

MY CHILDHOOD

By
Agi LINHARDT

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I was born in 1931 in Budapest; my father's name was Miklos Breuer, my mother's name was Cecilia Fischmann. I was their first child, born barely nine months after their wedding. They named me 'Agnes Victoria Breuer', nicknamed 'Agi'. My father worked as a clerk in the Export Department of a large textile manufacturer called Goldberger. My mother was a talented seamstress.

We lived in Obuda, a working class suburb of Budapest. I have only shadowy recollections of the small building in which we lived and an amphitheatre and a Roman ruin nearby. After my father transferred to the city we soon moved to a third floor apartment of a building on Karoly Boulevard 5 which was in the center of Budapest. I can recall my parents' twin beds, two armoires, night stands, my crib in one corner and my mother's Singer sewing machine in the other and a dressing table. The bedroom set was a wedding present from my Uncle Adi, my mother's brother. There was a living room, kitchen, bathroom and a small maid's room, and the building had an elevator. There was a grocery store on the ground floor in the courtyard and we used to lower a basket with a list of the food items we needed. The grocer would fill the order and we would pull up the replenished basket.

One of my earliest accomplishments was that I memorized the tale of "The Three Little Pigs". Every night I asked my father to read me this story. Poor Miklos, bored to tears by repetition, tried to skip pages and the game was that I was on full alert when he was slacking off on the job and always caught him!

Around the same time we went to Subotica (Yugoslavia) to stay at a spa. I was bitten on the upper thigh by a dog and my Uncle Laszlo rushed me to the doctor sitting me upon his bicycle handles. Even after I was properly administered to I was still inconsolable. In an attempt to bribe me Uncle Laszlo bought me a sweet drink. Ha! Then he tried another avenue of opportunity; entertainment. He said, "Hoppa!" and let go of his glass, recapturing it in the same moment. To show Uncle that I was a good sport, I said, "Hoppa!" and let go of my glass. It crashed to the floor spilling pink liquid all over the place. The usual big fuss followed--it was not my fault that Uncle Laszlo was not too tightly wrapped. Imagine teaching a child to behave foolishly!

I have only a few memories of that time during which we lived in that apartment. In Hungary Saint Nicholas Day was a holiday called Mikulas. The children put their shoes in the window expecting Santa Claus (Mikulas) to fill the shoes with sweets. The day was a holiday because the head of the government was Miklos Horthy, and this was his 'name' day. Since my father's name was also Miklos, he used to tell me that the day was a holiday in his honor and as he was my hero, I believed him wholeheartedly. On this day I was up at the crack of dawn and was never disappointed. My laced shoes were always filled with goodies: a small chocolate Santa Claus in red foil, a boot in yellow foil, colorful candies. Even though we were observant Jews, we still celebrated this Christian holiday.

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When I was three or four years old I was hospitalized with scarlet fever. The older children on the ward used to amuse themselves by hitting the metal side panels of their beds while yelling,

"The wolf is coming! The wolf is coming!" They were successful at frightening me and I cried until the sister (nurse) came and restored order. My scarlet fever was further complicated with an ear infection and since this was all before penicillin, the ear had to be drained for months. Even today, my Eustachian tube is ready to pop and gurgle at the slightest provocation.

I always threw a tantrum whenever my parents tried to go out in the evening for a few hours and leave me with the maid. Finally they came up with a solution. All our shoes were kept in the night stands and I had a passion for shining shoes. On the evenings when my mother and father were off to the movies, out came the shoes, the polish and the brushes. I became so involved with my shoe shining project; I did not even notice my parents slipping out of the door. But soon enough I discovered the truth and was not too happy about it.

When I was about four years old we moved to Tobacco Street 16-18 and I would spend the next fifteen years of my life living in an apartment on the mezzanine. My father arranged the move and he was very proud of the fact that not even a glass was broken by the movers. Meanwhile my mother and I took a vacation in a spa maintained by my father's employer. I have always found this puzzling. One would expect the lady of the house to stay actively involved in the moving of the household.

