

Ferenc Sandor

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Interviewer: Dora Sardi and Eszter Andor

My great-grandmother Cili, Cecilia Rosenthal, was a great beauty even at the age of 92. She had beautiful blue eyes and white hair, and her hands were soft and warm ... and out of vanity she said she was younger than she actually was. She knocked a few years off her age. Because only when she passed away did it turn out that she was already 92, not 90. She was the heart and soul of the family. She had a good sense of humor too.

Great-grandmother's sister, Aunt Fani, was a Jewish schoolteacher in Papa. She had two sons, Geza and Miklos. Geza committed suicide. I do not know why, and I have no more knowledge of him. Miklos was apparently gifted. They apprenticed him to a bookbinder, but it was quite clear that his ambition was to pursue further studies and that was what he did. For some years he spent his summer holidays with my grandmother and grandfather in Sopron. He told my grandfather, his uncle, that he would get a doctorate. "If you get one," Grandfather said, "I'll get my head chopped off." So when Miklos got his first doctorate, he said, "Uncle Ferenc, I am coming to chop off your head." And when he got his second doctorate, he said, "Uncle, I am coming to chop off your second head!"

Granny Cili's husband was Beno Fogel. They were miserably poor.

We could never stand the so-called Polish Jews, those "fin" folks with the payot (sidelocks). (Interviewer's note: The Jews of northeast Hungary who spoke Yiddish and followed the Orthodox tradition bore this nickname because they twisted the Yiddish word fun, meaning "from, out of," into fin). There were no such people in the entire family.

It is not easy to say what my great-grandfather did for a living, because he worked at various jobs in various places. My grandmother was born in Mezokovacs-haza. In those days the family was so poor that they had to move from village to village in the hope of earning a better living at a different place. But by the time I was born, they owned a house and a small store in Megyesegyhaza; later a tavern, too. Fourteen children were born to them and nine lived to adulthood. Of the nine, three were boys.

Uncle Jenő magyarized his name to Fodor.

Another one was some kind of backward creature, yet an absolute genius at fixing things. He lived in Megyesegyhaza, County Bekes. He had a motor scooter, which was a very big deal at that time, and he held movie shows.

Then there was Andor Fogel, who magyarized his name to Andras Vago. He fought in World War One.

The eldest child was Etelka, who later became a schoolteacher. She ended up in a mental ward. She must have been quite a funny lady. I've got only the faintest memories of her, maybe not even real memories, just from some photo.

Then there was Rozsi. She lived in Mako with a husband who was a porter. He once wrote in a letter, "I live in beautiful harmonium here with my dear wife."

Then came Irma. Irma lived in Megyesegyhaza with her husband, whose name was Guttman. They owned a store too. Later they had a tavern next to Great-grandmother Celi and Great-grandfather Beno's. Their daughter Terez was an extremely beautiful young lady. I was completely infatuated with her.

Then there was Mariska. Both of her sons suffered from hemophilia, and both of them died later, I think during displacement.

Juliska, the youngest one, was so much younger than my grandmother that Grandmother used to nurse her and change her diapers when she was a baby.

Ferenc Rosenthal, my grandfather, was a brother of Cecilia, my great grandmother, and this rather unfortunate thing happened: he married his own niece, my great grandmother's daughter, a very beautiful young girl. But then my granddad was a full-fledged schoolteacher, and when he took fancy to Janka, the 17-year-old niece of his, the poor creature was duly married to the schoolteacher.

I never knew my grandfather because he was born in 1849 and he was sensible enough to die in due course in 1913.

My grandparents married in 1893 in Sopron, and that's where they lived. Only one child was born to them, my mother. It was a pretty unlucky kind of business. The bridegroom was 25 years older than the bride. And Grandmother wanted to kill herself, by jumping out of the window, on the first night of her marriage.

