

# Gyorgyne Preisz

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- **My family background**

I don't know anything about my paternal grandfather, because my father came to Pest early, they rarely went back, and it was already part of Romania by then. I think my cousin heard all kinds of details from his father [*and he wrote these down*]

This is a tricky phrase. I just want to be 100% sure. There is a big difference in meaning between the choices: it was part of Romania / it was already part of Romania / it became part of Romania



"In the picture taken in 1894, my grandfather is wearing a Hungarian-style suit made of black felt, a well-fitting jacket with black braids and nicely-shined boots. Only the wide-brimmed hat on his head indicates his racial affiliation. Grandfather had a full, black beard."

"My grandfather was born into the large family of drayman Izsak Farkas on March 15, 1848. It is a family legend that when great-grandfather arrived to register the newborn, the news of the great events [*the revolution of 1848*] in Pest had already reached Szatmar.

So then, when drayman Izsak Farkas announced that he intended to give his son the name Wilhelm, the notary angrily slapped his pen down on the desk and shouted: What? Wilhelm? The German world is over now. The boy's name is Vilmos Farkas!' The name 'Zev', which means wolf (Farkas), keeps recurring amongst the Hebrew names of male members of the family."

"Grandfather didn't really go to school. The children were needed for work around the house and for fetching and carrying, for loading, transporting, looking after the horses and carriage. In his bachelor years, grandfather went to Szatmarnemeti, where he went into service for a Jewish grain broker called Swarz, as a sacking laborer.

After a time his master made him a storeman. Grandfather's tasks included hiring reapers, since the grain broker occasionally leased land, and he purchased standing crops, so he arranged the harvest."

However he had a very great ambition: he had a desire to study, he wanted to learn to read and write. Learning and books had been mystical things for him since his childhood, probably because

they were rare guests at Izsak Farkas' house; only on holidays did his father hold a dog-eared prayer book in his hands.

He read the letters, looked at the words without understanding their meaning. So the reason for his having gone into town was that he had hoped to realize his dream. He learnt to read [*from the rabbi*] in Hungarian and Hebrew, to write nicely, with fancy letters.

When, at the end of the day he returned home from the grain-store he washed, and changed into clean clothes, and the family sat down for supper. Then he arranged family matters, before finally retreating to his beloved books. Reading, burying himself in holy books, was his delight. Over the years he managed to get hold of most of the holy literature in Hebrew.

He read newspapers too: "the Szatmar Messenger". On his bookshelf, there was one volume of Petofi, one of Janos Arany, a thin volume by Jozsef Kiss, and a couple of Kincses Kalendarium (*Treasury or thesaurus calendar*), folk customs of Szatmar and similar publications."

"When grandfather got married, he must have been around 22 years old, judging by the number of children he had. He married Vilma Katz who was also from a poor family. She was 17 years old when they got married. Vilma Katz gave birth to eleven children. Two of them died, and they raised nine – five boys, four girls.

All the children were assigned their own work around the house. There was not much talk around the table. One who talks remains hungry easily, as the food is eaten by the others. Grandfather never raised his voice and he never raised his hand, it was quite enough for him to look reproachfully at any of the children who were being boisterous. Grandmother was more vociferous. It was easy to receive a slap from her too, though she was moderate in that."

"Grandfather died suddenly, and his funeral had to be arranged in a hurry. A carriage was sent for the rabbi, who lived at the other end of Szatmar. However it returned without him. As Miklos reported, when the rabbi learnt what had happened, he quickly recited a funeral blessing, saying that he would go to Vilmos Farkas's funeral on foot.

He put on his black gown, put his angular priest's hat on his head, and took the prayer book and all that was needed. So he trudged along through the town with the cantor on his left, in similar mourning dress.

After the funeral the siblings sold off the house, portioned out the chattels, and the boys from Pest packed the belongings of their mother and their sister, Helen and took them along to Budapest. Vilma Katz didn't survive her husband long. She died on January 26, 1922.