I remember walking to our new apartment, my parents holding my hands on both sides. I was very excited. The entrance hall led to the living room called the salon and to the bathroom and W.C. (water closet) on the other side. The second room was my parent's bedroom with my crib, later a divan at the foot of their beds. A third, smaller room was the sewing room where my mother created fine lingerie for her customers.

One of my father's sisters, Kato, lived with us and she made girdles and bras for the same ladies who employed my mother. The maid's room, kitchen and pantry completed the apartment which I thought to be magnificent.

My father used to come home for lunch which was the main meal of the day. He had weekly streetcar passes which had to be date punched by the conductor at the beginning of the journey. This pass was valid for just an hour. I remember my father got hold of one of those punchers and always gave himself plenty of time to come home, enjoy a three course meal, a cigarette, maybe a short nap and then complete the return journey to his office.

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In the afternoon, I would go down to the front of our apartment building and wait for him to return from work. My father often bought me presents, a bar of chocolate or large pieces of textile samples. My mother made dresses for me out of these cloth samples. I was a very well dressed little girl. I remember red and white checked pajamas; I loved them and wanted to wear them all day long.

My mother was less affectionate to me than my father. She seemed burdened by her work and the running of her household. She was not a happy woman. Her work was for demanding customers. Her housework was for a husband and demanding child.

On Sundays, Miklos often took me on outings. We went to the zoo, to the King's Palace, where the 'other' Miklos, Head of the State, Miklos Horthy, waved to us from the window. Miklos Horthy it will be remembered went by the title of Admiral although Hungary had no seaport since World War I.

Miklos, my father, loved to tell me fantastic stories. There was a long tunnel next to a bridge over the Danube. Miklos told me that they pushed the bridge under the tunnel when it rained. And I, of course, believed him.

I had endless conversations with my father and always started every sentence with "Why?" Once after fielding my barrage of why's for a couple of hours, Miklos made me an offer.

"If you don't ask 'why' for five minutes, I'll give you a pengo (Hungarian unit of money). After thinking this over for a few seconds I started out with a "why...."

My father and I often went to the river Danube to feed the fish. Here the air was fresh and invigorating breeze blew from the river. He took me to the circus, to the movies and fed me wickedly delicious pastry. We went weekly to the lending library to exchange his books—he read mysteries only. We visited the Amusement Park and the various grassy parks of the city where we watched the monkeys riding bicycles and performing to the tune of the hurdy-gurdy. We sampled the thermal swimming pools and hiked the nearby mountains. I was a lucky girl; Miklos liked me and enjoyed having me around. He was my father and he loved me.

When I was four years old and the time had come for me to choose a profession, I told my parents that I was going to be a doctor. They were overjoyed by the news and I was very pleased with myself. A little later in the day the doorbell rang. The maid went to answer and she came back to announce "A man with a broken leg is at the front door and wants to see Doctor Agi." I was under the table in a flash, hiding behind the table cloth and I could not be coaxed out for some time. That is why I never became a doctor of medicine.

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Budapest was a beautiful city during my childhood. It is actually two cities, Buda and Pest divided by the Danube River and reunited by seven graceful bridges. There is a wonderful view from the Gellert Hill topped by an old fortress from where one can see Pest, the more modern half of the city populated by a forest of beautiful buildings and many parks. In the middle of the River you can see three spectacular islands.

The Buda side encompasses a number of hills and low mountains blended in with the historical buildings and contemporary villas. This was the more elegant part of the city. Castle Hill with the King's Palace and the picturesque Fisherman's Bastion are the oldest parts adjoining the 13th century Coronation Church.

All these locations were very much part of my outings with my father as was the huge Town Park with its' amusement park, circus and zoo. Sometimes we went to the Corso, a favorite strolling place for the natives, the line of cafes and outdoor terraces filled with animated men and women sipping their espressos. Everybody was dressed in their latest finery.

