

Eva Bato

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Interviewer: Dora Sardi and Eszter Andor

I'm a terrible combination of things: one of my great-grandfathers was a Transylvanian baron. A second obtained a royal license - I'm not sure from which king; the license was lost during the war - to start up a pipe-carving atelier at the foot of the Buda castle. He was a Turkish master pipe-carver. The license authorized Almos Limo to practice the art of pipe-carving. He was Muslim, incidentally. Then there was my great-grandfather Koppel Reich, who, if my information is correct, was the first Jewish representative to the Hungarian parliament. And the fourth great-grandfather was from a nondescript Jewish family.



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Family background

My great-grandfather on my father's side was Mor Berdach - Berdach was an acronym for his complete name, Ben Rabbi David Hacham. He lived in Austria, more precisely in Vienna. He was already quite an old gentleman when I was born, and he died in his nineties in Baden. I visited them on Kantstrasse in Vienna when I was a child. When my great-grandmother died, my great-grandfather moved to Baden, where he died. He died the night the Germans invaded Austria, on the night of the Anschluss. Nobody went to his burial. He was a teacher, and didn't speak a word of Hungarian. He had two daughters and a son.

One of his daughters was my grandmother. She had a younger sister, Rachel, who was a well-known writer: a novelist, journalist and poet. For instance, when Queen Elisabeth of Austria was murdered, the German Writers' Association held a memorial and her poems were recited, poems written for the occasion. Rachel married one of her cousins, Otto Bardach. (He was also from the Berdach family, but due to clerical misspelling of their name, they went by Bardach.) Because they were cousins they did not want to have children. Rachel was a very beautiful, very graceful woman. She lived permanently in a hotel because she had a passionate affair with a man, and they agreed they would leave everything behind and get married. They rented a flat, arranged it, furnished it beautifully with all sorts of antique furniture and fantastic paintings. It was no easy thing at that time to simply move in together. They could not get married right away because the man was

married and had two children, but they decided to live together until his divorce was final. Her lover said he would move into the flat ahead of Rachel in order to be there to welcome her to her new home. And so it happened. Rachel went to the flat, opened the door and as she stepped in she saw an enormous Turkish Bukhara carpet, the size of this room. And on this enormous carpet lay the man - with a bullet hole through his temple. There was a note lying next to him; he wrote that he was unable to choose between his children and Rachel. We called that carpet "Blut-Bukhara" from then on. We never had it cleaned, and we never used it.

My grandmother's younger brother was a lawyer who changed his name from Berdach to the Hungarian Barna. As Karoly Barna, he was the general-director of the Danube Steamship Company. He was very rich. He lived here in Hungary.

My grandmother, Laura, was a woman of the Austrian monarchy. She spoke very little Hungarian, only a few words, and was very funny when she tried. Instead of "food" she said "tool." I don't exactly know why she made a lot of mistakes like that.

I did not know my grandfather on my father's side because he died very young. I only know he was called Geyza. He was the illegitimate son of a Transylvanian baron, a very famous Transylvanian family. That baron, although he did not acknowledge his son - he was given the maiden name of his Jewish mother, and therefore called Bato - made sure that his son received a proper education, which gave him a good start in life, and arranged a good marriage for him. So Grandfather most likely had a good job at the Adria Insurance Company.

In 1910 he was assigned the task of organizing the network of the Adria Insurance Company in Egypt (still a British colony) and the Middle East. So Grandfather moved from one day to the next to Cairo. My father went to an English gymnasium in Cairo for four years. Then my father and grandmother moved back to Europe so that my father could get a Hungarian Matura [an examination for graduation from school]. And my grandfather stayed in Egypt. He always said he did not want to die before going to the Holy Land; he wanted to see Jerusalem, since he was so close to it. I don't know what means of transportation he took, but he went to Jerusalem, also under British authority, so there was no problem. He arrived in Jerusalem, and he took a room in the King David Hotel. Then he went to have lunch in a palm-tree garden. The way the story is told he sat under a palm tree and had lunch, then he ordered a coffee, the waiter brought him his coffee, and there he was, dead, with his lit cigar still in his mouth. This was what he had wanted: Jerusalem. That had been his wish, so they buried him there. My grandparents were good Jews. They observed the holidays, of course.

