

Jozsef Faludi

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Szigetszentmiklos

Hungary

Interviewer: Eszter Andor and Dora Sardi

My paternal grandfather came from Cracow to Hungary. He found work in Kiskoros. Exactly how old he was when he came to Hungary, I unfortunately don't know. He was the congregation's chazan (cantor). This is where the family's cantorship comes from. I inherited his good voice. Especially in my childhood, I had a wonderful soprano voice, and I would even sing at high holidays in the temple.

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Family background

My grandmother Fani Bondi was Italian. She didn't speak Hungarian well, and she mostly mixed in Yiddish, and she brought a little of the Italian with her too. Italian was her native tongue, but she spoke Yiddish with my grandfather. My grandfather knew Hungarian too, he spoke Hungarian beautifully. Grandmother Bondi was sweet and loved her grandchildren. When the grandchildren came she always had cakes ready.

My grandparents lived in the service flat in the synagogue courtyard, because my grandfather was the employee of the congregation. There were flats in the yard, and a mikva (ritual bath) too. The cantor sang in the temple and did the bris (circumcision).

My grandma was diabetic; she died around 1928. Grandfather got married again in 1938. They offered him a wife from Budapest. And he sang actively in the temple in his eighties.

My maternal grandfather was the rabbi in Obecse, and they called him from there to Csepel to be Shatz-matz. That means he took care of the community's affairs, the registers, the weddings. He was the shochet (ritual slaughterer) too, and supervised the Csepel's kosher slaughterhouse. Finally, he taught Hebrew in the schools.

The community in Csepel was Orthodox, but wasn't as religious as the one in Kiskoros. For instance, there wasn't a cheder (Jewish religious primary school) in Csepel, and they didn't have mid-week prayer either. My grandfather did the mid-week prayers alone at home. There wasn't a mikva in Csepel either, so my grandfather went to Budapest on Fridays. That's where he died too, of a heart attack, in 1942. My grandfather, as you can see in the pictures, had a beard and wore a beaver hat. My grandmother also had a shoitly (wig).

Grandma was a wonderful person. She ran a big household, because they had eight kids and didn't have help. Ten of them lived in two-and-a-half rooms. There were two bigger rooms and a smaller room. The kitchen was in a separate building. There was a guest room too, a so-called "clean room," because my grandfather had a lot of visitors on official business. Only guests could go in there. They had a fairly big courtyard, and the temple was also there in the yard.

Our grandfather Eckstein came to Kiskoros from time to time. Well, that was a special occasion, because he would buy things, and he brought every kid something different, usually new clothes, and things like that. When he arrived he would open his suitcase after a little while and everyone got their own present. He wouldn't spend a lot of time in Kiskoros, as his responsibilities kept him in Csepel.

My father had five siblings. The first three children were born in Cracow, but my father was born in Hungary in 1895.

Growing up

I don't exactly know how my parents met, but it was surely through a shadchenolash (match-maker). They didn't do that any other way then, just through the shadchenolash. Love came later. Well, in my life I never saw a love like the one between my parents! My parents were married in 1920, and I was born in 1921. After me came Imre. There wasn't even a whole year between us. Magda came in 1924, Rozsi in 1925. We called Rozsi "Babi."

We had a leather goods shop. Father didn't have an assistant, but when we were older, we helped him as best we could. We learned how to cut out the soles, among other things. A leather merchant not only sold leather but also cut out shoes and boots. I learned to make the upper parts of shoes from one of our clients.

The shop was closed on Sunday and most of Saturday, but opened Saturday night when we returned from the synagogue. My parents also sold canvas. My father got it from a firm in Budapest and sold it for them. When I was still very young, I began riding around on a bicycle delivering canvas to Akaszto and other villages nearby.

My mother was a corset-maker. She worked at home and had lots of clients. They would come to the house and try on the corsets. Mama was always sewing.

Since my mother worked and there were four kids, someone had to take care of the housework, so from time to time we had a live-in servant for one or two months. The servants had to clean, and help with the cooking and washing. They were girls from the villages nearby.

My mother wore a wig. She had some short hair underneath it, but she wore a wig. When she wasn't wearing it, she covered her head with a scarf. She usually wore a scarf at home. If she went out visiting, she would put on the wig.

