

Gyorgy Preisz

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My family background

My grandfather Soma Preisz was born in Toalmas in the 1860s. I don't know much about him – only that he moved to Nagykata at the beginning of the 1880s, where they married him off to my grandmother, Berta Preisz, nee Deutsch. She was born at the beginning of the 1870s in Nagykata. If I remember correctly, they got married sometime in 1887. My grandfather was a merchant; he had a village general store. They had grocery, haberdashery and drapery goods in the store.

They had six children. The eldest was Auntie Etelka, who was probably born in 1890. Her husband was called Imre Horvath, and they were also merchants in Nagykata. They had a dry goods and textiles shop. They had a child, Laci and an adopted daughter because one of her husband's sisters died and their daughter became an orphan; so they adopted her. She was called Bozsi Stern. From this family only Laci survived the war. He came home from forced labor in 1945. And then he and his father's youngest brother, who was almost the same age as he, opened a textile shop in Budapest. This lasted until 'buddy' Rakosi [1](#) put an end to everything – until the nationalization. Then he and his wife left for Canada, where he became a trader. They didn't have children. Laci died in the middle of the 1980s in Canada.

The next daughter was Jolan, born in 1892. When she got married, many years before the war, she came to Budapest and lived here with her husband Istvan Kovacs and their son, Andor. They were merchants as well. They had a fashion boutique. Her husband died of tuberculosis in the middle of the 1930s, and then they lived together, she and her son. She was here in Budapest during the war, but not in the ghetto; her son was in forced labor but he came home, too. He was a violinist. He graduated from the conservatory and used to play in orchestras.

Then came my father Gyula Preisz. He was born in 1893, and he was the only one of the six children who was given an education. The others only had four classes of middle school [2](#). All of the children finished middle school in Nagykata and after that, they got married and worked, opened stores, or came to Budapest.

My father graduated from high school. He finished a school of commerce, I don't know where. After graduation, he was a bookkeeper at the Hungarian General Match Factory Inc. in Budapest. He then became deputy head bookkeeper. He was drafted into the army in World War I. He was in the 23rd Hungarian Royal Defense Regiment in Serbia. He was shot somewhere, but it wasn't serious, so he soon returned to the front. After that, he was a lieutenant and he was discharged as such. Then he went back to the match factory and was there until 1943, when he was fired because of the third Jewish law [see Anti-Jewish laws in Hungary] [3](#). He took it to heart so much – because, at first they said that somebody else would be fired, but then they introduced the anti-Jewish law and he was fired. Half a year later, as he was walking on the street, he collapsed. The ambulance took him to the hospital, but he never really recovered. He got cardiac asthma, so he spent more time in hospital than at home. He died in 1944 in Budapest.

The next child was Uncle Miklos. I think he was born in about 1895. He had a wife, Margit Deutsch, and they had two children, Kati and Laci. They had a grocery and haberdashery store in Nagykata.

The second-to-last was Pal Preisz. His wife was Rozsi Erlik and they had a daughter, Zsuzsa. They lived in Jaszbereny and they were movers. They had two trucks and moved all kinds of things with them. They had a bus as well. They lived in Jaszbereny, and they were taken to Auschwitz from there. They never came back.

The last child, Pista, lived with my grandparents. He was still unmarried, and he ran the shop because my grandfather just went to work in the morning. The first thing he did was to drink a snort, even when he was 80 years old. After that, he went out walking with his pals. Later, Pista got married. His first wife Maria, nee Bmuthaner, was a very elegant woman. They married in 1937. They had one daughter. The daughter and the mother were deported from Nagykata, where they lived, to Auschwitz. Pista was in forced labor and when he came home, he married again. His second wife was from Miske, but she had some connection to Nagykata. They had two children, Andras and Eva. After the war Pista first opened a shop with Laci [his brother Miklos' son]; it was a big beautiful fashion and drapery shop. Later he worked in a food shop; he was the manager. After that, he set up a little knit-ware workshop. He died in 1977, but his wife is still alive.

Pista's son Andras got married, and they left for Montreal, Canada. His wife divorced him there. He was an electric engineer here, and worked as quality controller. He has the same kind of job in Canada. Pista's daughter Eva married in Budapest, and her profession is being a 'grande dame'. Her husband is a trader in car spares and she doesn't have to do anything. They have two daughters, the eldest just got married to a lawyer. The younger one is still studying.