It was typical of my grandfather, Ferenc Rosenthal, that in the Neolog school where he worked, the word cheder (a Jewish religious primary school attended only by the children of the Orthodox) was considered a dirty word. In Sopron there was both a Neolog school and an Orthodox one. Well, some supervisor remarked: "This is not a school, this is a cheder." A word of

abuse, it was. And so my Grandfather retorted: "Yes, schools will become cheders if they have directorates like ours."

Grandfather was an orphan. He took an unusual career path to become a schoolteacher. One year he would work regularly as a private tutor in the service of a particular family. Then the following year he would study at college.

They must have lived in extreme poverty when he was a child. He was raised by his elder brother. As a young boy he was supposed to eat a variety of foods, but they usually had nothing but bread. He would ask his brother, "Please, give me something to eat!"

"You want bread and jam?"

"No, I don't want bread, give me something to eat." He was craving for something, it could have been meat or fruit, I cannot tell, but he said: "Give me something!"

"Bread and lard? You want bread and lard."

"Not bread, I want something to eat." He got nothing else.

He was twenty-four when he got his degree. The general nickname for teachers in those days was "light," or "lamp." People called my grandfather was that. He told my grandmother that he once met an upper class Jew who remarked: "I wear velvet and you wear rags, yet you are the one called 'the lamp!'"

Grandfather lived completely in the spirit of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. When Grandfather was about three or four years old, the Emperor Franz Joseph stopped in Sopron on his way somewhere. They lifted him above the crowd, and he yelled, "Uncle Emperor, Uncle Emperor!" The story goes that Franz Josef even waved back to him, but, of course, one cannot be sure of that.

My grandfather wrote reviews of performances staged at the theatre in Sopron. I had the chance to read a few of them. And if the primadonna happened to show her ankles in some performance, he went to see that play thirty times in a row. He must have been a man of brains for sure.

They lived in comfort, had a fine house and were able to provide well for their daughter, their only child.

My mother attended the upper middle school for girls in Sopron. Then her parents registered her for a one-year course in a business school.

She found work as a clerk at the local administration center. Most of the time I was looked after by my aunt, who moved in with us after my father

did not come back from the war. I was practically raised by her.

My father was called Vilmos Sandor. He magyarized his name from Spielman before he married. That had to be done on account of his job, as he worked for the Veszto office of the Bekes County Savings Bank. He had a high school education. He met the young lady who became my mother on a train trip. My mother was sitting in the train with my grandmother and he sat beside them. That must have been in 1910 or 1911. Right there on the train they decided to get married. The actual wedding ceremony in the temple followed in 1912 in Sopron. After the wedding he immediately took my mother to Veszto, where they lived in a family house, an official residence, secured by the Savings Bank. He had previously run into debts, which were then paid off from the dowry. As an unmarried man he had been accustomed to leading an easy life. Most likely, he did not abstain from alcohol either.

There was a large Jewish community in Veszto. In my father's family alone there were five brothers: Bari, Miksa, Jozsi, one whose name I forgot, and Vilmos, my father. They all lived in Veszto. Most of them owned some kind of store or other. Uncle Miksa had a grocery. After we moved to Budapest, I spent my summer holidays at Uncle Miksa's. They were very religious and kept kosher. My aunt Giza would definitely have had a stroke if she had known I was offered bread and lard at Balint Torok's and ate it.

In World War One, my father was called up from Veszto to the Russian front. Then he returned and spent some time at home, and had the chance to see me as a baby of a few weeks old. I have no memories of him whatsoever. There is only one thing I know. When he came home from the front he said that one was not allowed to laugh any more. I have seen the postcard he sent home to my mother. On it was written: "Don't cry, darling. The country must be saved from the enemy." The poor fellow, he could not have suspected that during a 1944 death march, my war-widow mother would helplessly fall victim to this same country he was trying to save from the enemy.

I had an elder sister, Sari. She was born in 1913. There were eleven months between us. Sari went to school downtown in the Vaci street gymnasium, where she took her finals. Later she took a course where they learned how to make corsets. Before that she worked as a typist, and as she earned some money, we were able to move to Legrady Karoly Street, where we had a very pretty little flat that consisted of one room, a foyer, and small room for the house-maid.