The Hungarian Parliament is housed in a magnificent building skirting the River--I do not remember ever being inside as it was too majestic, too unapproachable.

When I was ten years old I took my parents' beautiful lingerie creations to one of the stores called Towne Shoppe and landed them as a customer for my parents merchandise line. The managers were impressed by my pint size and I basked in the attention.

There was no bigger treat for a hot Sunday afternoon than to embark upon the Sofia River Boat for a couple of hours of cruising and enjoying the cool breeze blowing up from the River. We ate ice cream and watched the couples dance along to the mellow jazz music. I could not wait to grow up and be one of them.

The best pastry shop was Gerbaud, an oasis of old fashioned charm offering an unparalleled selection of pastries, chestnut pure topped with whipped cream and cognac.

Most of these activities took place on Sundays. Usually my mother did not join us. Instead she stayed home to produce, with the assistance of her maid, a wonderful noon meal.

Hanukkah is the Jewish holiday when the head of the household is supposed to light the colorful candles every night for eight days. My father had a relaxed attitude toward religion and one night I was sent repeatedly to fetch him so that he will light our candles, but when I found him he said, "Take my photograph instead of me." This kind of levity did not play well with my mother who hailed from a strict orthodox home.

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Every summer we visited my father's parents, Ferenc and Amalia (Mali) Breuer in Újfehértó (New White Lake). The village was about 300 kilometers from Budapest, but in those days it took a whole day to get there by train. I loved to visit there. I was spoiled by my grandparents and by my aunts and uncles and I was treated like a sophisticated city girl by my friends and cousins. I was left with my grandparents when I was as young as two or three years old. Újfehértó was my Camelot. I spent three months of every summer there as well as Christmas vacation too.

I remember everything: how the house was furnished; one room had heavy, carved marble topped furniture, two large mirrors, and a plush divan in a Turkish pattern. This room was used only to receive visitors, and it smelled of apples stored in the breakfront. The middle room had modern, lightweight white furniture. It had been the room of my Grandparents' youngest daughter before she left home. The third room, my grandparents' bedroom, was the center of all activities. It had a beautiful honey-colored tile hearth, my grandfather's roll top desk, and a large bowl with a pitcher for washing up. There was an adjoining bathroom but there was no running water in my grandparents' house. The tin bathtub was used to store walnuts.

The kitchen was magical. It always smelled wonderful with great works of culinary art constantly under construction. I can almost taste my grandmother's spicy cholent, goose liver, sweet and sour stuffed cabbage, roasted duck and tart gooseberry sauce. She baked apple strudels and cheese cakes, beigli with poppy seeds, apple torts and cookies made with honey with a half walnut sitting on top in a thumbprint. All the pastries were generously swathed in deliciously smelling vanilla powder

Friday afternoons I used to take the cholent (a spicy bean dish) to the baker who would keep it overnight in the hot oven. Then at noon on Saturday I was sent, along with the other Jewish children to get the cholent with the lid of the ceramic pot secured with brown wrapping paper tied on with twine and our name "Breuer" written on it. There was always an "opening ceremony". Did the cholent come out "right"? It was delicious every time, sometimes crispy and sometimes soupy. Today, making cholent is one of my better culinary efforts.

I can visualize my grandmother's garden. Her lovely pastel roses, the kitchen garden with a fragrant olive tree in one corner, raspberry bushes in the other. A plum tree sat in the back and a dozen sunflowers. Everybody loved to crack roasted sunflower seeds. There was also a vegetable garden, green beans threaded carefully on narrow sticks, lush tomatoes hung heavily on the vines, and I was often digging for carrots, radishes and tender green onions. In the corner of the poultry yard was a tin drum which was put out to capture the rain that fell from the roof. We used the soft rain water to wash our hair in. We carried the water in buckets over from the neighbor's well to keep the garden fresh and the drinking water had to be fetched from a well one block away. I can still see my grandmother Mali puttering about in her outdoor domain.