Nagykata wasn't a big town; it had about 10-12 thousand inhabitants. Nothing was covered with asphalt in Nagykata. Only on the main square, where there was a line of shops. Otherwise, a few streets were paved, but nothing else, only the mud, and eventually the dust. There were more than a hundred Jewish families, and a beautiful synagogue, with a gallery of course, a Neolog [4](#) synagogue.

We had a cantor of our own, a rabbi of our own; his family lived there. They received apartments from the Jewish community. I can't remember now the name of the rabbi, but his son was a famous writer in Budapest. [Editor's note: The rabbi of Nagykata since 1904 was Soma Breuer. He had studied in the Teacher Training College of Locse, or Levice, and published several books and articles in various Jewish papers as a rabbi.] We were on very good terms with him. The synagogue

was opposite uncle Imre Horvath's house.

Jews didn't live in one place, but all over the town. Three of my grandfather's children lived in Nagykata, in three different parts of the town. They lived in nice houses, with yards and outbuildings, and the shops were also there where they lived. One part of the house was the shop; the other was the apartment. Margit's family had a vegetable garden, even a vineyard, because they had a very big piece of land. Half of it was the yard. Near the house there was a flower garden, and in the back there was a farmyard, where they kept chickens, geese and everything. And it had another part where the vineyard was. When the grapes grew ripe, dad loved it; we always went there for the grapes. The furnishing of the houses wasn't special; they looked like average middle-class homes.

Ninety percent of the customers of the shops were Christians. Miklos' family was the richest, and they had a big shop. They worked a lot, but they lived very well. For example, at every nearby village (all named 'Tapió-something-or-other') there was a fair twice a year, and they always went there to sell. There was a dray, they'd put the whole shop on it and they'd go at dawn, to Tapioszecso, let's say, where they'd sell all day long, and then they'd come home in the evening.

My grandparents went to the synagogue on Friday evenings, I remember that. My grandmother lit the candle every Friday evening, there was barkhes, but I know that it wasn't baked by her. There was a kosher butcher's shop. In Nagykata there was kosher housekeeping in the sense that there were separate dishes for dairy and meat products. My grandfather used to pray in a prayer shawl on Friday evenings. But they didn't observe the Sabbath as such. They opened the shop because Saturday was market-day and it was double business. They managed to accommodate religion with work.

I remember when, as a child, I went to the seder, the whole family was there; we all came down from Budapest, too. My grandfather led the ceremony, he read the Haggadah to the end, and the youngest grandchild said the mah nishtanah. All the servants from the three Preisz families were called to help and I don't know how many people did the matzah balls but it was a beautiful holiday. It was a great feast when Bozsi, Etelka's adopted daughter, got married. Her wedding was there in Nagykata at the family house. The celebrations were held in the yard and all of us were down there. The rabbi came and married them in our yard. This was the last time the family was together. This was in 1942 or 1943.

My mother was called Margit Blum. She was born in Gyoma in 1899. She attended the secondary school for girls in Mezotur and she graduated as well. She was an only child. Her father was called Mor Blum. He was born in 1868 in Gyongyos. My grandmother, Roza Klein, was probably born at the beginning of the 1870s in Abony. My grandmother had many brothers and sisters, at least eight; she was raised in a very religious family. My grandmother's parents were shoemakers and we visited them in Abony for two or three days. Only my great-grandmother was still alive at that time.

My grandmother lived with one of her brothers, but I can't really remember anything about him. Grandmother had another brother, Gyula, who was the managing director of the sugar-works in Szolnok. Once, when we went to a wedding in Jaszbereny, we left a day earlier and we went to Szolnok. A wonderful carriage with two horses and a liveried servant came to meet us at the railway station and took us to the sugar-works. I was seven years old, but I still remember that. And

I also remember that on the following day we were taken to the station by car, and we went on to Jaszbereny. My grandparents got married in 1898 in Gyoma. I don't know how they got to Gyoma, but one of my grandmother's brothers, Vilmos, got to Gyoma and he had a big department store from the 1880s onwards, and I think they went there because of him. The department store was called Kis-Klein department store. He had five or six assistants and office-clerks.

In grandmother's family everybody magyarized their name to Kadar. The brother from Szolnok, Vilmos, who had the department store in Gyoma, his sons and daughter, all became Kadar. Only grandmother remained Klein.