My father had a goatee, and he shaved it with razol (chemical used for shaving by the Orthodox who cannot use a knife or razor to shave). I also shaved with that for a while. Papa had payot (sidelocks) too, but this short, they called it pakumpak. His head was never bare. We never had bare heads either. When he went out on the street he'd wear a hat, not a kipa.

My father went to temple twice a day for the morning and evening prayer, and three times on Saturday. After morning prayers he'd generally go in for a shot of alcohol to my grandfather's. We kids used to go there a lot from school, because my grandparents lived in one of the community employees' flats, in the schoolyard, near the synagogue.

My father used to go to study too. There was a set time when the Rabbi or his son-in-law would hold the lesson in the bes medresh (synagogue and study house). Not everyone went there, just those who were more religious or knew the Talmud a bit better. They got the 13-year-old boys ready for their Bar Mitzvahs in the bes medresh too.

They didn't use the great temple every day, just on Saturdays and holidays. There was a smaller temple where morning and evening prayers were held. Everyone had his own seat in the temple, for which they had to pay once a year. Their names were on the seats.

There were lectures and drosches (oral explanations of biblical text) too, mostly on Saturday afternoon, from the third meal until dark. They had a special mood. The old Rabbi would say the droshe in Yiddish and Hebrew. But his son-in-law, even though he'd been to a yeshiva, said it in Hungarian. In Kiskoros there were about 150 people who regularly went to synagogue and to the lectures but only 10-15 who were really knowledgeable in Jewish religion and tradition and who studied every day.

In Kiskoros there were always bochers, students, from other towns who studied and ate during the day. "Tag essen" (day eating) students would go to a different family every day for lunch, which was considered an honor to the family because it counted as a mitzvah, a good deed. There was no yeshiva here, but there were groups of students who studied together like they do in yeshivas. We also had bochers who "ate days," usually for the whole zman (semester, in yeshiva). I "ate days" too when I was in yeshiva in Mako and Paks. In Mako, my relatives shared the days, and this way I was able to visit them as well.

Then there were always outsiders in Kiskoros for Sabbath. They would sit on a bench during the prayer, and sometimes people would practically fight over who would take the guests to dinner – because that was a mitzvah. There was a room in the community building where they would stay, usually for a day or two. At dinner, my family never had only enough food for just ourselves: we always counted on a guest coming.

On Fridays the women had to go to the mikva. Afternoon was for the men, evening for the women, but the mikva was open on weekdays too.

Friday evening was wonderful. I think back on it with great affection. My mother would light the candles and say the blessing. There were two candlesticks for this, which we didn't use for anything else. We sang songs, the zmirot (psalms), at Friday dinner. Before dinner the girls would dance the Shalom Aleichem with our father. I don't know if they danced in Grandpa's family too, but I think my father brought a lot from that cantor grandfather.

My mother would make the challah, and the baker would bake it. We would bring it with the cholent, which would get cooked in the warmth of the Friday oven. They would make the cholent ahead of time, and wrap it up in paper, and take it to the baker like that. There were paper labels with numbers that they would stick on the top of the challah and the cholent, so you could tell

whose was whose. My mother made bread too, and baked it at the bakers. Usually the kids would go for the bread, and for the challah too, but naturally they weren't allowed to touch it. On Saturday, children under 13 would carry the cholent home, because only they were allowed to carry. If not, then the task fell to some Christian who kept the fire at home and turned on the lights.

On Friday evening we had fish, meat soup, and tomato sauce. Fish in aspic was the appetizer, prepared on separate plates, and everyone got a plate. That was a special treat. There was stewed meat in the soup, and they poured the tomato sauce on the stewed meat. We had dessert too, cakes made in honor of the Sabbath. My mother was famous for her cooking and baking. Many people came to her to learn. She had learned from Grandma in Csepel.

We usually bought live geese at market and take them to be slaughtered by the shochet. The Rabbi would examine their crop. We didn't have to take the smaller poultry, only if it appeared that it might not be kosher. But we always had to take the geese and ducks.