"Out of the nine children, four went to Pest: Imre, Helen, Adolf and Miklos [*the interviewee's father*]. Five of them stayed there [*in Transylvania, which became part of Romania after the First World War*], I only know the names of three of them, the first-born was Gerzson, and then there was Eszti and Piri. Some two or three years after the millenium celebrations, the elder children left the parental home. Eszti got married, and so did Piri.

Piri didn't do anything, her husband was a mechanic. And the first born, Gerzson was already a respected master tailor. Aunt Helen stayed an old maid. In her youth, she had worked in the house serving the family, and she continued to do so in Pest. She sacrificed everything for her siblings, for

their children and for their children's children. The family was everything to her.

Grandfather wanted to raise his youngest child [*Imre*] to be a rabbi. Perhaps that was his only dream, which didn't come true. [*After WWI Imre*] found employment at some transportation company. He transported timber for the State Railways.

Adolf became a timber-merchant, too. In 1919 he also did something as an agricultural something-or-other during the Commune [*The brief Communist regime in 1919*. They wanted to catch him, and he left for Vienna with my father's papers as Miklos Farkas because he couldn't leave the country under his own name.

Quite soon he lined his pocket, and became a wealthy merchant. His daughter went to an institute in Switzerland. In 1938 when they came in [*the Germans to Austria, at the Anschluss*], he managed to come home with the last train. He came back home and the following day he rented an apartment somewhere in Budapest; he bought a typing machine, seated his daughter in front of it and the first thing he did was to announce:

"I have relocated my business to Budapest", and life began anew. Anwithin one year he became really wealthy. His wife died, and he went away to Switzerland with his second wife, and died there. His daughter Anna was older than me. I was around 15 when she got married. Her husband's name was Balazs Weisz and he magyarized to Vitez. Anna survived the war. She came back, and her son was saved by Auntie Helen. He is in Israel now.

When I was five or six years old, my parents put me on a train here, in Budapest - an acquaintance traveled with me- and they sent me to Szatmar to stay with relatives who lived there. Only Piri, my elder cousin [*was still there*], and I lived at their place. I [*was there*] for two or three weeks.

Maternal grandfather's name was Jakab Strausz, grandmother's name was Betti Weisz. Their wedding was in 1843. They lived in Kallosemjén, this is in Szabolcs county, next to Nagykallo. It was a typical Szabolcs county Hungarian village: a small, dirty village, with wooden fences.

They [the *Jews*] didn't live separately, but there was quite a Jewish life, they came together in the synagogue. The synagogue was very nice, and it was on the main square. On one side there was this shop, which belonged to Auntie Ella [*mother's sister*], on the other side there was the synagogue, and on the third side was the Christian church. There were quite a lot of Jews, and they came in from the neighboring farms. Just like my aunt and her husband.

My grandfather was a smallholder: he had two acres or four acres, I don't know. They were not rich people. He grew tobacco and melons. I remember that there was a big tobacco-drying barn in the courtyard, and there was a beehive. He went out to work on the land. His sons sold it, I think.

His only employees were those who were at the house, just one or two people, from time to time. They had the sort of village house, which was large enough to have enough room for the many children they had.

When I was at school I always spent a few weeks there in the summer. I remember grandmother's head was always covered, and grandfather always wore a hat. Lighting candles on Fridays was natural too.

All the family was there at the supper on Friday night. And on Saturday there was that sort of colored woven candle [*the havdalah candle*], which was up on the wall, and then on Saturday afternoon, the holiday was over when it was lit.

And the phylacteries, grandfather always put them on, I remember that too. And on Friday, they made bread in a huge wooden bowl for the whole week, and these tiny challahs for the children and grandchildren. Pasta with cottage cheese, that was always the main meal on Saturday. There was a small kitchen garden, and there were horses, and a carriage too, there was even a separate small house for the groom and the staff.

There was a large well in the middle of the courtyard, and there was a mulberry tree next to it, and a million ducks underneath, so if a mulberry fell down all the ducks gagged and it was eaten up. Then when I was a teenager, my father bought a holiday home in Agard.