Gyoma was an agricultural town with 14-15 thousand inhabitants but it was much wealthier than Nagykata because even in my childhood every larger street had one side covered with asphalt and the main square was completely covered with asphalt. It had very good soil; wheat, corn and barley was produced and many animals were kept: pigs, oxen, everything. About 80-100 Jewish families lived there as well. There was a beautiful synagogue, like that of Nagykata, and there was also a Jewish school with a teacher couple that was paid by the Jewish community. And there was a rabbi, though there was no cantor; he was brought from another place. There was a shochet who came to do the slaughtering every week and there was a shop where it was sold. But there was no permanent butcher's shop.

My grandmother was kosher, but my grandfather always sent me to get things for him; he would always say, 'Go to Rakoczi, and fetch some sausages'. And he would put them in a case and when grandmother wasn't within sight, he'd eat it. At Tabernacles the sukkah was pitched in the synagogue's yard. It was good fun to go in and play there.

The house in Gyoma was a nice big corner house, where the access to the shop was in the middle. It was a big shop and there was a two-bedroom apartment. There was a covered carriage entrance, and further on there was another apartment and a shop, which was rented out. They rented the shop to a pattern-stenciller for embroidery. It was also a Jew who rented it.

My grandparents owned the first shop, a grocery, haberdashery, and dry goods shop. It was rather big, but there were no employees, they ran it alone. They opened at 7 in the morning and it was open until 6 o'clock; on Saturday until midday; on Sunday it was closed. But people came in every five minutes on Sunday, saying, 'Ah, Mrs. Blum, I'm out of flour', or 'I'm out of sugar', or 'I'm out of salt'.

Buying on trust was in vogue there. Everybody was a permanent customer. They had a book, and we had a big book, in which everybody got a page. They wrote in their book as well, as in ours, what they had bought and they paid on the first day of the month. My grandparents could also buy on credit from wholesalers. There were a few merchants in Gyoma about whom merchants said they could buy on credit; there were others who could buy only in cash. My grandfather got as much as he wanted. He got the merchandise for 30 days, for 60 days, for 90 days. Of course, for 30 days, it was cheaper, for 90 days it was more expensive because they added the interest. He had these kinds of folders in which the bills were kept. He looked up when they were due to expire, and then he paid them.

Growing up

My parents met in Nagykata; they had some distant relative in common who invited my mother to Nagykata for some feast or ball, and they met there. They got married in 1921, and I was born in 1922. At that time, after World War I, the housing conditions were bad and they managed to get a one-bedroom apartment in Tisza Street in Budapest. In 1931 they managed to get a comfortable two-bedroom apartment in Visegrad Street. My mother lived there until the time of the yellow star houses [5](#). My father died there, I went into forced labor service from there. My mother didn't work because, back then, my father maintained us easily with his bookkeeper's salary.

We also had a servant, who lived in the servant's room. She did everything. My mother shopped at the market – there was the Lehel market – and at the grocery. The servant cooked, cleaned the house and did needlework. She was a country-girl whom my grandmother had sent to us and she worked for us until she got married.

Most of the time my parents were satisfied with the servants, so every servant of ours spent a few years at our place. We had a servant not only there in Visegrad Street, but even when we had that one-bedroom apartment in Tisza Street. It was natural that there was a servant in a middle-class family because in the Horthy [6](#) era the husband could earn enough money so that his wife wouldn't have to go work; they wouldn't have let her work anyway because people would speak badly of a man who couldn't maintain his wife and children. In middle-class families women stayed at home.

I don't know what my mother did, besides going to the hairdresser, to the dressmaker, and to her girlfriends. She went out for walks, went to drink coffee. I went with her many times. I still know where the dressmaker's was, where the milliner's was, where the hairdresser's was. My mother was an elegant woman and she was beautiful, too. I also had a fraulein [governess]; we could even afford that, too. I went for walks with her many times, and we talked in German.

My mother kept the tradition of having barkhes at home and of lighting the candle on Friday but there was no obligatory common dinner on Friday evening or on Saturday, nothing. We only went to the synagogue – the one on Arena Street, now Dozsa Gyorgy Street. In the back of it, there was a very big cultural hall and the Women's Association held many cultural events there. We went there many times to Dozsa Gyorgy Street, to the cultural part as well as to the synagogue until 1943.