My father, Tibor Bato, was born in Budapest in 1896. On his return from Egypt, he spoke excellent Arabic, English and French. He had a great talent for languages. Back in Hungary, he passed his Matura, then went to Vienna and studied commerce at the Oriental Academy. When World War I began, my father was sent to the front. He was taken prisoner and learned Russian while there. What's more, he learned almost all Slavic languages spoken by war prisoners around him. He was wounded four times, and each time went back to the front. His leg was full of shrapnel, from grenades, until the end of his life. My father was a many-times decorated officer. He was one of the few - and this wasn't something given out lightly - reserve officers who were allowed to wear their uniform at all times. When I was naughty at school and my parents were called in, I always sent my dad in his uniform. It always made a very good impression and everything was smoothed

out immediately.

After the war, my father lived in Berlin, where he worked at Shell. When he moved back to Hungary, he was the representative of the Shell Hungarian office. After the anti-Jewish laws were enacted, he started his own company, which bought oil from Shell and distributed it. He was a very talented man.

The father or the grandfather of my mother's father was probably that pipe-carver I talked about, and that was a family from Janoshaza, in Vas. The great-grandfather worked at the railways. He was born Beno Elias, but he adopted the Hungarian name of Illes in 1894.

There were three boys in the Elias family, and they all became Illes. The eldest was Gusztav (1865-1945); he was my grandfather. The middle one was Imre, he was a doctor, and spent his entire career as an army doctor. He was a colonel in the army, and the commanding officer in the Szeged garrison. The youngest was Emil, who lived in Felvidek. He is buried in Bratislava. He spent more time in prison than out. After the first world war and Trianon, he became the president of the Hungarian Association of Felvidek. He liked to talk a lot. Each time, he was sent to jail. Emil had a daughter who would have grown up in uncertain circumstances. Her mother died in childbirth, and her father was in prison all the time. But Gusztav Illes had three daughters, and took up Emil's daughter as the fourth.

Grandfather worked at Hoffer and Srantz's engineering firm for more than 40 years; when he retired, he was director of finance and exchange. He died in March 1945. He lived to see the end of the Arrow Cross commotion. Grandmother's name was Anna Lederer. She was from Felvidek, from Liptó or Turocz county. I don't have much to say about her. She was a grandmother, a mother. She reared four children. She died in December 1942.

My grandparents had three daughters: Margit was the eldest, my mother Erzsebet, and Magda.

Margit was born in Budapest in 1897 and died in 1993. She studied at the Budapest Academy of Music and became a pianist; she gave concerts abroad. And she was beautiful. Her husband was Geza Laczko, the writer from the Nyugat group who also was a professor of French literature. He later became the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper "Pesti Napló." He was a Christian, and his wife lived through the Arrow Cross upheaval unharmed as the wife of an Aryan. They hid me in 1944. From time to time, when the fascists would come by, I'd be standing on the balcony on the fourth floor, drenched in sunlight from the courtyard.

Magda was born in 1901 and died in 1992. She married Albert Mandaberg, a gentleman from a very rich Viennese family. When she became pregnant, or maybe after she gave birth to the child - I don't know exactly - she converted so that the child would not be Jewish.

My mother, Erzsebet Illes, was born in Budapest in 1899. She drew beautifully, and was accepted into the Academy of Applied Arts. Let me just mention that all three girls had their Matura. She learned how to paint porcelain china and the like, but then she met my father while still very young, was married, and left the Academy.

As far back as I can remember, she went to synagogue every Friday. She couldn't read Hebrew, but was a very good Jew, which was proven over the course of time. For there was only one person in

the world who turned a private flat, that had been a modern flat for years, into a synagogue. Benosovszki, the chief rabbi of Buda, went there each and every Friday from 1945 to 1950.