They were called duplex houses, because there were two identical houses together, one of them was ours, and the other one was Uncle Imre's [*father's brother's*]. They were in the same courtyard. They had a small main room, a verandah, and a small kitchen. Then we used to go there regularly, so that we always went out to grandmothers for no more than two or three weeks.

Unfortunately nobody was left [*in Kallosemjén*], everybody was taken and they perished in Auschwitz in 1944. Grandmother is said to have died already on the train, She must have been 70 years old already then. My grandfather died earlier, around 1940.

My mother had eight siblings: four boys and four girls. The eldest girl, Fanni, lived in Balkany. Auntie Gizi got married. Her husband was a tailor, he couldn't get employment here and in 1938 they left for Paris. The children were born there. Her daughter, Anna got married, and her children are in Israel.

Her son, Laci took part in the French resistance movement. I think he was executed as a resistance fighter. Hella got married and their parents opened a village general store for them in Kallosemjén. But it seems that they weren't good merchants, because they couldn't make a fortune from it.

They had a son, Tibor, who became a sacker. And then the whole family was deported [*in 1944*]. The youngest, Aranka was a very pretty girl. Her husband was a farmer; the ranch was near Kallosemjén and he was some kind of a farm manager there. Erno got married

in Nyiregyháza. He studied, and he was something like a lawyer but not exactly that because he couldn't make it to that level. He had two daughters, who adored my father. One of them, a niece of mine named Eva, corresponded with dad, and dad told her: I will find you a husband.

That was in 1944. And in 1944 Eva wrote a letter, and she signed it: "kisses with love from a future grandmother". She was dead half a year later.

The other three brothers, Artur, Lajos, and Misi all lived there with their parents [*in Kallosemjén*]. They passed themselves off as farmers, but they didn't actually do anything. Then they were deported [*in 1944*], they all died in Auschwitz.

My father was born in 1887. In 1904 he moved to Pest, and became a merchant's apprentice, and then he was sent to school from there, and he completed some kind of commercial course. He

began with textiles; he was in Kiraly Street at some sort of a textile merchant's, then he went elsewhere.

At that time, at the beginning of the 1900s, working hours were from 7 in the morning until half past ten; he was exploited. His life in the prewar times was not a characteristically Jewish life, but rather a worker's life.

He joined the Social Democratic Party. Then, in the end, when he had been fired from everywhere because of his activities in the working class movement and in the trade union, he found employment at the 'Hangya' General Consumer's Co-operative. There he dealt with spices and such.

In 1915 he was drafted and fought in Romania, but I don't know which front he was at. He was even injured. Although the injury, according to one of his old letters, was like this: Once he came home for a furlough, and back then they came in wagons which were heated with stoves, and when the train stopped, he fell against it and burnt himself. So that was where his injury was from, but he got some sort of war injury medal.

[My parents] wedding was in 1920 in Kallosemjen, it was held at their place, in the courtyard of their house. They had a marriage arranged by a so-called shadchen [*match-maker*], my mother was paired up with my father, and then a great and beautiful love emerged from it. They came to Pest in 1922.

I would have been born here in Budapest if my mother hadn't gone down to Kallosemjen to give birth there. At that time, the custom was that the child went home and delivered at the midwife's. My Jewish name is Deborah. Dvoyrele as my grandmother called me.

### • Growing up

When I was born, [my parents] already lived in Verseny Street, in the neighborhood of Keleti railway station in a small, one-and-a-half room apartment. Those were old workers' homes. My mum was at home with me. At the beginning we didn't have servants, then later there was a girl, from somewhere in the countryside, when my mum became quite ill.

That was already after my birth. In 1923 there were already quite nasty times; there was the white terror, and my mother was kicked on the train. It might have been only an accident or it might have been done on purpose; I don't know. And then her breast got infected when she suckled me, and it was cut open. But it seems she got her heart trouble at that time, and she suffered with it for the rest of her life.