At Christmas my grandmother visited from Gyoma. During Christmas they were closed, and they were closed between Christmas and New Year's Eve as well. They came to stay with us for three days. We had Christmas at our place. There must have been a Christmas tree. I remember that I had a girlfriend from the house and they sent the two of us down to the yard while they were putting the presents under the tree. We looked up, watching for when the little angel or little Jesus [who is believed to bring the Christmas presents] would fly in through the window. She was Christian, but I didn't care at all – not even that they had little Jesus and we had a little angel.

On certain days my father's friends gathered at our place. They loved to go to Weingruber on summer weekends. It was a huge place that could hold a thousand people, a tea-shop, and the Jozsef Nador 2nd Infantry Orchestra used to play there. I just checked where my parents were sitting and then went away immediately. I used to be right behind the conductor. I knew the whole program by heart because they played an operetta mixture at that time: Csardas Queen, The Merry Widow, Countess Marica, the Persian Market and everything. In the fall they took me to see Rigoletto at the Erkel Theater. I liked operettas very much. My parents loved Kalman, Lehar, and

they took me along as well. As a child I knew everything: what was playing in which theatre. We were subscribed to the Színhazi Élet [Theater Life] and when we had guests, they called me in, 'Gyuri, come here, they are asking about the theater programs' – and I knew them by heart. And I became attached to classical music, too.

I spent a lot of time in Gyoma because my mother was an only child, and I the only grandchild. My every wish was granted; I was in clover. There was a grocery part of the shop, which had a big stand on which there were at least 20 jars with chocolate-candy but I never thought about taking one piece. They had never seen such a child; they forced the chocolates and candies upon me. I was always at our neighbor's house, where there were boys of my age. They were Jewish as well. Because we were boys, we loved to play football.

When I was ten years old I got a bicycle from my grandparents – the post office was only about 200 meters away, but I went by bike – even there. I loved that bicycle.

Later my grandparents bought an estate in Gyoma, a very nice, complete estate of almost 30 acres, with a house, outhouse, and everything. This was rented out by the half-and-half system, which means that a peasant lived there with his family. He used the homestead, he bought himself animals, he bought everything but the land was ours, and so half of everything was ours.

I came up with the idea that I would like to have a horse because I loved to drive horses and I drove the horses out to the farm. My grandfather bought me a wagon and a horse; we used to go to the beach in it with my grandmother.

The river Koros in Gyoma had a very nice beach and one could rent a cabin. I went there every day with my grandmother. And we went out to the farm, too. I loved it; there was the harvest, as well as the threshing, I liked that very much. On such occasions I slept out there as well.

I played tennis from the age of ten. There was a court in Gyoma, and there was a big tennis-scene: Already around 1937, Jews could only go to one court. There were big tennis championships twice every summer. Tennis-players used to come from the whole county, but sometimes even from the surrounding counties. At that time they already made remarks: there was a very good tennis-player from Szeged, who was a champion, but he was a Jew. The right-wing people of Gyoma always grumbled, asking why Singer was always the winner.

Every summer, I was down at my paternal grandparent's for two or three weeks. I liked to be there because there were many children of my age. There was a long beach there. Miklos had a vineyard, and when we went out there it was a party all day long. When I was there I went to all three families because there were children everywhere. I spent the least time at my grandparents. I just slept and ate there because I loved my two cousins. The summer holiday was spent in Gyoma, but every year before or after Gyoma – because it was on my way there and back – I stopped with my mother at Nagykata because she said, 'Come on, we'll be here now for a while'. And I was there every year.

I attended four years of elementary school at Pannonia Street elementary school. There were few Jews in our class. In 1932 I went to Berzsenyi high school, which I attended for eight years; seventy percent of the students were Jews. My favorite subjects were history and geography; I hated mathematics. I liked Latin because if one learned it, one knew everything. There were religion

classes as well; a rabbi came and he taught Jewish religion; and every Friday we had to go to Csaki Street synagogue to a youth religious service. We went to the Klub Café and we sat outside, we didn't have to consume anything because they knew that we were Jews and we weren't allowed to eat and drink. We just stayed out there sunbathing.