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My grandfather Ferenc was a different story. He was tall and walked erect with the help of a walking stick. His black hat was on straight and his expression always stern. He was a taciturn man with a cigar. He was only friendly with his grandchildren. According to family lore when Ferenc got mad at one of his sons, he would not talk to the offender for years thereafter.

My grandfather went to the United States for a few years. When he returned from America he married Mali and received a couple of flour mills as dowry. A few years later the mills burned down and since they had not been insured, the fire destroyed their livelihood. While the fire raged on my grandmother was in the middle of giving birth to one of their seven children. What they lived on after the mills perished is a mystery.

I remember my grandfather was the local gasoline distributor. He kept his stash in tin barrels in a fenced lot. This was a one car village and even that one car was owned by my uncle Sanyi. He used the car to ferry the nobility of the village to the county seat.

My grandparents rented out burlap sacks to the peasants at harvest time, not exactly a big moneymaking undertaking. My brother, George, was a great help folding and sorting the sacks. Another time they tried to raise rabbits in the shed and sold their fur for angora yarn. The rabbits had the nasty habit of eating their small ones. The shed was stinking and cleaning the cages wasn't my favorite activity. I ended up with a couple of good looking angora sweaters, but the angora farm petered out never turning any profit.

Grandpa wasn't a great success in the business world, but they got by even though once in a while the pigeons from the roof ended up on the dining room table. They raised their own poultry and grew their own vegetables. There was always a young maid to fetch the water from the well and to wash up the dishes. On the Sabbath, she would do all the things religious Jews are not allowed to do; light the fire and flick the switch to turn on the electric light.

After eating his delicious lunch, often in the cool, green ivy covered gazebo, Ferenc took a nap and then was off to the club where he played cards with the local dignitaries, all the while sipping a glass of red wine. The "old man", as his children called him behind his back, liked his wine.

My grandfather often took the train to Budapest to visit us. He arrived with grandma's cookies, goose liver in fat and a demijohn of wine for medicinal purposes. I thought everybody's grandfather came equipped with a demijohn.

When I was visiting my grandparents in Újfehértó, my grandfather and I often went to the farmer's market to do the marketing and when the fair came to town, he took me to see the freaks and to sample the Turkish delight and pink cotton candy. I always took a

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turn on the Ferris wheel. My grandfather told me to stay away from the gypsies because they stole children. Poor gypsies, they had a terrible reputation.

I was told that my father's childhood toys were stored in the attic and I spent many hot and dusty days searching under the roof but I never found those toys. Fooled again! My uncles had a cruel habit of teasing us children.

Eva, my best country friend, lived next door. She had black hair, vivid, intelligent black eyes and a wondrous smile. Eva and I had many secrets and we shared them as we played away the lazy summer days. We would spend some of these afternoons in the blackberry tree in the front of Eva's house. We would turn up at the end of the day purple from head to toe. We also played husband and wife and I remember Eva asked me "which is better, to have a husband or a lover or both?" We were ten years old at the time.

Once we decided to put on a play using bedspreads and such as our props. We duly charged my grandparents and Eva's family for the tickets to see our performance. The proceeds were supposed to go to the poor children but instead we bought hard candies and ate them all.

I had another good friend in Újfehértó. She was my second cousin named the same as I was; Agi Breuer. She died in a concentration camp and often, when I screwed up my life, I would think the other Agi would do it right and she should be alive and I should be dead. I found out that this is called survivor's guilt. I do not feel this way any longer since I know I was never in charge of how long I am going to live.

My grandmother Mali was a spiritual woman. On Friday evenings, in preparation for the Sabbath, she put a scarf over her head, lit the candles, covered her face, said her prayer, "Boruch ato Adonaj..." and had a good, long talk with her God. I could see that she felt a lot better after this ritual. Mali was wonderful and all her seven children and their spouses adored and cherished her. During the thirteen years which I was privileged to be her granddaughter, I received only love and gentle good humor from her.