After the short-lived communist rule in Hungary in 1919, a right-wing government took over and a wave of violence against various groups of people (left-wing people or people, often Jews, accused of being left-wingers and supporters of the communists).

When I was six years old we moved to Buda and we lived in a big city building there, but we still lived in a one-and-a-half roomed apartment. In the beginning my parents lived in quite bad financial conditions. Then, later when my father was appointed departmental manager or deputy departmental manager in the Fenyves Department Store, we were better off. But we didn't live the life of the upper middle class.

Next to us, next to Fehervari Street, there was for a long time a Jewish elementary school. I was enrolled there. It was a very nice and modern school, with a brand new grade teacher. The first day we appeared in school, there wasn't a teacher yet, he was appointed then. And he taught us in an absolutely modern way. There were no special Jewish subjects.

I think they taught the Hebrew alphabet (but it is a crying shame that I don't know Hebrew). I [a/so] learnt German in my childhood, my parents even employed a governess for me, and she took me to walk and tried to speak in German, but she did all the talking, I didn't say a word. None of it stuck.

[At the school] there was a big courtyard, which was divided into plots between the classes and we had to plant different plants there. There weren't any lessons on Saturday, but there were on Sunday. I cried because of this many, many times. In that particular city house, I think we were the only Jewish family, and the children always mocked at me when I was coming home from school on Sunday.

Later my father always came to pick me up in school and he took me home. And the children always mocked at me, saying "Egerberger every Jew is a scoundrel". And then my father told me, if they say that, I should tell them: "I don't deny that I am a Jew, and what I shit out, I give you". And then I used to say that very proudly. I made friends at school.

I had one or two girlfriends in the house, who were nice, but [later] the friendship with them broke up. There was an ice-rink in the winter, the courtyard in every school was covered with water, and then, we used to go there to skate. There was a time when I went to play tennis, but that was later.

Next to the elementary school, in another street, there was a small synagogue in a courtyard, and we went there. There were just a few Jews in that neighborhood. And there was a synagogue in what is now Bocskai Street. Later we used to go there. On high holidays my father too went to synagogue. I think he didn't remember much of the traditions learnt from Szatmar, but he tried to live up to the commitments out of respect for my mother.

On Friday evenings he dressed up, he put on tallith too, there was a common supper, but when my father was not at home, he used to eat pork in secret. But on Saturday my father had to work. On high holidays, I think he didn't have to. My mother lit a candle on Friday night for a long time.

At Seder the family came together, relatives, mainly from my mother's side of the family, who were here in Budapest, and then we had a little Seder night. Whether it was at our place or at Irma's, where there were four children, I don't remember that any more. But I was the youngest, and I had to say the *ma nishtana*.

Later we moved to Peterdi Street, and there I started to go to middle school. I completed the first two classes. That [apartment] was somewhat larger, but Aunt Helen [father's sister] lived with us too, in the so-called servant's room. Then three identical big modern houses were built in Tisza Kalman square. And -- it was back in 1936 -- parties distributed the apartments there.

Half of them were given to members and families of right-wing parties, the other half was given to the social democrats and the trade unions. My father did some kind of a job in the Trade Union of Commercial Employees, and so he got an apartment there. That wasn't a big apartment either, but

it was nice and modern, with central heating. I went to the middle school in Kalman Tisza square from there.

here I had a Jewish schoolmistress, the religion teacher, who was a very intelligent and smart woman, because she didn't make us bone up on the prayers, but she taught the words. She tried to teach us Hebrew language. Well, she had precious little success in that with a 12-year old child, but, in any case, she was a Zionist; she spoke a lot about Palestine.

After middle school I took a commercial course. I was to transfer to high school fifth grade after graduating from the middle school, but that was quite difficult, besides then the anti-Jewish laws began, and the family decided that I would go on a one-year shorthand & typing secretary training [course]. And then came the more serious trouble.

I couldn't really find employment as a better-paid official. Then the family decided that I should learn some trade. I first of all learnt corset-making, but when I completed my apprenticeship, I transferred right away to outer garments, and I worked there as long as I could, in a boutique in the inner city as an assistant.