When I was 15 years old there was a Jewish association called Duna Sports Club [DSC]. This consisted of three sections: tennis, table tennis and tourism. I liked all three of them very much. We were in the club from spring until fall. When classes were over, we went home, did our homework quickly, and were already off to chat, to play tennis or rummy or whatever. We lived our lives there. Ninety percent were Jews there as well. There was no Jewish life, we were just sportsmen and we organized DSC balls. At the weekends there was the DSC and there were trips, too. It was in 1943 that Jews were no longer allowed to visit tourist hostels. My friend asked for a permit for six people because we could enter only with a permit at that time. It was a very romantic thing that we were six boys; we went there; we got the keys in the village. It was a very well furnished tourist hostel. There was cutlery in the kitchen and everything. We found all kinds of uniforms and insignias of rank and organizer armbands and person-on-duty armbands. All six of us put them on; the day after, the tourists came and we asked for their papers to see whether they were Jews. We laughed a lot.

I would have chosen a musical career after graduation, if I could have. I didn't learn music, but I liked and adored the opera. I didn't have a gramophone at home, but I was always listening to the radio; the radio was always next to my ear. But I couldn't continue my studies. One day a woman, who had come from the tailor's where she had had a costume made, came to our house, and asked, 'Do you know a graduated boy whom they could engage as an apprentice?' 'Gyuri, would you like to be a women's tailor?' they asked. I had never ever held a needle in my hand. It was terrible. I went in the morning. He told me to sit down on a chair. He gave me a needle without thread and a piece of cloth to poke with the needle and the thimble again and again. He showed me how to sew. I did this from 8 o'clock in the morning until midday, then I went home to have lunch. The family always had lunch together, my father slept half an hour, and then he went back. Then I was there from 2 pm until 6 pm. I spent a year there, from 1941 to 1942. When I was finished, I worked in a very cool place on the Duna-promenade in the Molli showroom. It was a very distinguished place. I remained there until July; then I was called up to forced labor and went down to Bereck.

During the War

Since my father worked at the match factory and it was a Swedish company, my mother got a Swedish Schutzpass [7](#). At first they were in the yellow star house at number 3 Csaki Street, which was a synagogue. After that, when the Schutzpass stuff came, Auntie Jolanka and my mother went to the Swedish protected house in Hollan Street. But one day the Arrow Cross [8](#) men came - this was at the beginning of November. During the Hungarian Nazi regime, they came and emptied the Swedish house. They took everybody to a brick factory, and from there to Bergen-Belsen. My mother went to Bergen-Belsen, too, to the same place as her relatives - that is, her parents from Gyoma.

I went to Bereck, which is the very tip of what was greater Hungary, at the end of Szeklerland, in the Eastern Carpathians. It was a fluke, in the sense that on 1st November there was a fire in

Bereck. They called us to help stop the fire. We ran with pails of water and suddenly my leg was sprained and my ankle was broken. In that moment it was a nice, good feeling; all right, it hurt, but I got away with things for a while. The nearest town was Kezdivasarhely. There was a good hospital there. After three or four weeks I had no problems at all. They sent me back to the corps, but they wrote on my papers that three weeks of recuperation was recommended. Then I came home on 15th December for three weeks. That was when I saw my parents for the last time, and I was at the opera for the last time. When I went back I didn't have to march out for a long time, I peeled potatoes in the kitchen, and carried water.

In March the whole army corps marched to a place near the Verecke-strait. We were in a little village, where Ruthenians lived; very kind people. The whole company was distributed to families. We made the road on both sides of the Verecke-strait. Then we went to the other side, to Rusinsko [that is, Ruthenia]. The river Striy is there, near Striy. We constructed a bridge there. It was terrible to carry such large beams.

I was liberated in Ungvar in a hospital because I was so weak that I had to be there. The Jewish doctor put a tag on me, which said what my problem was, and they put me in a railway-station. This was in 1944. Somebody put me on the train and, in Tiszaulak – which belongs to Ukraine today – there was a forced laborer's hospital, which they took me to. The head of it was an officer called Brandi. He was a very kind man. I was in a very bad condition and my luck was that I wrote to my mother in Budapest and she sent me 300 pengos via telegraph. The postman came to the hospital in Tiszaulak, where there were millions of rooms, and he went through all the rooms shouting, 'Gyorgy Preisz!' And he shouted until he found me. If he hadn't shouted, but pocketed it, nobody would have looked for it. I got the money and with it I could get better food from outside.

