

FOUR

MY MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS, THEIR ANCESTORS AND SOME RELATIVES

GRANDMOTHER

Of all my four grandparents the family of my maternal grandmother was by far the most intellectual with the longest tradition of higher education and also the most assimilated. Grandmother's upbringing was almost that of an upperclass Christian girl. She was called Hermina Hajos. She had 5 brothers and 3 sisters. These are shown in the family tree but are not listed according to their birth years.

The family name was originally Hamburg, not Hamburger. Hajos means in Hungarian "seafarer" or "mariner" but I am pretty sure that none of my ancestors had anything to do with the sea though there could have been a connection with the city of Hamburg. Grandmother's father M. Hajos was born in Zboró, a village in the district of Sáros and which I believe is the area where the town Sárospatak is in north-eastern Hungary. I don't know his first name, only the initial. It probably stood for Moritz or Maurice in English. Zboró, I understand is located at the foot of a fortified castle of the Rákoczy (or Rákoczi pronounced Rakotzee) family.

The Rákóczys were one of Hungary's most illustrious and powerful families of magnates. They were established on land now straddling the Hungarian/Romanian border and in eastern Slovakia. Their family seat was in Felsővadász (which means "upper shoot"), but whether this is the place where Zboró is, I have not been able to establish. At one time their lands stretched about 100 miles from Makovica mountain in the north of Slovakia and close to the present Polish border to about the Hungarian town of Nyíregyháza. The Rákóczys occupied a middle ground between the principality of Transylvania and the Hungarian Kingdom. They constituted the natural focus of anti-Habsburg patriotism. They were Catholics since the 1620s. The brother Pál (Paul) of György (George) I Rákoczy was converted and became chief justice of the Hungarian Kingdom. But they were an established family already before 1600, when they were still "heathen". Zsigmond (1544 - 1608) was elected Prince and his son György I (see above) gained the same position in 1630 and held it to his death in 1648. He was succeeded by György II who in turn was followed by Ferenc (Francis) I (1645 - 1676) who became involved in treasonable manoeuvrings. The latter's son

Ferenc II (1676- 1735) enjoyed a right of apostolic succession to the leadership of the kuruc army, a militant, crusading, opposition . movement with some peasant support and enjoying the sympathy of the protestants. He devised the motto Libertas Hungariae which was also shown on the coins which he minted. In 1707 king Joseph I was deposed and the vacant crown placed in the hands of Ferenc II Rakoczy. But intrigue followed intrigue and he was exiled under Turkish supervision.

This brief diversion into Hungarian history exemplifies the turbulent politics and the violent conflicts between the king, the magnates, Catholics and protestants, ethnic groups and foreign powers. Conflicting tendencies continued - though perhaps less vehemently - right into the days when M. Hajos lived. The prudent Jews no doubt were lying low, siding with whichever was the more liberal side and supporting the most powerful house, usually the Habsburg emperor.

The Rákóczys continued as powerful and enlightened magnates right into the Second World War, though their land had much contracted already after the First World War.

M. Hajos's parents were poor. There was no resident rabbi in little Zboró and his father acted as elder and leader of the Jewish community there.

M. Hajos was sent to a rabbi to study the scriptures and the Talmud. While still a student he earned his living as a house tutor to the children of one Abraham Schwarz. Schwarz rented farm land from a famous magnate called Andrassy after whom a wide road in Budapest is called. There is, incidentally, also a Rakóczy circular road in Budapest. Schwarz himself was a renown scholar of the Talmud. In the turbulent days of 1848 three brothers of Abraham escaped to the USA. They changed their names to Black. One of the Black widows was still alive during World War II, according to Lajos Polgar, uncle of George Polgar.

M. Hajos became adept in interpreting the Talmud. He was also a very practical man and had learned all about agriculture from Abraham Schwarz whose daughter Roza, my great-grandmother, he married. I remember meeting her once when I was about 7 years old. I have some information that she had sisters who had emigrated to the USA but I suspect that this might be an error and a mix-up with the emigration of her 3 Schwarz uncles.

M. Hajos rented a small farm from the prelate of Eperjes, called Szinyei-Merse. Later M. Hajos added another farm rented from count Forgách in the Abauj district (just south of Kosice inside Hungary; during the last war when Košice had been grabbed by Hungary it was in the same Abauj district).

Finally he hired a third farm of 3000 acres near Forró Encs from the city of Košice.

My information about M. Hajos comes from a letter written on 16th July 1946 by Mrs. Kornelia (Nella) Polgar, a great - aunt of mine and a grandmother of George Polgar's to Endre Ranschburg (see family tree). In this letter she calls M. Hajos an erudite, philosophically-minded, pro-Hungarian, refined and handsome gentleman. On the occasion of some anniversary he financed stipends for Hungarian-speaking pupils of Slovak ethnic origin living in the Sáros district. An example of the support Jews gave the Crown by turning Slovaks into Hungarians.