Sari later married. My first brother-in-law, Laci Reisenfeld, died during his forced labor service in 1944. He was born in 1902 and worked as a clerk for the Goldberger Works. When Sari learned that he had died, she wanted to kill herself. Then in 1944 she married a gentile, Laci Foldessy. She would not have been able to cope with the prospect of having another husband get killed. A daughter, Marika, was born to them, and the three of them fled to

Holland in 1957, shortly after the 1956 revolution when the borders were open for some time. The borders had already been closed, but they managed to smuggle themselves out. They passed their flat on to someone at the Ministry of the Interior, so an eye was shut for them.

In 1916 the whole family-my mother, my grandmother, my sister and I-all moved from Veszto to Budapest. We had a flat on Maria Valeria street. A really decent fellow helped Mother get a very good job at the Central Institute of Finances. Up to the last moment, as long as the anti-Jewish laws permitted, she kept that job. She got a good salary, as the Central Institute of Finances was the second biggest bank in the country. "That's why I did not have to raise my two orphans in poverty," she often said.

My grandmother Janka drew a fairly good pension after my grandfather's death. We had a huge family scattered throughout the country from Sopron to Bekescsaba. We were the only ones who lived in Budapest, so we put up everyone who came to Budapest from the countryside on any business.

In the apartment house where we lived, there was a front staircase, and a back one, which was normally called the "servant staircase." We had to use the back staircase, but all the same, we lived in a sunlit, airy apartment on the third floor. The toilet was at the end of the corridor. For a time we had a proper housemaid who lived with us. Later on, a cleaning lady came regularly. The first housemaid, Roza, accompanied us when we moved to the capital from Veszto. Later, when I spent my vacation with my uncle in Veszto, I went to see her. She lived at the edge of the village in dire poverty. In my mind's eye, I can still see her child, who suffered from consumption, and whom she unwrapped as if it were some small bundle. The housemaid was always a family member to us.

My mother had a colleague, Mr. Sziklai. This was a magyarized name, and originally he was called Spisak. It was a great thing for me because he was the only male role model for me to follow. He liked me too. Then when Mother died I did not know how to relate to him any more.

I started high school at an orphanage for war orphans in Cegled. I was completely crushed in that place in the second year. Broke my spine, so to speak. There were a hundred of us there and only one other Jew, who was in the seventh grade. I came second, a second grader. And ninety-eight children teased me for a whole year because I was Jewish. When I managed to get into the infirmary, that was a relief. I remember once it was really cold outside and I was outdoors and did not feel like going in. A bunch of these pests kept following me, and when the teacher noticed that it had something to do with me, he told me off because I did not tell on them, I did not inform him that they were pestering me. He put the responsibility for that scene on me.

I was very bad at languages at school. Math was easier. In my free time I went on rowing trips with my friends, or we went to a dance. I actually learned dancing in the Czech lands. We were sent there to spend our summer holidays as students on an exchange visit. We lived with Czech families, and then Czech students visited us in return.

Hungarian poetry is very dear to me. I live in those poems, I practically live for them, even if I only tell them to myself. I have performed a lot of poetry recitals in my life; how well, I cannot say.

I used to be a boy scout too. We sang songs around the campfire late at night and until daybreak. We never sang the same song twice.

My family never made a special issue out of the fact that we were Jewish. I heard that my father was considering converting, but in 1915 he lost his life at the Russian front.

At elementary school I received a Roman Catholic religious education. I went to school on Cukor Street in downtown Budapest. Novitiates would frequently come to us and visit, or do their teaching practice there. They were very nice young men and I, for my part, was a hundred percent Roman Catholic, duly making the sign of the cross. I had had my First Communion and was on very good terms with God, asking Him for things now and then, as was common in those days.