Two shochet lived in Kiskoros, because the Jewish community was large, with 350 members. There was a slaughterhouse where we'd take the poultry. The larger livestock was slaughtered in the city slaughterhouse, where there was a separate place. The butchers weren't all Jews, in fact only one was a Jew, but they sold kosher meat in their shops too.

My mother did the canning. Jam-making was a special sort of tradition. Everyone had to help, including the boys. By the way, I loved the kitchen, more than the girls did.

We lived in a long, thatched, mud-walled house. The rooms were one after the other. The floor in the "big room" – our parents' room – was made of thick boards. There were two beds in it, and a couch where I slept because I was the first-born boy. We never heated the room, we just slept there. Then there was the so-called hall where my little sisters slept. We were there the most. That's where we ate too. And then there was the kitchen. We had a "sitting-bath" that we would put up in the kitchen and we'd heat water up in it once a week. Besides that we went to the mikva, where we could bathe on Fridays. There was a pump-well in the yard, and there was a shadoof in front of the house beyond the fence. (Typical of the Hortobagy region of Hungary, the shadoof is a well with a large counterweighted lever for drawing the water.) At first we lit the house with petroleum lamps, then later with electricity. I don't know exactly when they brought in the electricity, but we were already big by then.

Around the house was a garden where we grew vegetables. There was also more garden and a vine arbor in the yard. We had a big wooden shed with a tile roof, where we did the washing, especially in the winter when we couldn't do it in the yard. We had a washer-woman come for the washing, who would wash with my mother.

In our childhood our grandfather from Csepel would come to Kiskoros at certain times and would bring clothing for the kids. That was a tradition of ours. He would bring a set of clothing. We had other clothing too, but usually our new clothing came from here. It was a special feast when our grandfather came to visit. Not only did he bring clothes, but he brought other things too, such as sweets, to make his grandchildren happy.

I don't especially recall that we had a library at home. We had Hebrew books, prayer books, holiday prayer books, and Saturday prayer books. The business newspapers in Kiskoros were sent to the

shop. Later, when they'd been read through, they'd be sent home and we'd read out of them, but we weren't big newspaper readers.

My parents sometimes went up to Pest, and then they'd go to the theater. That wasn't really permitted. They were religious, but they weren't fanatics. From a certain point of view they were actually quite modern.

I went to school in Kiskoros, where there was a Jewish school. The boys and girls went together. There were only two classes, younger kids in one and older kids in the other. My sisters went to middle school, like us boys. They finished the four grades, and then they learned the trade from our mother, helping her. In their free time they went to a Jewish house where young people would get together and do cultural things, and play sports.

Kiskoros was an Orthodox community. We all had payot (sidelocks), that we stuck behind our ears. Later, when we got into the yeshiva, we wore our payot out. I was a clever kid, I never did what you'd call homework. What I knew was what they'd explain to us in class. Regular school was something new for us, because we learned with entirely different methods, and completely different things than in the cheder (Jewish religious primary school).

We had school lessons in the morning, and then we stayed until 6 in the evening with the melamed (Jewish religious primary school teacher), who taught us our alefbeyts (Hebrew ABC), and the Torah, and we learned the Rashi commentaries too. The cheder was a separate place next to the so-called little synagogue, and only boys went. We went to the melamed when we were 3 years old. At first we learned to read, but we didn't know what the words meant. Then when we started learning the Torah, we translated it into Yiddish.

I met with Yiddish for the first time in the cheder. We didn't speak Yiddish at home, we spoke Hungarian. Families usually spoke Hungarian, but if a problem connected with religion came up, they'd talk about it in Yiddish. Especially those who had studied more, they would even write letters in Yiddish. I could do that. So the kids didn't really understand the language that the melamed taught, only if he also explained in Hungarian what he had said.

In the cheder you couldn't not study because it was strict, it was quiet during the lessons, and the way he presented the lesson was interesting. Even little three-year-old kids couldn't stand up or talk, they had to have control. And they did. It was such a natural thing that we were happy to do it. Everybody could hardly wait to get there before they were three years old. That's the sort of reputation that cheder had, and that you had to study, it's everybody's responsibility. And kids were happy to go there because he sang the Torah especially musically. I was really interested in what we studied, and I learned it well.