Growing up

I was born in 1921. We went to my grandmother's in Berlin when I was 2 months old. And our lifestyle was such that we were constantly traveling between my grandparents, or rather, my eldest aunt Margit, who never had children, and Berlin. Aunt Margit behaved as though I were her child. For example, she went out to Berlin on Saturday morning to see me and returned on Sunday night; that was no short journey by train. She saw me for two or three hours and came back. She loved me madly, deeply, worshipped me. Still, if she hadn't, I wouldn't have survived the Nazi era in their flat.

We had a "small" summer house, a 15-room mansion in Cezn, near Berlin. Every member of the family had a car, and their own chauffeur. Father drove himself. And I grew up there, not in Berlin. We had a gigantic park. My mother raised me, and my grandmother, and all sorts of aunts. We bred racehorses. The property was simply huge. There were many servants: from the butler to the cook, from the chauffeur to the "lady's companion." We observed Shabbat, but they did not dare take me to synagogue. Anti-Semitism was increasing. In 1927, it had become so bad that my mother declared she could not stand it any longer, and she moved us back to Pest.

I had been a private student in Berlin. I did not speak Hungarian very well when we arrived back in Hungary, so I took private lessons, and only went to a public school for the fourth grade, the last before gymnasium. And I had no idea what it meant to go to a public school. I loved learning and I was far ahead of the others, of course, because the cultural environment had done much for me, and I studied and read a good amount out of boredom. The teacher in the public school told us in the first half of the fourth grade: "Children, now you all must start studying for the future, for the school you will go to next year will be different. So I am not going to give any 'excellent' marks in the first semester so that none of you should become over-confident." To which I, who had no idea about schools, put up my hand, and told her that I would certainly not become overconfident, so she could give me the "excellent" mark without having to worry. That teacher, whom I later met from time to time, told me that story years later. And she did give me that "excellent" mark, and I received all "excellent" marks from then on. I had no problems in that school.

When we moved back to Hungary, my mother left me with my grandparents, her parents, and she went on to Switzerland where she took a course on tourism. When she came back after the six months, she bought a pension together with a lawyer for whom the pension was an investment. That pension was on Nador Street, opposite the Exchange building. At that time, I mainly lived with my grandparents. Then, one day, it turned out that the lawyer had hung himself during the night. He had embezzled all the money. So the pension had to be closed.

My mother decided that she would stop traveling, and became a member of the Buda Jewish Women's Club. Back in Berlin, she had been involved with child welfare funds, and she had worked a good deal at the International Red Cross for children and youth protection. And my mother, who was an incredibly active person, said that they should establish a public soup kitchen. And the Jewish women's club did make a general soup kitchen - under her direction - on Medve Street. Then it turned out that there was a very rich Jewish man, Gyula Donner, from Buda, who had a villa on

Rose Hill. He was the general director of one of the large banks. When he died, his family sold the villa at 22 Keleti Karoly Street. And then the women started to talk - well, you know, they were millionaire and multimillionaire women, all Buda Jews, rich women talking among themselves, there was also an intellectual group among them - they made up their mind to buy that villa. They bought the Donner villa, and nominated my mother to be the director and told her to do what she could with that building. My mother set herself to work. She had the second floor renovated and created a hospice for old women. Just by the entrance, opening onto the garden, there was a kindergarten, and there was the kitchen, and the staff bedrooms. It was a splendid villa: Mahogany doors with copper mountings, a circular hall in marble, and a huge ballroom with white marble fireplaces on both ends, two twisted columns of that marble supported the roof. It was just breathtakingly beautiful: Music room with white lacquered doors, gold everywhere, just like in castles. Just as we had it in Czernowicz, I felt very much at home there. And we lived there. Better said, I slept at my grandparents, but went there from school.