We went to the Mikvah (religious cleaning bath) together. We visited her sisters. We took a horse drawn carriage ride to the orchard to pick ripe grapes and other fruits to make jam. Sometimes we strolled to the ice cream parlor or to the movies. Once she took my brother, George, to the Wonder Rabbi to receive a special blessing to ask God to cure his asthma.

I loved to help my grandmother in the kitchen and she always found plenty for me to do, shelling peas, smashing cubes of sugar into powder in the brilliantly polished brass mortar. I picked raspberries from their thorny nests, carved the pits out of purple plums,

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smashed walnuts and picked them clean from their shells—this always left my fingers stained black, I liked to grind the poppy seeds, and scrape the carrots.

My favorite pastime was playing with my grandmother's dough, cutting cookies in shapes of animals, houses, imaginary figures and making pretzels. I loved to make "baratfule" (friar's ear). The pasta is rolled thin then folded in half with a small dab of plum or apricot jam in between in the middle of squares. It is then cut into cubes and cooked in simmering, salted water. The cubes are drained after cooking and rolled in bread crumbs browned in fat.

Unfortunately I was not crazy about all the jobs assigned to me. My grandparents kept a kosher kitchen and according to dietary laws all poultry had to be killed by the shochet (a professional chicken-neck cutter with religious credentials). After the killing was completed all the birds were plunged into boiling water so that their carcasses could be plucked clean of feathers. What a job that was! Finally the bird was singed so it would be perfectly clean. I was a Jewish housewife in training. Alas, I have to admit, nothing tastes better than tender chicken soup with noodles and boiled chicken meat with tomato sauce on a Friday night.

In the evenings I was often sent to fetch milk for the family. This was a somewhat dangerous assignment as the cows were coming home from the pasture at the same time and they were a lot bigger than I was. I had to be very careful to avoid collisions and tried not to spill too much of the hard-earned milk from my red glazed container. I also had plenty of run-ins with geese since those white birds can be pretty snippy and will pursue you with speed. An old woman came by everyday to force corn down their gullets so they would grow big and fat. I could see that the geese did not like this very much and maybe that is why they were so nasty.

Sometimes I was sent to the cellar for the vegetables stored in cool, packed sand or for wine resting in its cask. It was a dark, scary and musty place holding many unknown terrors and I was in and out of there in a flash.

When I was visiting in Újfehértó I did not have the need to escape into the pages of my books as I did at home. My life with my grandparents was too interesting and too much fun. I was busy having my own real adventures so I did not have to seek out ones to read about.

Across the street from my grandparents lived a boy who actually managed to poke one of his eyes out with a pair of scissors. Since I had been warned all my life to be careful with scissors I found it incredible that such accidents actually happened I felt sorry for the unfortunate boy. Eventually he was killed in the Holocaust.

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I loved the High Holidays at Újfehértó. The week before was heavy with culinary planning, careful shopping and the big decision of which chicken was going to be sacrificed for our dinner table. Then came days of cooking and baking. This was a time before refrigerators so keeping the food from spoiling required strategy. We had one well-to-do neighbor who had an ice house, a cellar filled with ice during the winter so that it would stay cool for a long time while the ice melted. Sometimes we stored some of our prepared dishes there. Another neighbor had a deep well and we lowered watermelons and the wine in a bucket and cooled it to perfection. Right before the holiday my grandparents' home was filled with tantalizing smells. The celebration started the night before with a festive dinner laid out on a snow white tablecloth. After dinner we strolled to the shul (temple) for the religious observance.