In the same letter she gives an interesting account of a close friendship which the Talmud scholar Hajos developed with the local Roman Catholic priest. He came almost every day to their house, discussing religion and "they often and again and again ruminated on a single sentence". When my grandmother and her siblings were still small children he wanted the whole family to be converted to Roman Catholicism. The matter was apparently discussed rather thoroughly on several occasions but postponed several times. The idea was finally shelved but it is not known for what reason. He did not give up the idea completely and even introduced to his daughters Christian young men eligible for marriage. It is in this environment that Grandmother grew up. There is little doubt that the family had become almost completely assimilated. Grandmother later became a devout Christian. Two of her brothers, Géza and Albin (see family tree) married Christian English girls.

Roza Schwarz had 2 sisters who like her became part of the Hungarian middle class establishment. The husband of one of them (presumably a medical doctor) became health commissioner in the city of Bártfa. The other was the mother of a famous actor Emil Fenyvesi. (We knew some people of that name, who emigrated to England about the time as Jean and I did and whom I assume were relatives of that actor).

Mrs. Abraham Schwarz (née Rosenberg ?) appears to have emigrated to the USA too where she died.

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The Hajos family lived in a big attractive house with a turret and set in a wooded park, shown in exhibit 2. This house is in Forró Encs, the last and largest farm bought by M. Hajos. Forró is about 35 m south of Košice and about 19 m south of the current Czechoslovak/Hungarian border. Encs is a village about 2 m east of Forró. As the house is referred to as being in Forró Encs, I assume that it is somewhere between the two places. I have never been there. It is a land of gently rolling hills and the river Hernád flows in a nearly



2. Maternal grandmother's home in Forró Encs. The person on right is probably her father



4. The girl in white blouse with shoulder strap hand bag is my maternal grandmother. The other girl is possibly one of her sisters



5. Grand mother in white blouse on extreme right



3. Micka had written Little Tartar Girl Great Grandmother Szilard. The "great" refers to our children.



6. Maternal grandmother aged approx 20.

north (south . . .) direction through it towards the Danube.

Exhibit 3 shows Grandmother as a young girl. Exhibits 4 and 5 shows her in the white blouse. The men are not the same in the two photos but as she is dressed in the same way, I assume that the photos were taken on the same occasion: perhaps some sort of gathering organised by her father. In 4 one can see very clearly Grandmother having a handbag with a shoulder strap. The other girl could be a sister of hers. All men are dressed in the latest fashion. In 5, on the left, is a peasant who is dressed differently. That is how peasants used to dress right up to my time. He seems to carry a lot of clobber including a box on a shoulder strap which might be for the camera with which the two photos were taken. Exhibit 6 shows Grandmother at about the same age as in the two previous photos, perhaps 20 years old. In all these photos her hair is shorter than in 3 when she was much younger.

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Of Grandmother's 5 brothers, three had studied law. Of these one became a judge, one did not enter the judicial profession and became a farmer and the third became a lawyer. This was Géza who had married the grand[daughter] Nelly, of the English engineer Clark who had built Budapest's first bridge in about 1830 - known as the chain bridge. It was badly damaged during the last war but rebuilt afterwards. An unproven legend has it that after the solemn inauguration and consecration of the bridge in 1830, it was pointed out to Adam Clark that the four stone lions, guarding the bridge at each end, had no tongues, whereupon Clark jumped into the Danube and drowned himself.

The lions are still tongueless. Géza and Nelly had two sons and one daughter. The girl became a nun. One son, Serge, studied theology, became a Benedictine and professor of mathematics in Budapest. The other son was also called Géza and worked at the Hungarian National Bank and died about 1959/60.

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One of Grandmother's brothers, Albin, married an English (American ?) girl, emigrated to the USA and established himself as a photographer.

One of her sisters, Nella or Kornelia, married Dr. Sándor Polgar. They had two sons: Lajos and Pista or István or Steven in English. Pista was a first cousin of my aunt Boris (see family tree) whom he married. Their only child was George Polgar. Lajos emigrated to New York, having survived the Holocaust and died there a few years ago.

The only sibling of Grandmother's whom I have ever met was her sister Irén. She married Dr. Pál Ranschburg, a noted professor of Psychology at the University of Budapest. They had 3 children and lived in a comfortable flat which I visited once with mother when I was about 7. On that occasion I met there my great-grand mother Roza Hajós. The children were considerably older than me

but I was made to play a game which involved a horizontal mirror, perhaps 2 ft x 2 ft, supported by 4 short legs at its corners and resting on a table.

