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Judit Kinszki

Personal details

Place of birth

Budapest
Hungary

Year of birth
1934
Place of death

Budapest
Hungary

Year of death
2025

Family History

"My father, Imre Kinszki, was brought up by his paternal grandfather and his wife, and was born in 1901. He grew up in the building where the newspaper had its offices. It was a large apartment, and my great-grandparents had a maid and a cook. They lived well – ‘bürgerlich,’ you could say about upper-middle-class German society – but they had no fortune stashed away, only a good salary to live off. My mother’s family was completely different. I can say that they were working class, real proletarians. My grandfather was a tailor, but later he worked for a

company that made uniforms.

Rifka Vostrel and her family in Split

Rifka Vostrel and her family in Split

1947

His job was to travel to different regiments throughout the empire, measure the soldiers, and then make their elegant dress uniforms. They chose the material and the style they wanted, he took their measurements, and when he had enough orders, he traveled back to Budapest. They had nine children. My mother was called Ilona Gardonyi. Her name was magyarized from Grunberger, possibly by my grandfather. My mother was born in 1899. She graduated from middle school, then a one-year commercial school, and she was a clerk, a shorthand typist."

"I think my parents met so that my mother got to where my father worked, to the Manufacturers' National Association, and within that to the Association of Textile Manufacturers. She worked in the same room as my father; she worked hard, and even worked overtime and took on everything. My father started throwing little paper airplanes onto her desk; this made her mad, and she told him off, saying, 'you stupid little kid.' But my father didn't stop. On one of the airplanes he wrote that he'd like to meet her. It was impossible not to love my father. He was so

sweet, tender-hearted, and gentle, and he was such a modest man. I don't think that it was an issue for my father to marry a Jewish woman, but it happened so. But they didn’t even have a wedding at the synagogue. They were married in 1925. The wedding was beautiful. They rented outfits from a costume store; my father was in a morning jacket, my mother wore a wonderful myrtle wreath. They recorded it on film. One of the highlights of my childhood was watching my parents’ wedding on a small film projector. I have no idea where the wedding was, but one can see on the film that they are going in an open car all the way down Rakoczi Street."

Growing Up

"My brother Gabor was born in 1926 and I was born in 1934. We lived in a three room apartment in a three-story apartment house with one open side and the sun shone on the courtyard all day long. When we were little children, we learned to walk there, splashed there in a little pot my mother put out for us, and we did our homework there when we were older. Down in the courtyard, all the children played together. That was great fun. We were the only Jews in the house, but it was no problem."

"I learned to play the piano, and played until the Jewish trouble came. My brother and I skated and swam in the ice-cold water. It was my brother’s task to teach me everything. He threw me into the middle of the pool and I somehow floundered out, then he threw me in again, and that’s how I slowly learned to swim. It went the same way with skating. He took me in the middle and left me there, I cried and just stood there for a while, then I toddled out somehow, he took me in again. Within an hour I skated happily."

"We attended school on Angol Street and Gabor was always a top student. When I got to school I was a Greek Catholic already. I was five years old [in 1939] when we converted. I didn’t have a Jewish identity. We observed Christmas and Easter. It was obligatory to go to church, one had to be there at the mass every Sunday; there was a church attendance certificate, which had to be stamped. When we had to wear a yellow star, there was no more school. The year ended very early. I couldn’t go to high school because of the anti-Jewish laws."

"My dad’s family was an absolutely liberal and assimilated family, with no Jewish religious activity of any kind. I never saw any candle-lighting at my dad’s family, nothing. In my mom’s family, however, they did some of these things. If you went

there on Friday, you could see my grandmother and the boys going to synagogue. As a child I always fell asleep when my father was listening to Hitler. In those times Jews had to give up their radios and my brother had to give up his bike. We had a little popular wireless set and another serious, rather large one. We gave them up."

During the War

"My mother and I were in the ghetto during the war. I have never been back to the house on Akacfa Street where the ghetto was. When I walk on that corner, I stop – to enter the yard where we stayed, where they separated us; the Arrow-Cross men were shouting that they would give us five minutes, and we heard the gunshots upstairs, because people were probably hiding there and they were shot dead on the spot. I can’t go in there."

"My father was in forced labor in Deva [today Romania] and Celldomolk. Then he was here in Budapest, in some kind of mill. He was such a skinny man, but he carried heavy sacks. But even in the labor brigade, they organized a newspaper. They created a reading circle. These people were all wearing white armbands [meaning that they were people of Jewish origin, but Christians]. In 1943 my brother was also drafted. In the ghetto we didn’t know anything about Auschwitz and what happened to those in forced labor service. It didn’t even occur to us that my father might not be alive any more. My mother and I went to the Keleti railroad station every day, and went up to everybody who got off and asked them."

"Once my mother found a man who had been in the same group, and he remembered my father. He said that their car had been unhooked and the train went on towards Germany. They got off somewhere and went on foot towards Sachsenhausen – this was a death march. We didn’t have news of my brother for a long time. Then my mother found a young man who had worked with my brother. He told us that when they arrived in Buchenwald in winter, they were driven out of the wagon, and asked what kind of qualifications they had. My brother told them that he was a student. This young man told us that the Germans immediately tied him up, it was a December morning, and hosed him down with water just to watch him freeze to death. Those who didn’t have a trade were stripped of their clothes and hosed with cold water until they froze."