We were there for a week, and the Russians came. Then Brandi said that he had received an order to send the bedridden patients to the hospital in Ungvar. He called for ambulance-cars and sent us to the military hospital there. We weren't even there for two days when the Russians came. In the evening the Hungarians were still there; in the morning there was nobody. At 11am the Russians arrived. In the afternoon the cinemas, the coffee bars, the cafes already opened. It was no problem because there everybody could speak to them in 'Slavic' language. But we didn't get food.

The people of Ungvar were fantastic. Everybody came and brought clothes and food; they brought everything into the hospital, and when I could walk with two sticks, a guy said to me, 'Let's go for lunch!' When the noon-bells rang we stated, 'Today we'll eat along this street!' We had lunch in five to six houses every day. The only problem was that on Sunday there was stuffed cabbage in eight houses out of ten. But we loved Sundays anyway, because on Sundays there were cakes everywhere. If we went into the coffee bar and sat down at a table, after ten minutes the table would be full; a tray of cakes would be sent to us from every table.

In December 1944 I had started on my way home when the news came that Budapest was soon going to be liberated. Ungvar had already been liberated in November. We arrived at the Hungarian side in Szabolcs County. There were millions of apples, which they had harvested, but couldn't take anywhere, as they had no transportation. We ate apples all day long.

There was a village where a Jewish family lived. They hadn't been deported. The man had some kind of decoration, and lots of Jews had left their assets there. He made a canteen from these gathered assets and as the forced laborers came back, we lived and ate there. I was there for a few

days, then I went on and soon reached Szolnok. At Szolnok, my leg was so bad that I went to hospital again.

Then the news came that, on 13th January, Budapest had been liberated. I knew that my father had died – my mother had written that to me in summer – but I didn't know what the situation was with her. I went home quickly to mother. I went out to the railway-station and the first train from Budapest arrived. It was so full of people that it looked like a Christmas tree. I asked them what had happened in Budapest. Someone said, 'Don't go there, young man, there's nothing but ruins and dead bodies and lack of food'. Another train came from Békéscsaba. I said, 'Is there anybody from Gyoma here?' They told me there was. I said, 'Is there any food?' He said, 'I should say so! They don't know what to do with it. They can't move it!' Well, I went to Gyoma. I went into my grandparent's house. The house was still there, but nothing remained of the shop. I walked waist-deep in garbage and rubble: every box, every case was upside-down.

I wrote a letter to my mother in Budapest. A week after that, the answer came from somebody from the house that she wasn't there anymore; she had been taken by the Arrow Cross men. They didn't know where. Then I had time. In the end, I went up there on 15th March 1945, the opera opened and I just had to be there at the opening. I went to our house, but somebody else lived there. But almost everything remained, even the jewelry, my mother's ring, too.

After the War

Two houses and an estate of 30 acres remained in Gyoma. When the deported people of Gyoma came home in summer, they told me that they had met my grandparents, and certified that they were dead. Then, in the mortgage registry, everything was transferred to me. I was 23 years old at that time, I had no idea what communism and capitalism was. I didn't know that I shouldn't accept the two houses and the land. I sold one of the houses because I had nothing but the bundle with which I came home, and with that money I bought myself a two-bedroom apartment in Csaki Street and moved there.

I worked as a tailor for a while. The brother of the girl that I was courting was the party secretary in the National Pawnshop. Andi told her brother, 'Put Gyuri into the pawnshop'. I told them to put me in the accountancy department, because my father had been a bookkeeper. So I became a bookkeeper in the pawnshop. Then came the period when I started to court another girl, Melinda Banty, who later became my first wife, and she worked at the Building Worker's Trade Union.

The change of regime [the communist takeover] came in 1948. I was called a kulak ⁹ because of my heritage in Gyoma; everything was confiscated, and I couldn't study anywhere. My wife was told that a head bookkeeper was needed for the Building Workers' Trade Union. I told them I wasn't the right man because I was written off as a cadre. They didn't care; they needed a head bookkeeper. So I became a head bookkeeper. I passed the head bookkeeper's exam 'on the sly' – this was the only way because I would have needed a recommendation from the company – but how to get recommended as a kulak? Then, of course, I was denounced: how can the party support a kulak to be a head bookkeeper? I was fired. And then I got into a company as a bookkeeper.