You had to go to cheder until you were about 12, because the preparations for the Bar Mitzvah happened at the cheder. That's where we learned the droshe that we presented. The Bar Mitzvah wasn't in the temple, it was at home. In the temple the Bar Mitzvah was called up to the Torah for the first time. First we'd finish our affairs in the temple, and that would take until noon. Then there was lunch where the family was, and afterwards came the guests. We'd set up tents. We had a tent in the yard too, where the guests would come. Almost the entire kileh (community) was there. There were three long tables. I stood at the head of the table and very proudly said my droshe.

Then the Bar Mitzvah got his new clothing, which was finally long pants, and things like that, but gift-giving wasn't in fashion.

There was a movie theater in Kiskoros, where we didn't really go because movies weren't for Jewish kids. My parents didn't forbid it, it was just normal that it wasn't entertainment for us. Somehow that's how they raised us. There was a movie theater in the Szarvas building where every sort of cultural event would happen. They had gypsy music evenings there. There was a restaurant in the Szarvas and a hotel too, and shops. The last shop was my father's leather goods shop.

Then there was a house with a stage, and they would hold theater performances just with Jews. They would rent the place and learn the play they wanted to present ahead of time, then put it on. Afterwards there was music, and then the young people would dance with each other. They were Yiddish plays, but presented in Hungarian.

We spent the school vacations in Csepel with my grandparents. They had lots of grandchildren, because they had eight children. The rest of my cousins also spent their vacations in Csepel. The aunts who still lived there would take care of us and we got a lot of love from them.

We would wake up there, and eat and play the whole day. And later, when we got older, we studied there too. Our grandfather explained a lot to us. He had a separate room where he would sharpen his knives when he did his shochet work. And he would call us over then and ask us questions and tell us interesting things that we were able to put to good use later in the yeshiva. And the girls also had to be there during those conversations.

After the fifth grade of elementary school I got into the second grade of middle school with a special exam. It was only after fifth grade because I wasn't sure that I could go because middle school cost money. My little brother went to middle school after fourth grade.

There were very few Jewish boys in each class because most parents didn't want their kids to go to middle school. But my parents wanted me to have a certain type of education. My siblings also went to school, my cousins too, everybody went. I'm telling you, we were among the enlightened even though we were religious. On Saturday the Jewish boys didn't have to go to school. They got permission.

We didn't use the kipa in school. I think it was a requirement to have your head uncovered. Our parents also took their hats off in offices.

I ended up in a group whose members were wrestlers. I practiced with them in secret. And when we had finished our training, there was an exam where we competed. My parents were shocked when they found out. They were against it, a Jewish boy shouldn't go wrestle with the rest. Because we wrestled with Christians. There was another Jewish boy who I went to wrestling with.

I went to yeshiva after middle school. Mainly my father wanted it, but my mother agreed with him. I had already taken part in the Talmud Torahs (advanced religious Jewish primary school), where there was yeshiva preparation. Soltvadkert was next to us, and the yeshiva where I studied for the first year was there. There was a Rabbi in Soltvadkert who dealt with the bochers. There were 20-25 of us. We learned about two big books of the Talmud, one was the Beytza (Egg). The second

book was, interestingly enough, the Nida (Menstruation). We took about one zman (semester) to learn one of those books. I learned them by heart. I had a very good intellect.

I didn't have to rent a room in Soltvadkert, because my uncle lived there, my father's brother, and I lived with my cousins. It was fairly far from the yeshiva. Antisemitism was already there, there were fights; they'd wait for us after lessons and throw rocks at us, and things like that. The bochers didn't wear kaftans (robes), but were dressed normally. I was 14-15 when I went there. I wore a shimish cap, and my payot were usually put up behind my ears so they wouldn't be obvious.

But I didn't eat every day at the cousins' house, just on certain days. Friday and Saturday were their days. We took care of our own dinners. We had money, our parents gave it to us. We would go to the grocery and buy margarine or something there was no doubt about from the kosher point of view. We didn't shop in kosher shops, but in the grocery. Every sort of thing that we could prepare was there.