"I think that at that moment something broke in my mother. She was always waiting for my father, she refused to declare him dead, even though she would

have been eligible for a widow’s pension. But she waited for my father until the day she died. She couldn’t wait for my brother, because she had to believe what she had heard. Why would that young man have said otherwise? She had grown accustomed to the fact that my father managed everything. For a short time, when my uncle came back from internment in 1946, he took over the part of my father a little. He got married but he still took care of us, financially, too. And when he died [in 1953] it nearly killed me. I couldn’t eat because I had lost him as well. He was a smart, intelligent man who you could talk to, and it felt good. It really got to me very much."

After the War

"We lived on Liszt Ferenc Square. We carried there what remained from Zuglo [the previous apartment]. We pulled the furniture there in a handcart by ourselves not long after the liberation. There were three rooms in that apartment and a different family lived in each room – but the real owner never came back. Then a family from one of the rooms went back to their own house, and we had two rooms to live in. Then my mother got an apartment on the ground floor for the other family, so the whole apartment became ours. My mother lived there on Liszt Ferenc Square until she died [in 1983]."

"It was April 1945, when all of a sudden my mother looked at me and said, ‘Aren’t you supposed to be in school?’ The nearest school was the Maria Theresa Grammar School for Girls. Many of my grandmother’s sisters had attended it. This was a prestigious school in Pest, on Andrassy Avenue. We went in, they took a look at us, we looked terrible, and they said immediately that school had already started, and that there would be no more admissions."

"Well, my mother opened her mouth and said, ‘All right, this is how we look, ghetto and all, but this is her father!’ And she took out my father’s school reports from the Piarists. They admitted me. They said that I could only be a private pupil, but I could attend classes, and I had to take a private examination. From that moment I went there regularly. I had perhaps two B+ grades and the rest were all top marks, in the first year. After that I had only top marks. I didn’t belong anywhere. There was a Jewish scout troop, but I couldn’t join that because I was Greek Catholic. Religion class was obligatory after 1945, but since I was the only Greek Catholic at school I had to go to religion class at the priest’s apartment, who was also my brother’s priest. The year of the Communist takeover came, it wasn’t obligatory anymore, so I never went to religion class again. Still, I went to church with my mother. "

"My husband and I attended the same university. We are of the same age; he was born in 1934 as well. His name is Cs. It was Schilling before. It was a German [Swabian] family from Celldomolk. His father was in the Arrow Cross Party, then he became a Communist Party member, that's how it is. We were walking on Engels Square, where the 5th district town hall is, and Cs. said, 'Let's get married, that would be the best; they can't say that a wife cannot enter there.' I said all right. He said, 'Let's go and ask when it would be possible.' They told us it was Friday. So we had ourselves registered in advance for Friday."

"Eszter, my daughter, knew everything about the family, and about the war, but I didn't raise her as a Jew at all. In fact, she is baptized, because my mother-in-law's family demanded it. Cs. is not religious; he hates priests. After the child was born I started to give English lessons while walking the baby. I pushed her in her pram, and two children came with me and I taught them English as we walked. I didn't want to send her to a day nursery. I took her to my mother's and I gave English lessons there. The child stood in the baby-walker, she played."

"I got a phone call, saying that a substitute was needed in the 8th district. I went there, and taught Hungarian and history for half a year. My mother took care of the child during that time. Then I went wherever I had to for a week, or two. I taught everywhere in the 8th district."

"After 35 years of marriage I got divorced. I have two cousins; one lives in Paris, the other one in London; we were on very good terms. When we were in England we visited them, and they used to come to visit us, but after a time they stopped coming. I asked another cousin of mine why they never came, and he said, 'To tell you the truth, the rumor about Cs. is that he's an undercover man.' So Cs. said, 'Your biboldo relatives!' [Biboldo is a pejorative word for Jews]. At that moment I felt that I had lived with a stranger for 35 years. How could he say such a thing? I thought he was an intelligent, educated, liberal, tenderhearted gentleman! Who was this man with whom I lived? A drunken, foul-mouthed, fascist coachman? I was shocked and devastated, but I thought it would be best, if I didn't say a word. Two weeks passed, and I didn't speak to him. I put his coffee and his meals in front of him, I washed the dishes, and everything, but I didn't say a word. He didn't notice anything. I thought that maybe he would think better of it. He said nothing. Then I moved away. At first I lived at my daughter's place, then she found a separate apartment."

"I have lived alone since then. I never saw my husband again after the divorce. My daughter and my grandchild kept in touch with him, and they told me that he had died [in 1997]. The woman he lived with during his last days got all the

serious valuables and all the little objects of our common life."

"I would classify myself as a Hungarian Jew. My Judaism is in the classical tradition of liberal Budapest assimilated Jewry. That is, if somebody doesn’t have any money, they should still have books, and I grew up in a home where everybody studied all the time. Erudition, music and music-reading; tolerance, interest towards people."

"I definitely consider myself Hungarian. My students asked me many times why I remained here in 1956. I told them that even though it might be strange, the language and the literature kept me here. I couldn’t live in a country where those lines of poetry, those words don’t mean anything to anyone. I will never learn another language so well that it would mean the same. So what makes me a Jew? That the anti-Jewish laws consider me one? Then I accept that. But there’s something more, something sentimental, spiritual. I hate to confess this publicly, and in my opinion many others feel the same way. So I said, ‘Nothing.’"