"This mirror, I was told, is the sea. Floating on it were small models of iron battleships. Each player had a powerful magnet which one applied with dexterity from underneath the mirror, causing the battleships to move according to the rules of the game. Unknown to me, inside the mirror were hidden insulated spots and when a ship happened to hit such a spot, the magnet could not move it. When this happened the children kept on shouting "akna, akna" in Hungarian (which I didn't understand; I certainly did not know this word). Not until it was explained to me that akna means a submerged mine did I understand but I was still at a loss^{as to} what a submerged mine was. During the last war the Ranschburg parents were hiding in a cellar and died of hunger during an attack on Budapest. Their son Endre (born 1899 ?) still lived in Budapest in 1984. Their daughter Erzsie was also alive. On marriage she had become Mrs. Ruzsnyak. Their son Géza became an electrical engineer. It was Endre who was the recipient of the letter from Nella to which I referred above.

GRANDFATHER

Grandfather was one of 8 children as will be gathered from the family tree. They are not shown by their birth days except that I know that Berta was younger than he. Grandfather Simon Szilard was born in 1861. He was 10 years younger than my paternal grandfather. His parents were farmers near Nitra. The original name was Schlüssler. I don't know when the name was changed to Szilard*. His maternal grandmother was Friderika but I don't know

her married name. Her parents were called Tauber. The origins of that name are not clear. Taube means pigeon; taub means dumb; there is a river Tauber in Germany. The Taubers were almost certainly farmers in the latter part of the 18th century as a result of Joseph II's reforms in 1781. Whatever the Taubers used to be before, Mihály Tauber could have been one of those who had benefited from the Imperial Ordinance and took to farming. Grandfather was tall and strikingly handsome. Exhibit 7 shows him as an officer in Budapest when he was perhaps 22 - 24 years old. He had studied law and became a solicitor. He was, I believe, the only one amongst his siblings who had been to university. His family were less well-to-do than the Hajos's. Although successful in his profession, he remained a relatively small town lawyer. Perhaps he was a little bit frustrated for not having achieved a higher position in the legal profession. The reason for this may not have been a lack of drive but the fact that after the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic Hungarian-trained lawyers had little chance

* szilard means firm or strong in Hungarian



7. Grandfather as officer in Budapest
22 - 24 years old



8. Grandparents wedding 1892



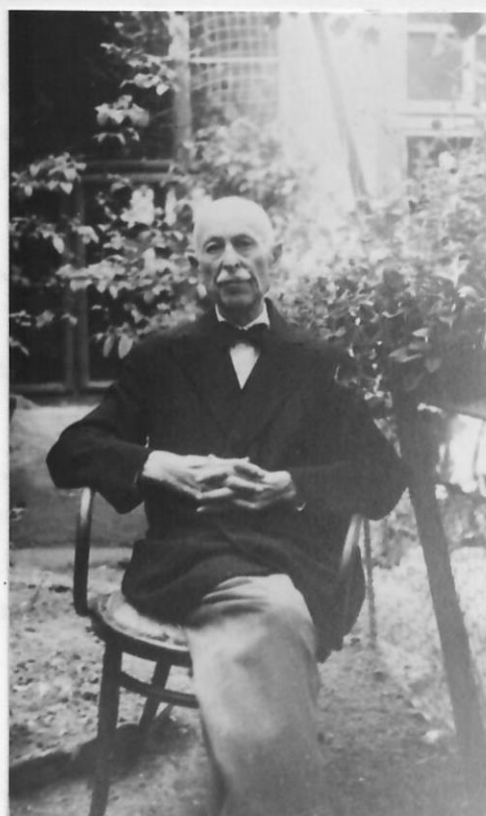
9. Grandfather at about the time
of his wedding.



10. Karlsbad, a few years after
his wedding.



11. Grandfather in 1938/39



12. Grandfather not long before his death on 30th December 1944, sitting in his garden

of advancement. He was intelligent, spoke Hungarian, German and Slovak fluently and was interested in world affairs and social developments. He was conservative, loyal to the Emperor but adapted himself to the changed conditions of the new republic.

Exhibit 8 is a wedding photograph of my grandparents. He was then 31 when he got married in 1892. On all photos he is shown with a well-groomed moustache and always dressed elegantly in the latest fashion. Exhibit 9 was taken probably at about the time of his marriage. 10 shows him in Karlsbad, a few years later. Exhibit 11 shows him in about 1938/39 as I remember him. His face shows hardly any wrinkles and he is still very handsome; his moustache is trimmed neatly. 12 was taken probably in 1944 not long before his death. He is sitting in his garden but has obviously aged greatly. He died on 30th December 1944. Anni lived in Hlohovec during the last war and had visited him often. Alas, ^{neither} she nor mother were with him when he died. On 2nd December 1944 they were transported away to their deaths, but mercifully grandfather was not told. Micka looked after him throughout his old age and was there when he died.

