

A reluctantly transferred Hungarian heritage

First let me express my gratitude for being invited to this very interesting conference. I only speak Hungarian with difficulty. But I do understand the spoken language well, most of what you say I do understand.

Allow me to emphasize that I learnt this language, the mother tongue of my mother, in spite of the fact that she used to tell me and my brothers: “do not bother to learn Hungarian, it would be of no use for you”.

18 As you may guess I am the daughter of Holocaust survivors, both of Hungarian origin. Well, as you are well aware of, the term *Hungarian origin* may be interpreted in different ways. Is it enough to say that you were born in a Hungarian speaking region to be labelled as of Hungarian origin? This question gives us some reasons for carefulness when trying to find more exact figures about how many of the survivors who came to Sweden were of Hungarian nationality. According to Professor Carl-Henrik Carlsson at Uppsala University the figure of the total amount of survivors that came to Sweden in the main Red Cross actions in 1945 is approximately 30 000. Out of these 30 000, barely half of the individuals were Jews, 11–13 000, Holocaust survivors.

About half of the Jewish survivors came from Poland. About 1800 came from Czechoslovakia, and about 1600 stated that they came from Hungary. Furthermore about 1300 stated they are from Romania. So, my guess is that quite a number of the refugees from both Czechoslovakia as well as from Romania were Hungarian speaking persons.

However, I would like to thank Dr András Szécsényi, the previous speaker,² from whom I just learnt that the number of survivors taken by the Red Cross to Sweden from Bergen-Belsen was 7000, for me this is a new figure in this context.

As a child I thought the war took place ages ago, long before I was born. Eventually I realized that the war ended only eight years before my birth. My eldest brother was born three years after the war and my second brother four years after the end of the war. My mother was 26 and highly pregnant with her first child when entering her new homeland, Sweden.

My mother spent some five years before the war in Budapest and the last year with a false identity, her false name was Anna Kovacs. Her real name was Channa Braun.

1 * Former Deputy Head of the Swedish IHRA-delegation.

2 The return dilemmas, possibilities and return routes of Hungarian Jews deported to Bergen-Belsen after liberation.

Soon after the end of the war, which for my mother meant, after the Russian army had entered Budapest, she found out that one of her cousins and his very good friend were also in Budapest and the three of them found an apartment in a bombed building where they moved in and stayed together the three of them. My mother and the friend of her cousin fell in love and became a couple. But my mother was already determined not to stay in Hungary while the young man, her boyfriend, believed that the Hungarian future would become better under the new socialist ruling. My mother was not in principle against the idea of a socialist system but *for her* staying in Hungary was out of question.

She left Budapest and went to her little hometown Beled, in the Győr-Sopron County in western Hungary to see if anyone of her family would turn up. When back in Beled she met with her father who had survived the forced labour service (*munkaszolgálat*). They of course thought that they were the only survivors of their family. I think that they spent a couple of months in the town and hereafter they decided to go on to Germany.

They ended up in Windsheim, in Bavaria, where there was a huge camp for displaced persons. 11 km from the main camp there was a so-called kibbutz established. My mother joined this kibbutz which contained of Zionist religious young people. Every *shabbes*, Friday-Saturday, they cooked festive meals and many other youngsters from the area who did not belong to the kibbutz came and joined them for these meals. This is how my mother met my father and they quite soon married in this place, in this kibbutz, in Windsheim.

My father was from Beregszász, which today belongs to Ukraine. But as you know it once belonged to the Austrian-Hungarian empire. And still today it is a Hungarian speaking area. So, the mother tongue of my father was Hungarian.

My father, his Jewish name was Moshe, his name in the passport was Moritz. He was born in 1913. He first made the regular army service in the Czechoslovak army. After he had finished this army service the Hungarian state occupied this part of Czechoslovakia and my father had to do another army service also for the Hungarian state. He used to tell us that this was how he learnt the difference between a democratic system and a non-democratic system. During his army service for the Hungarian state this difference became obvious to him. Soon after he had finished this military service, he was forced to go to *munkaszolgálat* (forced labour).

I remember my father as a very non neurotic and cheerful, happy, person.

But as a child I almost every night heard my father's strange sounds of yelling. My mother used to wake him up and said: *Moshe wake up, you are dreaming*. He was all wet and had to get up to change his pyjama. Only later I understood that these yellings and night mares were caused by his dreams based on his experience during the Holocaust. But as a child I was so used to it, I thought that this is something that fathers do. Daytime, as I said, my father was a very lively person with a mostly good mood.