Some paid a membership fee, and some had financed a bed in the house, and there was a plaque indicating that "this bed had been bought by so-and-so." I knew the very cream of the Buda Jews. Every Monday afternoon, there was a tea party and dance for the young. A temple was made out of the ballroom for the elderly who were unable to walk. They brought an Ark, a Torah. It was beautifully made, and it was a proper service. That's why I say that the only woman in the history of the world to have organized a synagogue was my mother.

We invited many guests for the seder. Mostly young rabbis came - those who hadn't found their congregation yet. They observed the holidays. On Friday evenings, everyone used to light candles, privately, which wasn't common. And these prestigious Rose Hill Jewish families were there, together with the elderly. Incredible amounts were collected from donations. There were maybe 100 elderly women, and many rich people, as well.

Musicians would give concerts, and gigantic balls were held during the season. There was a charity bazaar once a year, to which I contributed. I went to the large shops, houses and factories owned by Jews and collected donations. My task was always to sell plants. If a cactus or another plant cost five Pengo, they paid 50. This was how the house was financed.

My father did not live with us by then. When we came back, he stayed in Berlin, and then my parents divorced. It was better that way for some official reason, so he moved to his mother's, who had, in the meantime, also moved from Berlin to Budapest. Back in Paris, in the 1930s, she had been trained as a cosmetician and she opened a beauty parlor in her flat. Her clients were an exclusive crowd - mainly embassy employees.

I attended the Baar-Madas Calvinist Secondary School. It was the best school. There were 13 Jews in my class. I was the only one who survived the war. I adored my religion teacher, and I also visited her privately. There was also a Jewish school literary and debating society at 49 Zsigmond Street. Miklos Szabolcsi was also a member. I was incredibly enthusiastic about that society. There were readings, and we also danced - Jews dancing together. It was wonderful.

I have been a student since the age of 5. Some nasty folks say that I was asked when I was still a small girl what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I answered: Madame Curie. Well, this shows that I did not want to be a doctor knocking about chests, but a research doctor. And so I did. I

swam, played tennis, hiked a lot. I went out hiking 52 Sundays of the year with my aunt Margit, Geza Laczko and the whole lot of Hungarian literati. When I was a little older, we also traveled a lot with my father across Hungary. We traveled by car and, as he worked for Shell, the gas was free. I spent my summer holidays in Baden with my grandfather when I was a child. Everything was quite elegant there.

There were already anti-Jewish laws in place when I passed my Matura. My father would have wanted me to have a diplomatic career, for I had a talent with languages. Diplomacy was taught at the Viennese Oriental Academy. That was all very well, but by then it was impossible to go to Vienna, and the Budapest university was inaccessible to me. I still wanted to be a research physician. The president of the Buda Women's Club was on friendly terms with my mother and tried to help me. She sent me to Samu Stern, who was the president of the Jewish community and had a high position in one of the large banks. He phoned the Jewish charity hospital - more precisely its laboratory - and said, "There is a young girl here who would be ideal for work in the lab." He asked them to give me a job. The answer was, "Unfortunately, there's no vacancy." He began explaining that it was impossible that they should say no to him, to which the head surgeon answered, "All right then, let her come." When I got to the charity hospital, he said the wife of one of the head surgeons was working in the lab. And he added: "I'm not satisfied with her work. So do come in three times a week, and she will come in three times, too. I will keep the one who does a better job. This is the only vacancy I have." After a while, the head surgeon said: "Make sure you can come in every day in the future; you are the one I'm keeping." This is the way I became a doctor in the charity hospital.