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I know nothing about grandfather's siblings except for his younger sister Berta. She had married a Szegő and their daughter was Micka (pronounced Mitska). Both her parents died when she was still a child. During school terms she was at a boarding school but she spent all her vacations in Hlohovec with my Szilard grandparents who were her guardians and I believe Grandmother was her Godmother. She was therefore like one of their own children and was brought up with my mother, Boris and István. She never married. When Leslie Eggerton's (Eisler) mother died in a road accident, when he was still a little boy, Micka became a housekeeper and foster mother in his home. Leslie and his sister Piroška (who now lives in Australia) looked upon her as a mother.

After grandfather had died and the house was disposed of, she moved to Galanta where she died a few years ago. It is thanks to her letters that I have a fair amount of information about the family and also several photos. She was an attractive, intelligent person endowed with a sharp humour, often sarcastic. She was well read, kind and loved us children without spoiling us. Micka was, I believe, mother's best friend and great support during the troubled times of the divorce and later again after Jean and I left for England. I still see them sitting on an afternoon over a cup of tea, embroidering, sewing and chatting in the smaller

sitting room which also served as mother's bedroom in our second flat in Bratislava. In a sense, Leslie is . . . like a cousin of mine.

On the occasion that I met my great-aunt Irén in Budapest, I also met my great-grandmother Roza, as I mentioned above. She still had a good head of hair which revealed that it must have been reddish, though it was rather grey. She was frail and pale and wore a black dress. She appeared to be much interested in life around her, talked well and presumably was as pleased to see me as I was happy to meet her.

GRANDPARENTS' HOME

Their house was in Hlohovec, in the centre of my triangle. It was No 35 in Štefanik Square, on a corner with the road from Madunice which ascended here steeply to the square. The house was on two levels. From the main entrance from the square one entered a lobby on the ground floor. In a sense this was the second floor because grandfather's office was entered from the road below, also a ground floor. In the office sat usually his plump secretary who operated a heavy Remington typewriter. I was allowed to belabour this machine sometimes. There were rows of dusty files and the office smelled a bit musty. A spiral staircase led up to the residential part above.

Here were several large rooms with heavy Victorian-type furniture and heavy curtains. The general impression was one of semi-darkness. Grandfather's joy was the totally enclosed and partly paved patio garden. Here were roses and shrubs and a large number of potted geraniums in the summer. Grandfather was an expert in geraniums and showed them rapturously to me and anyone else interested. Here was also a table and I remember having had some meals there. A corner of this patio is seen in exhibit 13, taken in 1902 when mother was 9, Boris, sitting in the middle, was 4 and István 1 year old. Mother looks serious, Boris displays her characteristic Mona Lisa smile.

In the centre of the square was a large church of simple and undistinguished design but pleasing in its overall appearance. See exhibit 14. On the square and the road next to the house there was a constant noise from creaking axles of farm wagons, often drawn by oxen, of horses' hooves, from motor cars and the occasional bus rattling and chugging up the steep road.



13. In the grandparents patio. Mother is on the right, 9, Boris in the middle, 4 and István, 1, on the lap. Taken in 1902.



14. The church in Hlohovec, opposite grandparents's house. Post-war card from George and Katherine Polgar and Micka.

On market days other noises mingled with these such as the cries of the stallholders, the squeaking of piglets and the yapping of dogs. It was the bustle and hustle of any busy market. On summer days dust pervaded the air and even found its way into the house.

Apart from the Madunice road, two or three other roads radiated from the square, one leading to Nitra and one to Fornoszeg, where my paternal grandfather lived and is buried. Two or three houses away from my grandparents' house was an ironmonger's shop belonging to a relative of my father's. The proprietor was called Nagel which appropriately means nail in German (see family tree).

The location for a lawyer's office was ideal. Peasants could drop in readily on market days and on such occasions a small queue formed outside the office door. For grandmother it must have been something of a come-down after her splendid, quiet parental house in the rolling country side. The patio of their house was, however, a tranquil oasis, cut off from the noise and dust of the town. Grandmother was very religious, and had the advantage living a few steps away from the church, ^{she} must have been appreciated this, but Grandfather once complained to me of the frequent ear shattering peals of the church bells which invaded his peace.

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I like to think that my mother and her siblings spent some wonderful holidays in the big house in Porro Encs. How happy they must have been roaming in the big park, going for picnics, playing and enjoying the fresh air and sunshine, picking flowers by the river and arranging them into posies and perhaps bathing in the Hernad river. Mother was particularly fond of daisies, the big cultivated variety called marguerites.