicken paprikash with sour cream - that was impossible to even imagine. The customs stayed. We bought a goose in the fall, and we'd bake the fat out of it, and then we'd use the fat. In November, December, and January we'd eat goose several times, and those geese, I believe, were always kosher. For instance, if we wanted a chicken killed, we'd take it to the shochet, and he'd kill it for us.

But we kept those holidays. I remember we had separate Pesach dishes. The chomets, that is, food containing yeast, was cleared out of the house. The point of that was really the cleaning. We'd get a woman - she'd come to do the washing too - who would help us, and then she would clean the whole flat, so there wouldn't be a crumb anywhere, and then we'd bring the dishes out from the attic, and we'd use them during the Pesach holiday. We'd eat matzoh, and we made pastries with the matzoh, things they hardly even know these days, dumplings out of matzoh flour, plum dumplings. When my grandfather died, my father didn't hold the ceremony at Pesach, but Seder evening was held, because we'd either go to temple, or acquaintances or friends would hold the Seder. We knew a lot of Jews, and either we'd go to their place, or they'd come to ours to hold

Seder.

On Friday evenings there was candle lighting; my father wouldn't be home, because he had to work, but my mom and grandma did it. They'd put scarves on their heads, and that's how they'd bless the flame. There was challah, too. I was still a child, but I knew the prayers, and I'd say them together with my mother and grandmother. Then that slowly ended too. We ate a lot of sauce with our Friday food, I remember. We went to temple on Friday evenings and on the Sabbath. We didn't go in the mornings, because that's when there was household work, cooking, and cleaning to do. There was never anything like us not lighting lights, or not taking a tram, or anything like that. My father went to work. I went to school.

We kept Yom Kippur, and we would fast, and we took part in the celebration of Sukkoth that they organized in the temple.

But we were completely Hungarian, Hungarians of Jewish extraction from Upperland Hungary (present-day Slovakia, which was part of Hungary before WWI). Language, the organization, and tradition tied us to Judaism. The same was true for Roman Catholics and Catholicism. At one point, they moved the Swabians here. Those Swabians later became Hungarians. Two hundred years later the Czechs came. By now they had also become Hungarians. While the Swabs were Swabs, and the Czechs were Czechs, the Hungarians could be Evangelists, Catholics or Jews, who were Hungarians. We weren't foreigners. We were Hungarians. We just had a different religion.

I remember spending several summer vacations during my childhood with the Gerendas family in Trans-Carpathia (now part of Ukraine, but before WWI, a part of Hungary). The family were distant relatives of ours on my mother's side. Marika Gerendas and her husband lived in Nagymuzsaj, which is near Ungvar (today Uzhgorod, Ukraine). We traveled there by train, and these people I stayed with would come to meet me. When my vacation was over, my parents would come for me. I found life really interesting there, because as a city child from Obuda, I had had no experience of country life. I loved the animals and the fruit trees, and the fact that, there, I could play freely. I don't know how many children there were in the Gerendas family, but there were lots of Jewish kids around, and some of them were about my age. I spent two summers there, for about three weeks each time. That must have been in 1940-41. I remember that the Gerendas weren't especially religious. On Fridays they would go to temple, but they weren't kosher, and the men didn't have beards, and their hairstyles were the same as those worn all over Europe. When the persecution of the Jews began in their area, they came to Hungary for a while to live with us.

I married my wife in 1960. We met through a friend in the technical school - I'd gone to school with him in Obuda too - and this friend was introduced to a girl at his relatives' place, and he asked her if she had a girlfriend, and she brought her girlfriend, who later became my wife. That's how we met, and both pairs ended up getting married. It was important that my wife should be a Jew. I always looked for Jewish company, and I believe my parents expected it too. When we got married we moved in with my wife's parents in Kispest. They lived in a very poor flat. The Arrow Cross had taken their flat from them in the Second World War, and they didn't get it back.

My maternal grandfather had a sister named Julia who never married. Her parents had sent her to Budapest where she worked as a servant in the home of a Jewish family until 1956, when the family left Hungary. She inherited their apartment and lived alone there in her flat. When she

grew elderly and ill, my mother's sister, Ilona Breiner, moved in with her to look after her. When Julia died, my Aunt Ilona went to live with her mother, Grandma, and we got Julia's flat. That is how we could finally move from the flat of my wife's parents in Kispest where we spent five years.

Before the war, Ilona worked as a seamstress in the Goldberger Textile Factory, and after the war she became an administrator in the state-owned Company for River Control. She had no family because her fiancé died in WWII.

When I first went to my wife's family's home, I thought I'd pass out, because I saw that they had a Christmas tree. They always celebrated Christmas. Her father, when there weren't enough Jews in Kispest, always went to the temple to make a minyan, but he didn't know how to pray. My wife's mother was taken away in 1944. There was a lady from the country who had stayed with my wife's parents as a sort of live-in servant. After World War II my wife's father married this woman. As a matter of fact, my wife couldn't have had a Jewish upbringing from her mother. But I was really surprised by the Christmas tree. My grandmother wouldn't come to visit when she found out they had a Christmas tree.

We have one daughter, named Judit, who was born in 1964, and one grandson. They also live in Obuda. I sent my daughter to England after she graduated, and she learned English well. She makes gifts with her partner now. They're entrepreneurs.

I'm sorry I can't pass on Judaism to my daughter or grandson. They aren't happy to hear about it. I raise my grandchild telling him, "You're a Jew," and what it means. My daughter has noticed this, but she's not happy about it. When my daughter was small we had a Christmas tree. Now we don't, but her family still does.

My daughter has Jewish sentiments. Her whole work style, the whole way she thinks, the planning ahead, the thoughtfulness, she got that from us. She didn't get the religion, because we didn't really practice it. She doesn't know Hebrew, she doesn't know the Jewish prayers, but she's getting interested, more and more interested in what it means.