Then a really strange thing happened to me. A Hungarian law ruled that children between six and eighteen were not allowed to change religion. And now this very law became the reason for the fact that that I had to change religion. I had received my registration card from the Roman Catholic Church. The Church was not interested in how the state classified people in terms of religion: it had its own rules and regulations. However, a state law ruled the way I described before. It was discovered that the authorities had failed to correct my birth certificate. According to my documents, I was still a Jew, even though I was a Christian. At the home of the war orphans in Cegled, this document business was taken rather seriously, so they wouldn't acknowledge that I was a Catholic. I was compelled to resume Judaism and attend Jewish religious education classes. For me it was the most terrible split. In this little provincial town, the way those Jewish people lived seemed utterly unkempt and messy. Not so very civilized, so to speak. Otherwise they were very kind to me, inviting me to join them for holidays and feasts such as Pesach.

I was twelve then, and I revolted. I insisted that I should be taken home to my grandmother immediately. And so I was sent then to the school on Barcsay Street, where the atmosphere was somewhat Jewish. As when we lived on the Maria Valeria Street before, from our window if I leaned out a little I could see the tower of the church where I was baptized. I also had

to go past the synagogue twice a day. Now, when I walked past the church, if I did not remember to take my cap off, I was committing a sin, and a few hundred meters further away, if I did the same-or the other way round-I got completely confused. I looked up in the sky and wondered whether there was someone up there watching what I was doing with my uniform cap. I finally got over it somehow.

In that school I was accepted, because the headmaster, a young man of Swabian origin, was a wonderful, kind person and loved me dearly. I was almost like an adopted son to him. (Translator's note: Swabians were ethnic-German farmers who had lived in Hungary since the 18th century.)

In our house we celebrated Christmas and Easter and we never observed any Jewish holiday, at least I cannot recall any. In Veszto with Uncle Miksa, everything was observed, but that's all I remember. Today I am deeply irreligious.

I took my finals at secondary school in 1933. Not long before my exam I was walking home - walking, because we did not normally take the tram: tickets were expensive. I went past a newspaper stand and there I saw the news on Hitler's takeover.

After my finals I wanted to go to university but I ended up at a printing house. That's how I became a printer. I did lithography: paintings, posters, color prints. That lasted until 1978, when I retired.

During the war, first I was sent to Gyongyos for forced labor service, then to Vac, and following that I spent one and a half years in Sastov, Ukraine, near Kiev. It was in August, 1942 when we went there. When full Jews were ordered to be sent further away, I, as a war-orphan, was offered the chance to stay in Vac. People who had Christian spouses were allowed to stay. They were given white armbands. I was contemplating whether I should go or stay, and in the end I decided to leave. But right then a guard kicked me back to the line. He wouldn't let me leave. Thank God. Because less than fifty percent of the company I was supposed to join ever returned. Later on, it was our turn to be sent to Ukraine. My company was a wonderful unit, an extraordinary group of people. Lots of medical doctors and lawyers among them. At the beginning of 1944 we were disarmed. Then on May 20, 1944 I was taken to Pecs, and from there to Szombathely. There I pulled the gold ring off my finger because I knew it would be taken from me anyway. I gave it away to someone in the street, so at least I gave it to someone I wanted to. We worked at an airport in Szombathely.

A friend of mine had some work at the Bruck Textile Works, and he went there time to time. That's where Zsuzsa, who later became my wife, worked. Before Christmas, my friend told them we were throwing a party on New Year's Eve, and he was in charge of inviting some nice girls. Zsuzsa would have loved to come but her parents wouldn't let her. So the two of them

agreed that she would bring a girlfriend along who would look after her all night. On that condition, the parents finally gave in. One afternoon a few days before New Year's Eve, Zsuzsa and her friend came over to my flat to check the place they were coming to. They found only my grandmother at home, and they sorted everything out with her, as far as what to bring and all. When I came home, my grandmother informed me about their visit and said that a very pretty girl had visited us who was going to come to my New Year's Eve party. Our wedding ceremony took place at the City Hall.