In those times the bailiff came every week to seize assets. He was a very kind Jewish guy, the head of the 13th district board of assessment. I always went to him and he arranged for the seizure to be suspended. In the end he called me in and said, 'I'm very sorry, Mr. Preisz, but I was given a good

‘dressing-down because I’m taking a kulak’s side. Now I must report you as a saboteur kulak’.

Once I got a summons to a people’s tribunal; I was suspected of a crime. I went in, and there was a judge of about 57 years old who read out the indictment – what did I have to say? ‘Rubbish’, I said. Wow, how angry he became! Then he threw out the case, based on some article. He said, ‘Listen to me, Mr. Preisz, go to the Ministry of Agriculture and get them to take that bloody land from you. Because, if this paper had landed not on my desk, but next-door, where there’s a 30-year-old communist attorney, you’d have gone to the Marko [an ill-famed prison in Marko Street] for five years, for sure’.

I went to the Ministry of Agriculture, where they kicked me out because they didn’t deal with kulaks. But the minister, Ferenc Erdei, happened to be a kind man and I managed to see to him for half an hour. I told him what the matter was. He had never heard of such foolishness and wrote on my papers: ‘Must be handled immediately!’ He told me to go to Bekescsaba at once. At first they didn’t talk to me but they saw the minister’s handwriting on the paper and they said straight away, ‘Please, come back in an hour. Everything will be arranged’. This was in 1952, but I couldn’t go anywhere to study or anything until 1956 because I was of kulak origin. That’s how easily I got rid of my family’s fortune, which had been amassed over centuries!

But getting rid of the land was in vain, I was fired again because I was a kulak, and I was put into manual labor. Then somebody who knew my skills came and told them to at least put me in some clerical position. This was in 1954. This was the year when Jutka, my daughter, was born. So I remained in Pannonia; at first as a clerk, then I transferred to the technical branch. I learned everything and I became the technical manager of a department.

My marriage went wrong rather soon. It was very bad; my wife wanted me to flee the country in 1956 [following the Revolution of 1956] [10](#), but I didn’t want to leave. After that, I started to court Vera Farkas, my wife found out, and her vanity couldn’t stand that. We divorced in 1965, and the wedding with Vera was in 1967.

Jewishness played no role at all in my post-war life. My wife was Christian, so I didn’t go to the synagogue for many years. Moreover, we got married in a church because my wife was very religious and had a sense of vocation. Her family was Calvinist, so we held our wedding in the Calvinist church in Rakosliget. It was the first time in my life that I was in a church, but nobody asked who on earth I was. We held the wedding at 8pm, and there was nobody there besides the family, so that they, in the trade union, wouldn’t find out. In those days, party secretaries frequented the churches on Sundays to see whether any party members were there.

I didn’t have any connection with Israel for a long time, either. In 1993 I visited there for two weeks. Since visiting Israel, I now buy the Uj Elet [the bi-weekly of the Jewish community] and other periodicals, and I go to the Jewish community more often. On high holidays I go to the Dohany Street synagogue. Unfortunately, I had a Christian wife for 13 years and I didn’t have any connection to Judaism during that time. Now I’m trying to find my way back to my past.

Glossary

[1](#) Rakosi regime

Matyas Rakosi was a Stalinist Hungarian leader between 1948-1956. He introduced an absolute communist terror, established a Stalinist type cult for himself and was responsible for the show trials of the early 1950s. After the Revolution of 1956, he went to the Soviet Union and died there.

2 Middle school

This type of school was attended by pupils between the ages of 10 and 14 (which corresponds in age to the lower secondary school). As opposed to secondary school, here the emphasis was on modern and practical subjects. Thus, beside the regular classes, such as literature, maths, natural sciences, history, etc., modern languages (mostly German, but to a lesser extent also French and English), accounting and economics were taught. While secondary school prepared children to enter university, middle school provided its graduates with the type of knowledge, which helped them find a job in offices, banks, etc as clerks, accountants, secretaries, or to manage their own business or shop.