Soon after their marriage my parents found out that my mother's two sisters had also survived and that they had been brought by the Red Cross to Sweden from Bergen-Belsen. This is why my parents together with my grandfather decided to go to Sweden.

From Germany they had to apply for a visa to enter Sweden. My mother received a visa and her father got a visa. But my father, the husband of my mother, did not receive a visa to enter Sweden. The Swedes claimed that only the two, the sister and the father, are close relatives to the two sisters who were brought to Sweden.

By this time my mother was already pregnant and my grandfather, said to his daughter: *"Look you are pregnant, you have to travel with your husband. I will give him my visa"*. And so, he did. My father was 15 years younger than his father-in-law and they were not at all looking alike. But it worked and he entered Sweden together with his wife – with a false visa.

They of course did not know for how long they would stay in Sweden. They just made the way to Sweden for the purpose to reunite with the two surviving sisters. Eventually my grandfather also made his way to Sweden to join his daughters.

My mother was a Zionist and dreamt about going to Israel. My father's dreams were more directed towards the US. But they ended up in Sweden. This was the start of the new life in Sweden.



This picture of my family was made in 1957. My parents had by then lived in Sweden for 10 years.

My parents spoke Hungarian between themselves. However, they always told me and my brothers: *“Do not bother to learn Hungarian”*. But I was a terribly curious child, I loved to listen to my mother’s telephone conversations in Hungarian and when there were Hungarian speaking guests in our home, I listened carefully to what was said. This in combination with the fact that a Hungarian elderly Jewish lady, Frida Néni, looked after me afternoons for a couple of years, contributed to my growing Hungarian skills.

I was maybe something like 15–16 years old when I once went on the subway together with my mother. Opposite our seats sat a young couple speaking Hungarian. After a while my mother turns to me and says, in Swedish: *“Let’s move, I cannot stand listening to them”*. When we had moved to another seat, I turned to my mother saying: *“I do not understand this, you talk Hungarian all the time, with your sisters and with many of your friends”*. Her answer was shortly: *“That is something else”*.

My mother once told me that for her the war ended much later than 1945. She came to Sweden and knew no Swedish. Very soon she gave birth to her first child in a smaller town hospital where they could nothing but Swedish. Her younger sister who had been very young when she entered Auschwitz was ill and in bad shape. And her father, my grandfather, also fell ill soon after he got to Sweden and she took care of them both together with her two little children.

My father learnt Swedish quite soon since he started to work. He was a glazier and could find work very soon. After a few years he started his own business where also my mother eventually started to work and their economic situation became better and soon even fairly good.

13 years after their arrival in Sweden they could afford buying their own house, a villa, in a nice area of Stockholm.

Most of their friends, I would say, 80–90 %, were also survivors of the Holocaust.

So, what was my parent’s identity? Did they ever become Swedes?

They both learnt the Swedish language well even though one could hear the Hungarian accent. My mother loved reading books, mostly in Swedish and became well oriented in Swedish literature.

But did they call themselves Swedes? The answer is no.

Did they consider themselves as Hungarians? Also, to this question the answer is no.

But the truth is that in a way they very much remained being Hungarians. They spoke Hungarian to each other and to many of their friends. My father for many years had a subscription of the weekly Hungarian-Jewish magazine, *Új Kelet*. My mother, who was the more intellectual of the two, could recite many pieces of Hungarian poetry. Even though she read mostly Swedish books she also had some Hungarian books in her library, for some reason I remember one with the title *Endre Ady Versei*.

Most of the food that my mother served was Hungarian. I was brought up with paprikás csirke, palacsinta, túrós delkli, almás lepény, gulyás, töltött paprika and so on. She was by the way a great cook.

Non-of my parents ever spoke about the possibility of going back to their birthplaces where they grew up. I do remember that my father said that for him it was not possible to travel to the place where he had grown up since it was behind the iron wall and I cannot remember that we ever questioned this. However also Hungary was at this time behind the iron wall. My parents had some Hungarian born friends who did go to Hungary for vacation. But this possibility was never suggested by my parents.

It lasted until 1974, when I was already in my twenties, until this became a realistic alternative. My parents offered me to join them on a trip and they said that I could wish wherever I want to go. So, I wished to go to Vienna and I also wished to go to Budapest. So, we went to Vienna for four days and from there by train to Budapest for three days. This was the first time that my mother was back in Budapest since she had left Hungary in 1945.