Next morning after a leisurely breakfast we dressed up in our best finery and went back to temple. I grew bored quickly since all the praying was in Hebrew and I could not understand very much. I thought it was stupid that God had to be addressed in this difficult language. HE was so unapproachable. I soon slipped out to play with my friends in the courtyard while still trying to keep my dress clean. Even at that young age we noticed the boys and they noticed us. Once we were chased by Gabor, my second cousin, until we locked ourselves into a smelly outhouse. We stayed there a long time until Gabor finally gave up his vigil and left.

We had a delicious mid-day meal--often carp in aspic with challa-- followed by a nap and then a return to the synagogue to escort out the Sabbath. Eating played a large part during our holidays but the rhythm of the day was filled with serenity. All forms of work were forbidden on the Sabbath so one was forced into a meditative state. We did not have to take lessons in meditation or grind our teeth to put in twenty minutes of chanting a day.

I usually prayed halfheartedly and not for long but after my father was drafted in to Forced Labor, I prayed ardently asking God to bring him back safely and in exchange I promised to be a good girl. I could not feel close to God but I do not think one was supposed to. He was God sitting on a throne with his long beard flowing just like he was pictured in the illustrations of old-fashioned children's books; busy meting out punishments and accepting accolades.

The way I saw it, I had competition for my grandparents' affection; my cousin Elvira. She was about the same age as I and she had spent years living with Ferenc and Mali while her somewhat flaky parents lived in Italy. Elvira's father, my Uncle Erno, used to import dancing girls to Milan. I guess he was an impresario. I remember watching these ladies rehearse their tap-dancing in short red satin and black tulle costumes. It was not exactly respectable but it was wickedly glamorous to me. Uncle Erno used to send us bananas in brown envelopes from Italy. Although they arrived a bit squashy, they were very aromatic.

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What really bugged me about Elvira was that she always received these incredibly wonderful report cards and I was deeply suspicious that these came about because the principal of the school was a close friend and neighbor to my grandparents. I knew a good deal more than Elvira yet I was often in hot water about my poor grades. When Elvira eventually went to school in Budapest, she promptly sank to the bottom of her classes so I had been right on the nose with my distrust. Uncle Erno died in the War and Elvira emigrated to Israel but she never reconciled herself to her father's death. I visited her when I was in Israel and we keep in touch, lightly.

Another of the colorful characters of my childhood was my Uncle Sanyi (Sandor). He was not only the proud owner of the only automobile in the village, with which he made his living mobilizing the local dignitaries, but he also ran the movie projector in the only movie theater in the village. As his niece, I was awarded the privilege of going to the movies as much as I wanted to, often taking a friend with me.

Sanyi was a good looking man and his pride and joy was his full-length leather coat. He had his eye on the prettiest Jewish girl in Újfehértó but the relationship never progressed beyond flirtation because the beautiful girl, alas, had no dowry. Uncle Sanyi thought that he, with his fine qualities and possessions, deserved a good sized dowry so eventually he courted and married a young woman from a nearby town who brought into the marriage two roomfuls of the latest style furniture. Uncle Sanyi once spied me holding hands with a boy and gave me a talking to I still remember. I was only eleven years old at the time and I swore our romance never progressed further than holding hands but Sandor was worried about my reputation.

I had one more Uncle, Laszlo, who suffered from asthma and living in a dusty little village like Újfehértó rendered him an invalid. He lived at home with my Grandparents and I have never known him to work. His opportunities were limited but his six siblings managed to eke out a livelihood. Poor Laszlo evoked his father's wrath by the simple fact of his aimless existence yet at the same time, my Grandmother tried to protect her weak son. Laszlo was a loving and gentle man, always ready to spend time with his nieces but he also enjoyed hanging out with his pinko friends shooting the breeze about politics and handing out free legal advice to the peasants. Never mind that he was not a lawyer.