I did two zmanim in Soltvadkert and afterwards two zmanim in Paks. My brother was there with me. It was his first year in the yeshiva. We lived together in a rented room in Paks. There were people there who rented rooms to bochers. Imre had only two zman in the yeshiva, in Paks. Afterwards he went to a Jewish gardener in Kiskoros and learned gardening.

After Paks I spent two zmanim in Mako. We had a little storm-lamp, and we would divide up the days. Each one of us had a day when we had to go through the town in the morning, at dawn, summer and winter, and wake everyone up. We'd go wherever there were bochers. We would sing a special song two or three times. The bochers would get up and go to the mikva and dip into the cold water, and the lessons would start in the beys medresh (study house). We had breakfast after an hour and a half, or two, and then continue studies until noon. Then we'd go "eat days," and then study more, and that's how it went until evening.

The yeshiva had a Shas, all the 36 volumes of the Talmud, which we could study. There were also summaries everybody could use. Everybody had to tackle the same topic. We could study alone or in groups.

There were chazer bochers who were more educated and had been studying in yeshiva for longer. Naturally they handled the youngest. Later everyone became independent and took care of his own business. In Mako there were also Rosh yeshivas, head students who controlled the others, helped them if they had a problem and also acted as judges in internal disputes among students. After the second zman I was made a Rosh yeshiva. We made sure that everything happened as it should, if it turned out that they had to hold a court session. We had no diplomas that we were Rosh yeshivas, but the others would go to us if they had problems or disputes, for us to solve.

I like to recall the Mako yeshiva the best. Somehow because of its religious content, it taught its students at a far higher level than the rest. Paks wasn't at such a high religious level as Mako. Mako was a lot more religious. There were two communities there, and a Neolog (Conservative) community too. My relatives were among the more religious, though one was a baker, and the other an onion-dealer. The Mako relatives were from my mother's side.

In 1938 I left the yeshiva. I had other things to do. Partly to help my parents, to get into business life. In 1939 I went to Palestine. My parents sold some property so they could pay the Agudat Israel,

a Jewish group that organized immigration to Palestine. That's how I went. My mother was sure that if I went there, with the family life and love that was in our family (as several other relatives were in Palestine by then) my life would be secure. I even was entrusted with taking care of getting the rest of the family out. That didn't happen, unfortunately.

During the war

In 1944 my parents and siblings were collected in Kiskoros and sent to Auschwitz. A relative who was with them said that as soon as they got to Auschwitz, my father and grandfather were immediately put into the oven (editor's note: interviewee no doubt means gas chamber, followed by the crematorium).

The girls and my mother were sent to work in Germany. My cousins Judit and Edit, who had also lived in Kiskoros, were with them. On the way it was the custom that the guards would shoot anybody who couldn't go any further. The sole of Edit's shoe came off, and she sat down, and her sister naturally stayed with her. They shot them in front of everybody. That's when my mother and sisters decided to escape, and they did escape. There has been no news of them since.

My brother Imre was taken to forced labor. He was in Austria and he escaped from there and came home to liberated Hungary. He ended up in Kiskoros, and was in the leather trade for a while. Later he ran a gas station. In 1946 he went to Israel, "the land of his dreams" as he wrote me, but he came home sooner than I did because he was disappointed in it.

My mother had seven brothers and sisters. One of her sisters was Rozsi. Rozsi had learned to be a dress-maker. Later she moved out from her parents' home and had a sewing shop. She married a man named Zoli Brull, and had a very elegant clothing salon in Csepel. In 1936 they went to Israel. They weren't Zionists, they just wanted to live.

Rozsi had a sister, Rene, and they were practically always together. They even lived together before Rene made aliya (immigration to Israel). She left before Rozsi and her husband. She arranged the trip to Israel for Rozsi, because she had Zionist connections.

Rozsi and her husband ended up in Tel Aviv, and they opened the Salon Rachel there, where I worked in 1939. Rozsi was the salon manager, and her husband was the tailor. First they had a two-room flat. Then they rented a three-room flat, and were able to buy more machines and hire more employees. Everyone in the shop was Hungarian. They spoke Hungarian, but they learned Hebrew. Rene learned how to make artificial flowers and she would make them for Rozsi's products. Later she founded a clothing factory. The clothing salon was a success. They exported clothing. Rene had a lot of foreign connections. She spoke French, English, and two or three other languages, so she would go and take the sample collection with herself in a suitcase, and take orders.