I was 20 years old and I did not ask her any questions about where she had lived during the 4–5 years that she had been living in Budapest. And she did not mention anything about it.

One evening during the days in Budapest we had an appointment with the man who had been my mother's boyfriend before she left Budapest in 45, we met him and his wife in a restaurant. This was in 1974, my mother was still a beautiful woman. I will never forget what he said when he saw her when we entered the restaurant. He said: "*Akkor egy szép lány voltál, most egy szép asszony vagy*" (*then you were a beautiful girl, now you are a beautiful woman*). Strangely enough, even though I was already twenty I had not until then reflected upon the fact that my mother was not only a mother, that she was also a woman.

I remember that we went to the Dohány utcai synagogue – which was beautiful even though it was in that time not yet refurbished. But this synagogue was certainly not the synagogue which my mother used to visit while she lived in Budapest. She was used to a more traditional praying order than the one in the Dohány utca which has the Neolog tradition. But she did not show me which synagogue that was the one she used to go to. And I did not ask.

While in Budapest during these three days we one evening walked through the city. Suddenly we passed an entry, a gate, to an older building. In this entry we could see two policemen who obviously had arrested a man. My mother became stiff and started to walk quickly. I asked her "*what is the matter?*". She said: "*nothing, just that seeing the policemen and the one they had caught in that entry of that building, gave me very bad feelings*". I think that I did understand that this had reminded her of difficult memories having to do with her final year in Budapest when she was hiding as Anna Kovács. *But I did not ask for any more details.*

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About 15 years later she did however go back to Budapest once again. But she never went back to Beled, her home-town.

I have been visiting Beled, even twice, but only after her passing away. I have also visited Beregszász. These visits were extremely meaningful for me – but they certainly left me with a million of questions which I have nobody to ask.

My parents both passed away at a quite young age. As you know, before the eighties the history of the Holocaust was still not so much a public issue or a topic of the general society. Even though the American film "*The Holocaust*" had been produced already in 1978 and the awareness of this history became a subject for an increasing number of scholars and so on. But I think that this did not really make an impact on my parents. For them the history of the Holocaust remained a private matter. I cannot remember that they ever used the term *the Holocaust*. They simply spoke about *the war*.

I am sure that they carried a kind of fury for what they had been subject to. They had been subject to Anti-Semitism; they had been subject to humiliation and persecution and several of their close beloved family members were brutally murdered and their homes were ruined.

And I believe that what was the most painful fact, was that all this happened while most of their non-Jewish neighbours looked on. The term *Nyilas (Arrow Cross men)* was something that caught my attention quite early in connection with my mother's very rare occasions of revealing memories of what she called the war. Sometimes she could mention something in connection with the Anti-Semitism that she experienced and add that this did not happen during the war, it happened before the war, when there were, as she said, *already bad times*.

My parents transferred a sentiment of ending up in Sweden *just by chance*. They always spoke about themselves, and also about their friends, who likewise were survivors, as *refugees*. They did not call themselves immigrants or newcomers or survivors, no they simply named themselves as refugees.

So where does this leave me, the child of Hungarian Holocaust survivors?

Well, I named this presentation "*A reluctantly transferred Hungarian heritage*". This heritage makes me in a way feel very familiar with Hungarian culture. But on the other hand, I also carry many of my parents' unspoken sentiments regarding being Hungarian. They could communicate events from their childhood which gave the impression that it was a happy childhood and with it came many descriptions of the environment in which they grew up. And this environment also contained neighbours and non-Jewish friends. But their experience as young adults, was obviously so painful that it forced them to distance themselves from much of their Hungarian heritage and also from most of the good memories of their childhood.

I myself, when in Budapest, I am fascinated by the sight of my mother's cakes in the window of every bakery and when in some restaurants I get extremely touched when I hear the music that my father loved, the real Hungarian Cigányzene, as he called it.

Some ten years ago, when in Budapest, I stood in front of the monument at the Freedom Square, in front of the statue of the Archangel Gabriel, symbolising Hungary while the eagle is threatening this, obviously innocent entity. The statue has the date 1944 attached to the eagle's ankle and the inscription says "*In memory of the victims*". I looked at it and it stood clear to me why my parent's emotions towards the Hungarian heritage was complicated. The message of this statue cannot be interpreted otherwise than what happened in Hungary in connection with the persecution of Jews and other victims is regarded as something that started with the Nazi occupation in 1944.

Looking at this official monument made me feel their frustration. The effect on me is the feeling of sorrow.