During my last visit to Újfehértó I accompanied my Grandmother to the shul (temple). Within this orthodox synagogue the women occupied the balcony hidden behind a curtain. Inexplicably I burst into tears in the middle of the services. I let forth huge sobs, gulping the air noisily while my Grandmother, alarmed and confused, tried to find out what was wrong with me. Finally I calmed down enough to speak. "My father is not coming back." I repeated over and over again. I fantasized that perhaps, this was the very moment he drew his final breath.

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My grandfather on my mother's side was Samuel Fischmann. He married Victoria Salzberger and they were very religious orthodox Jews. They lived in the northern part of Hungary and had four children, and my mother, Cecilia, was the next to the youngest. Victoria died suddenly perhaps of pneumonia and my mother, only seven years old at the time, was in the room when her mother expired. This experience affected Cecilia profoundly and she grieved the early loss of her mother all of her life. I was given the middle name Victoria after the grandmother I never met. I like the name Victoria a lot better than Agnes which sounds too tame.

Samuel quickly arranged a second marriage for himself to provide a mother for his four children. He married Gisela, a beautiful and vivacious woman half his age. She came from Újfehértó, the same village from which my father's family hailed. There is another connection and I will get to it yet.

As the story goes, smart and spirited Gisela was interested in a man outside of her faith. Her family owned and operated a pub at the railroad station so she had opportunities to meet many men. This romance so horrified her folks that they quickly married her off to my grandfather.

The marriage produced two very bright offspring Eva and Paul, but Samuel and Gisela did not get along and the household was fraught with dissent. My grandfather, Samuel, had trouble making a living. First he was a traveling salesman representing an Austrian chocolate factory. Later he opened a grocery store in Budapest. The store was located between two convents in an anti-Semitic neighborhood so it did not take him long to go broke. After that Samuel opened a haberdashery but unfortunately, that failed too.

Gisela helped to support the family by taking in sewing. They also let a room to help with expenses. Arguments constantly erupted about the lack of money. The four children, including my mother, from my grandfather's previous marriage gave their young stepmother a hard time. I heard a lot about their wicked stepmother from my mother and her siblings, but I liked and enjoyed Gisela and kept up a correspondence with her until years later, her vision failed and she was unable to write back to me.

When my mother was seventeen years old and an uncommonly pretty girl, she went to visit her step-mother's family in Újfehértó and met my handsome father, Miklos, whose family also lived there. They fell in love and a whirlwind courtship ensued complete with gypsy musicians surrounding my father as he stood under my mother's window serenading her with heartbreakingly sentimental music;

"Csak egy kislány van a világon." (There is one girl only in this world.) I was always jealous of this.

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It took them five years to get married because my father had to find a job in Budapest and my mother had an older sister, Sari, and according to custom, the older sister had to tie the knot first. During this long courtship, Miklos wrote to his beloved Cecilia every single day, talking to each other on the telephone whenever possible. Eventually my father got a job in Budapest at Goldberger's (with a little help from my grandfather's drinking companions) and the young lovers were able to see each other frequently.

Meanwhile my mother went to school to learn sewing and pattern making proving to be quite capable and talented. It was unusual even shameful for a middle-class girl to have a trade but it served her well throughout her life.

I think Cecilia enjoyed this period of her life and being courted with such ardor must have made her feel special. She was also anxious to get away from home because of the constant fighting going on between the members of her family. I was told many times my parents were star-crossed lovers and their marriage was a genuine love match. I have two photographs of Cecilia from this time and she is very lovely with dark hair and a heart shaped face, but ever so serious.

By the time I came along nine months after their wedding, the romance had settled down into a normal marriage. My mother could not cook and when she invited her stepmother for dinner, she opened a can of sardines. My father, who's family always believed in setting an excellent table, had a little trouble with Cecilia's first culinary efforts but she learned mercifully quickly.

My involvement with my mother's side of my family was limited although they lived close by. There was just too much strife going on between our households. I remember going to my grandparents', Samuel and Gisela's apartment to celebrate Passover. My grandfather sat at the end of the table in a white nightgown, his armchair lined with pillows.