During the war

One time I was in great hurry after work. There was a taxi in front of the hospital, and I rushed to catch it. And the head surgeon, whose wife had been an assistant together with me and who had been fired, also rushed toward the taxi. He said: "Don't take offense, young lady, I was called to see a patient." "And I have a date," I replied cheekily. "All right, I'll give you a lift downtown then." And by the time we got there, he said: "You could also have a date with me." I answered: "With a married man, doctor! Really!" "And if I weren't married?" he asked. "I'd put you down on the list," I said. About three months later, his secretary called to tell me that that head surgeon was expecting me. God, I certainly messed up something; I went up thinking, "Good lord, what have I done?" He stood behind his desk, dead pale and rather severe, and asked: "Young lady, do you remember our conversation?" I stood silently. "You told me you don't date married men. I'm now divorced; put me down on your list." That was my first husband, Karoly Rochlitz. Our wedding was on November 8, 1942. Three weeks after the wedding, he was taken to Ujvidek as a forced labor surgeon. I went to see him on weekends. The second weekend, on my way home, the train was awfully crowded and I spent the whole trip standing. By the time I arrived home, I was covered with blood. What with the tension and the incredible strain, the baby was gone. I had been two months pregnant.

In 1944, the Germans occupied the hospital and turned it into an air force hospital, a war hospital. They insisted I stay as an interpreter and help them acquire supplies and also work in the lab for their patients. Needless to say, I did not want to do it, and did not do it. But when the charity hospital was occupied, the school on Bethlen Square was available to be used as an emergency hospital. But who would do it? My mother, of course, who was known as an organizer

throughout Budapest, who was able to create anything out of nothing. So it was transformed into an emergency hospital on Bethlen Square. I worked there, and it was there that my aunt, who was spared because of her Christian husband, came to take me to their home. They hid me.

Immediately after the war, I went back to work at the Jewish charity hospital. A TBC unit was opened, and I worked with their material, got infected, and I contracted an incredibly severe case of TBC. But I still worked on and off; they gave me a room in the charity hospital, the whole hospital was devoted to me, from the director to the old porter. And I adored the whole company. That was the kind of milieu you can't even imagine today. Everybody was friendly there. My husband came back after 6 years - he was taken prisoner of war. We could not find anything to say to each other any more. We only had lived together for a few weeks before the war. Life together didn't work out, and we were divorced.

They arrested my father on the street and took him to the police station. The only way we heard this was because, back then in 1943, we still lived in our own flat and the policeman who was looking after us met my father at the police station. He said, "Believe me, I can't get him out, it's impossible, even if I bet my life if I had the guts for that, I couldn't get him out from the fascists." There was a group of people holding prominent positions, around 40 of them. They were sent off in the summer of 1944. It's not even certain they went to Auschwitz, but it is certain that they were immediately gassed. He disappeared, without a trace. Later, when I went to Auschwitz, I saw that room filled with glasses. My father's might have been among them. My mother was in the urgent care hospital, then she was moved to the ghetto. She lived through the liberation there.

Post-war

Between 1945 and 1950, she opened an orphanage instead of reopening the home for the elderly. There were masses of Jewish orphans. Those girls all learned a trade. Those who were school-age went to school; those who were too young went to kindergarten. There were sewing courses, language courses. Those children were looked after properly. Each of their stories was a unique tragedy. My mother tried to help each of them. In 1950, the wave of nationalization reached the villa. When the Jewish orphanage was kicked out of Keleti Karoly Street, they got the Town Hall of Balassagyarmat, which was also a beautiful building. And my mother arranged everything there, started all over again. The whole group of them, including Mother, moved down there. In Budapest, my mother was allocated a awful flat, opening onto a courtyard on Marx Square. She had no choice; they put her onto a lorry with her furniture, and told her that she would see where they would bring her. And when they arrived, she was told that this was what she got for the very good, very beautifully made flat overlooking a garden on Rose Hill.

In Katona Jozsef Street there was a cafeteria for Jewish students. My mother was asked whether she would do the menu planning. That meant that she had to calculate the amounts of rice, flour, etc., needed to feed 50 people. So Mother went to work there for a while. Then when she did not want to go there every day, they told her she could work from home. And she did it, until the last day before she died. And as she had started with the Jews, she finished with a Jewish kitchen. She worked for the Jews her entire life.

I went to the university, then got married two more times. Neither was Jewish. I quit working when I was 80 years old. I have no family, but I am not alone.