3 Anti-Jewish laws in Hungary

Following similar legislation in Nazi Germany, Hungary enacted three Jewish laws in 1938, 1939 and 1941. The first law restricted the number of Jews in industrial and commercial enterprises, banks and in certain occupations, such as legal, medical and engineering professions, and journalism to 20% of the total number. This law defined Jews on the basis of their religion, so those who converted before the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, as well as those who fought in World War I, and their widows and orphans were exempted from the law. The second Jewish law introduced further restrictions, limiting the number of Jews in the above fields to 6%, prohibiting the employment of Jews completely in certain professions such as high school and university teaching, civil and municipal services, etc. It also forbade Jews to buy or sell land and so forth. This law already defined Jews on more racial grounds in that it regarded baptized children that had at least one non-converted Jewish parent as Jewish. The third Jewish law prohibited intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, and defined anyone who had at least one Jewish grandparent as Jewish.

4 Neolog Jewry

Following a Congress in 1868/69 in Budapest, where the Jewish community was supposed to discuss several issues on which the opinion of the traditionalists and the modernizers differed and which aimed at uniting Hungarian Jews, Hungarian Jewry was officially split into two (later three) communities, which all built up their own national community network. The Neologs were the modernizers, who opposed the Orthodox on various questions.

5 Yellow star houses

The system of exclusively Jewish houses, which acted as a form of hostage taking, was introduced by Hungarian authorities in Budapest in June 1944. The authorities believed that if they concentrated all the Jews of Budapest in the ghetto, the Allies would not attack it, but if they placed such houses all over Budapest, especially near important public buildings it was a kind of guarantee. Jews were only allowed to leave such houses for two hours a day to buy supplies and such.

6 Horthy, Miklos (1868-1957)

Regent of Hungary from 1920 to 1944. Relying on the conservative plutocrats and the great landowners and Christian middle classes, he maintained a right-wing regime in interwar Hungary. In foreign policy he tried to attain the revision of the Trianon peace treaty - on the basis of which two thirds of Hungary's territory were seceded after WWI - which led to Hungary entering WWII as an ally of Germany and Italy. When the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944, Horthy was forced to appoint as Prime Minister the former ambassador of Hungary in Berlin, who organized the deportations of Hungarian Jews. On 15th October 1944 Horthy announced on the radio that he would ask the Allied Powers for truce. The leader of the extreme right-wing fascist Arrow Cross Party, Ferenc Szalasi, supported by the German army, took over power. Horthy was detained in Germany and was later liberated by American troops. He moved to Portugal in 1949 and died there in 1957.

7 Swedish Schutzpass

a document resembling a Swedish passport, invented by Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. These protective papers provided Hungarian Jews with a new identity and consequently, new immunity from the Arrow Cross. Knowing that the Nazi mind respected the authority behind official looking documents, Wallenberg devised a formal passport, complete with a number, official seals, the Three Crowns of Sweden, and the minister's signature. It also stated that, while abroad, the carrier of the passport and his property was under the protection of the Swedish legation. At Wallenberg's insistence, the Hungarian government recognized the new protective passports, allowing 5,000 of them to be issued. As he couldn't get hold of many more passports, Wallenberg issued a simplified document that, even though printed on poor quality, was effective in protecting Jews.

8 Arrow Cross Party

The most extreme of the Hungarian fascist movements in the mid-1930s. The party consisted of several groups, though the name is now commonly associated with the faction organized by Ferenc Szalasi and Kalman Hubay in 1938. Following the Nazi pattern, the party promised not only the establishment of a fascist-type system including social reforms, but also the 'solution of the Jewish question'. The party's uniform consisted of a green shirt and a badge with a set of crossed arrows, a Hungarian version of the swastika, on it. On 15th October 1944, when governor Horthy announced Hungary's withdrawal from the war, the Arrow Cross seized power with military help from the Germans. The Arrow Cross government ordered general mobilization and enforced a regime of terror which, though directed chiefly against the Jews, also inflicted heavy suffering upon the Hungarians. It was responsible for the deportation and death of tens of thousands of Jews. After the Soviet army liberated the whole of Hungary by early April 1945, Szalasi and his Arrow Cross ministers were brought to trial and executed.

9 Kulak

In Hungary from the late 1940s and in the 1950s peasants, who had more than 12 hectares of land and hired laborers, were called kulaks. They were considered class enemies and exploiters because

of the use of hired labor, just as they were in the Soviet Union. Their land was confiscated and they were banned from joining agricultural cooperatives. About 400,000 peasants were persecuted as kulaks in Hungary.

10 Revolution of 1956

Starting on 23rd October 1956, this uprising was against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest during which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationed in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.