When we went out, the English seized us in the Dardanelles and took us to Palestine. They took us to two internment camps and kept us locked up for half a year. Afterwards we got a permit to go to Palestine.

First I ended up in Rozsi's salon, Salon Rachel. That's where I learned to make dresses. I didn't learn design, but I did every kind of sewing, and even ironing. I was the only boy there.

Zoli Brull and Rozsi were never religious. Their kitchen was kosher, because otherwise I wouldn't have eaten there. They had a servant who did everything in the kitchen. Usually they did their own cleaning, especially in the shop.

In 1942 I left my aunts and, if I can put it this way, became independent. Because when I was with them, I didn't get a salary, just an allowance as a member of the family. By then I had learned to be a tailor. I got acquainted with a boy from Vienna, and we rented a room in Tel Aviv where I lived for a good while. The German boy and I spoke German together. I had other German friends too.

I learned English on my own there. I had learned a little here at home before I left, but I realized it wasn't worth anything.

When I left my aunt's, I came into contact with a leftist organization where I met a Hungarian, Ferenc Bug, a tailor. I worked in his shop as an assistant. That organization linked with the Communist Party. They held seminars and lectures, and organized excursions. That's where I met my Yemenite wife, Mazal. Mazal was born in Jerusalem, her grandparents had moved from Yemen to Palestine.

I was nominated for membership in the Israeli Communist Party in 1943. Then I went to party meetings, and did party work. Peace making was our assignment. We went to meetings where we would smoke the peace-pipe with the Arabs. The Communist Party also had Arab members. When I was among the Arabs doing party work, I learned to speak, but not write, their language.

I became non-religious under the influence of that leftist organization. It didn't happen from one day to the next, but step by step. I still went to synagogue on high holidays, but stopped observing Sabbath. That's when my being kosher stopped too, though my aunts hadn't been so seriously kosher either.

Later I met a man whose family were leather designers, and I joined them and learned the leather-working trade. Then I had my own leather shop, when Mazal and I were already together.

I was married in 1946. Mazal was not at all religious, but we were married by a Rabbi. Mazal's parents weren't present. We married completely independently of the family. We rented a flat in the basement of a house, where I also set up my workshop. We worked night and day. My wife helped me. There was no other employee. We worked on consignment making leather goods.

But I was powerfully homesick, and when I married Mazal I told her that she should only marry me if she was willing to come home with me, because I was definitely coming home.

Post-war

In 1948 we sold everything and came home. Our first son, Emanuel, had already been born, in Tel Aviv in 1947. Mazal was pregnant with our second son when we came home, and Elek was born here in 1948. Our third boy, Tamas, was born in 1951.

By then my uncle Misi, my mother's brother, and his family were already here. He had also been out in Israel, but they came back before me. They had a flat on Dohany Street in Budapest, and we went there.

Here at home I also worked on consignment as a leather worker. We ended up in Zuglo, a district of Budapest. We bought a flat, we bought a sewing machine, and I worked at home. We had no money when we came home, but started life here with help from relatives.

I joined the Party here too, and with their help I ended up as an alcohol sales permit officer in the Financial Directorate, and then on the Town Council. From there, on my brother's advice, I went to work in the cylinder factory as a skilled worker. In the meantime I had gone to technical school. So I became a shift manager. But that wasn't to my taste because my pay was less than it had been as a skilled worker. I was there for more than twenty years, and then I retired with a two-year age differential benefit.

The boys weren't raised to be religious, but they had their bris (circumcision). I think they are Jewish kids, but not religious. I didn't want to give the kids any sort of religious education. I ended up against God because he allowed the terrible killing to happen. Mazal wasn't religious at all. We didn't keep any holidays, we didn't think it was important.

I divorced Mazal in 1978, and one year later I married Krisztina. We lived in Csepel, but we bought this property in Szigetszentmiklos. At first we just came here on vacation. Then when Krisztina retired in 1993, we moved down here.