Zrinyi High School had a history teacher. His name was Szentirmay. He gathered around himself not only Jews but progressive and liberal people, and a lot of girls went there too. We came together every week and he held literary nights with the youth. I went to his place when I was between the ages of fourteen and sixteen.

I went there with a girlfriend of mine. It was an ugly trick of fate, perhaps, that this absolutely liberal man underwent a sudden and complete conversion, joined the Arrow Cross Party [*the Hungarian fascist party*] and became a fascist. When we were deported, several of us lived in barracks, and in the evenings we tried to recite the poems, the ones we'd learnt there.

We had a small notebook, in which we wrote them. There were occasions when we remembered only one line, and then we just wrote that down, and continued if more came to our minds later.

My father was drafted into forced labor. First he was called in but came back after one or two days. Then he wasn't taken any more, and they [*my parents*] were together in a yellow-star house. So they saw it through together.

I was deported because there was a small family fashion store in Erkel Street, but at the time a Jew could no longer own a business, but my father had an old customer whose name was also Farkas, he was Christian, and they ran the business together.

Having a strohman [*nominal partner*], it was called then. He hid me, when they started gathering Jewish girls to be taken away. And then the news spread that girls would be taken, but women would not. I had a sweetheart, and we got married quickly.

He was a Jewish boy, but we had only a civil wedding. He got a week furlough – he was in forced labor at the time – then he was taken away. He was called Laszlo Schwartz, then he became Laszlo Solyom in 1949.

He was born in 1921, and was from Pest. He learnt tailoring, but he couldn't get anywhere with it. Then [*after the war*] he became a doctor. He had a fantastic head on his shoulders, he completed

the university courses one year early, with excellent results. He was at the neurological clinic in Pest.

Back in 1944, not long after my wedding, women began to be gathered up, just as the girls had been. And then I went there [*to the shop*], and the strohman hid me. In November we had to leave the yellow-star house, and I said I would go home for a day to help mum to pack, and then I would come back.

- **After the war**

The Arrow Cross men came just then, so I couldn't go back. I was deported. It was the regular route: brick factory, Kophaza, Waldhausen, Gunsekirchen, I was liberated in Wels.

I came home. Thank God, I found both of my parents. They had managed to get another apartment in the same building and they were there. After the war my father tried again with a business. He had a small ladies' textiles shop on Karoly Boulevard, of the same size as the one before the war, but he didn't have any employees.

Occasionally, in the afternoons, we helped him out if we had time. The nationalization came in 1950, everything was taken away from everybody. Then he gave up and went to Corvin Department Store to be a salesman.

I had a so-called co-tenancy room close to [*my parents*], in Nepszinhaz Street, but my husband [*Laszlo*] and I didn't live together any more because we had divorced by then. That forced love disappeared and we divorced in 1945, I think.

I remarried, to Andor Gero, whom I got to know in the deportation, in Kophaza. His group was taken there too. Before the war he was a leather goods maker. He was Jewish too, but our wedding was again only a civil service. After the war he became a great communist, and he worked in the city hall as some kind of a departmental head there, but then he had some messy case and he was dismissed.

After that he did some sort of manual work. We lived together until 1957, and I have a daughter from him; her name is Judit. She graduated from the University of Economics, the evening faculty, while she was at home on maternity leave. She has two children, one of them goes to university and the other to college. She is divorced too, she had a Christian husband.

[*After the war*] for a while I sewed at home for relatives and acquaintances, because I had to make money. Then I got into the Gundel restaurant as an official, from there I went to the catering department of district 7 as an official, and I retired from there.

I got married for the third time to Gyorgy Preisz, and we are still together now. Our wedding was in 1967. We live very well today, and also, there is more emphasis on our Jewishness. We were in Israel in 1993, that was really a great experience. I have many relatives living there, I visited them too, and we also keep in touch. My husband buys Uj Elet (New Life) and other Jewish papers, and we go to the Dohany synagogue [*Budapest's main synagogue*] on holidays.