This holiday, of course, celebrates the rescue of the Jews by God leading them out of Egypt, and is very colorful and full of symbolism. The youngest child at the table asks four questions and the patriarch, who leads the Seder, tells the story by answering the questions.

At the beginning of the evening my grandfather hid a piece of matzo folded in a napkin (afhikoimen) and the children hunted for it throughout the evening. The child who found it was supposed to get a present, something he or she wished for. I do not remember ever getting anything from him; I thought it was a sham. We left a glass of wine for the prophet Elijah who would come during the night and drink it. I imagined Elijah going from home to home drinking up all his wine. Fifty years later I could have said "Nice going Elijah."

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My grandfather, Samuel, started to show signs of decline, perhaps from Alzheimer's, when he was only in his sixties. He was hospitalized in a mental hospital for a while and I remember he was always agitated, talking incessantly about business associates and family members cheating him and stealing from him. His son Adi and my father (his son-in-law) were his favorite targets.

Samuel and Gisela survived the War but had lost their son Paul in Mauthausen, the concentration camp, and in 1948, they moved to Israel where my Aunt Eva lived. My grandfather lived on into his nineties and Gisela took very good care of him as she took her marriage vows seriously.

Once I asked my Uncle Paul, who was very scholarly, "if God is in charge of everything, how come bad things are happening to good people. Why are there bad people?" If God is so powerful, He could solve a lot of problems for the living. I thought. I do not remember what his answer was but he tried to give me one.

My life during my first seven years was good. I had golden curls, was friendly, and talkative. My father's sisters and brothers often visited us for long periods of time, and my aunt Kato lived with us for years. She gave me a lot of attention and was like a loving mother to me.

I remember coming home from school on my seventh birthday and catching a peek of Aunt Kato as she hurriedly finished the hand stitched outfit for a beautiful porcelain doll with blond hair and long eyelashes and blue eyes which could be closed. This is the only doll I remember having as a child.

I once went to a fancy movie theater with my mother and Aunt Kato. Shirley Temple was tap dancing and these two ugly looking men were interfering with her vivacious performance. Rushing to her rescue I yelled out, "If you two don't leave her alone, I am going to give you a swift kick in the ass!" In an elegant theater, no less.

The audience cheered me but my mother scolded me for using such bad language. Aunt Kato thought that Shirley could take care of herself. Aunt Kato was attractive and bright. She had a dashing boyfriend who took her to balls where she wore beautiful gowns she had made herself. One was red velvet with zillions of tiny buttons on front and the other was white satin with rhinestones and a trail. They also went to nightclubs where the dance floor slowly turned in a circle, just like in the movies! Alas, the dashing boyfriend had to marry someone with money and so did Aunt Kato. She now lives in Toronto and I talk to her often, she is my favorite Aunt.

All the Breuer girls were attractive, vivacious and capable but they shared the handicap of not having a dowry. Back in that era, this was a tremendous obstacle in achieving a good marriage. If they wanted to marry a businessman or a professional of some

MY CHILDHOOD

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respectful note, a dowry was expected. I feel for the three girls; Julia, Kato and Boske (Elizabeth) because none of the three married for love. The oldest, Julia, married an upholsterer in Milan. He was a good-hearted man but uneducated and he had to work very hard just to eke out a decent living. Eventually they ended up in Los Angeles and were very decent to my family when we arrived as refugees.

Aunt Kato married a man who owned a grocery store and had a dragon-like mother. Kato was widowed in the Holocaust, emigrated to Toronto and remarried a man whom she loved very much.

Boske, the youngest, married a much older man, again not for love but because the clock was ticking and it was time to get married. After the War, they all ended up in Toronto so at least the sisters had each other. None of these marriages ended in divorce so perhaps they worked, after all.

Some of our maids were with us for years and I recall them being loving and nurturing but I don't remember my mother showing affection or enjoying the time she spent with me.