

## **RG-50.944.0102**

**April 29 and May 20, 2020, Budapest, Hungary**

### **Summary**

Magdolna Fischer Pálmai was born on September 30, 1921, in Nyiregyháza, Hungary. Her father was a tailor. He owned a tailoring shop with apprentices and trainees and had a good reputation in Nyiregyháza. She described him as someone who was well liked because of his good sense of humor and good singing voice.

Her mother had seven children: Anna, Jenő (1910), Frida (1911), Fanni (1912), Joli (1915, Imre (1918), and she, Magdolna. Her mother was 35 years old when she was born. She was her father's favorite. Her mother was very busy with the household. She also raised small animals and had a garden.

Her parents were religious. Her father went to the synagogue every Saturday. They kept a kosher household.

They had a decent existence before the anti-Jewish laws.

All siblings completed middle-school education and most of them learned tailoring as a trade. Magdolna would have liked to continue learning, but her father could not pay the high-school tuition. The rabbi gave her books to read, which she enjoyed. She learned to be a seamstress, but never liked the work, and always tried to avoid working in that capacity. In 1940, however, she went with her sister Fanni to Budapest where they worked in a dressmaker's shop and rented a room in Király St. They also helped out in her elderly uncle's clothing store. One of their co-workers introduced them to the youth organization of the Social Democratic Party. Initially they just went for the gymnastics held at the Vasas trade union center, but soon they attended cultural events of high quality; theater performances and literary evenings with left-leaning actors, actresses, and literary figures (Hilda Gobbi, Tamás Major, and Attila József were mentioned). They also had political lectures; she heard Anna Kéthly [one of the party leaders] and went for weekend excursions with other young people. She regularly borrowed books from the library. She made friends – two of them remained lifelong friends – and acquaintances. When Fanni became ill, the Party's physician took care of her, but Fanni eventually returned to Nyiregyháza.

Around 1943, her two brothers were called up for forced labor. One was sent to the Russian front, the other to Auschwitz via Austria.

In 1944, she did not know what had happened at home. Since she did not get mail, she contacted the parents of her previous Christian suitor who also lived in Budapest, but had not been in touch with her for years. Through him, she found out that her parents and sisters had been deported. She did not know where to and knew nothing of Auschwitz.

After the German occupation, she found out that her uncle had been arrested and taken to one of the SS interrogation sites, the Mirabel Hotel. She took food and clothing for him, and briefly saw him for the last time in her life.

It is not clear where she was and what she did between the German occupation and the Arrow Cross takeover (March 19 and October 15, 1944). She seems to have stayed with her uncle's family at 32 Eötvös St. It is also not clear whether her other sister Joli was with her all the time. She remembered well the scary times under the Arrow Cross. She was cleaning rubble at different places in the city to earn some money for food. Someone took a picture of her on one

of those occasions. She thought the young Arrow Cross man who guarded her and the other workers might have taken the photo. He was the one who told them about Jews being tortured in a building where he had night duty, and he had a gold ring and a gold cigarette case in his possession.

Sometime in November, when women had to report for forced labor she went to the KISOK sports arena where they gathered. Her group was taken to a big farm in Monok to dig fortifications. It was hard work, and they slept in stables, but they got food. Hungarian soldiers guarded them and behaved in a decent way. From there, they had to walk back to Buda and they were put under gendarmerie supervision in an empty factory building. The gendarme commander, seeing their condition and the completely inadequate circumstances in the factory, gave them discharge papers (she still has the paper) and a good amount of food. He sent them away at night with the warning to avoid Arrow Cross checkpoints. She was with her sister again, and they managed to avoid the checkpoints, but when they arrived at Eötvös St, the building manager did not let them in.

For a few nights, they hid at the shop where her sister had worked, in Haris Alley, in the heart of the inner city. There was no place to go during the day. They decided to move to the ghetto. They were in Akácfa St. They were caught in an Arrow Cross raid in Király St. and marched to the brick factory in Óbuda. Their deportation was imminent when a Swiss *Schutzpass* arrived. Only after the war did she find out that her suitor had acquired the *Schutzpass* and sent it to her. The Arrow Cross took the group of ca. 80 Jews with *Schutzpasses* to a protected house at 33/b Pozsonyi St. She managed to get her sister's name typed on the same *Schutzpass*.

After a short while, the Arrow Cross took over the building, and since all protected houses were full, she managed to get accommodation with Arrow Cross permission at 49 Ernő Hollán St. The building had been previously emptied of Jews, and she and her sister found food and clothing that had been left behind. They lived on that for the rest of the war, but they had to move to the ghetto at the order of the police. She said that the policeman who guarded them told them to flee, but they had nowhere to go. Her friend Éva was with them too, another friend died during the bombings. From the end of December until liberation, they stayed in the basement. Across the street, the building at the corner of Klauzál Square and Dob St. collapsed. Frozen corpses were piled up there. It became a recurring nightmare of hers for many years.

[In January 1945] she kissed the first Russian soldier who liberated them.

She and her sister moved back to their previous place at 28 Eötvös St. They had no food. Her sister Joli knew how to sew men's shirts and they earned some food with that.

In February, she and her friend Éva decided to go back to Nyiregyháza. They traveled for six days on the top of train cars. She found no one at home. At one of the neighbors, she saw her mother's monogrammed kitchen towels and Sabbath dishes.

She bought a huge amount of food and went back to Budapest.

Some weeks later, she and her sister went back to Nyiregyháza. They rented a room in the house of her aunt. By that time, they knew that their parents would not return. The Jews who came back talked about the horrors of Auschwitz and other camps. The Jewish agency helped them with furniture, food, and other necessities. Her sister began working as a seamstress. They heard that their brothers had survived and were waiting for them. One returned from the Soviet Union via Slovakia. Her other brother who survived Auschwitz was very ill and returned

only years later. Her sister Fanni also survived Auschwitz and immigrated to the United States, to Los Angeles where her aunt lived. Two sisters with their families perished in the Holocaust. Still in 1945, she met her future husband, Sándor Pálmai, whom she knew fleetingly before the war.

He was in forced labor and later deported to Auschwitz with his father. They were selected for work and sent to Gleiwitz (a sub-camp of Auschwitz, now: Gliwice, Poland), where he learned to weld and make rings from scrap metal for the SS guards who rewarded him with food. That way he and his father managed to survive. He came from a small village, Nagyberég (Veliky Berehy) close to Beregszász (Berehove, Ukraine). She went there with him to get the necessary papers for their marriage. While in Nagyberég, the Soviet authorities closed the border to Hungary. She lived for the next 14 years in Beregszász with her husband and her daughter. She said they were the “darkest years” of her life. She completed high school as an evening student and worked in the library of a big clothing factory. She learned Russian well, writing and typewriting as well, and performed clerical work. In 1946, she wrote a letter to the Hungarian ambassador in Moscow, Gyula Szekfű and obtained a Hungarian passport, but the Soviet authorities did not let her go back to Hungary. She managed to return in 1959, after a family unification program had been passed in 1956. Her husband followed a year later.

She went to Budapest. First, with the help of her old friends she found employment in the upcoming census, for which she had to take courses, learn statistics, sociology, etc. A few years later, she became a librarian at the [Hungarian Socialist Worker’s] Party Institute. She learned English and was responsible for selecting Russian- and English-language periodicals for the library.

Her husband worked as a Russian interpreter, initially for the Soviet Army, later for the big clothing factory, “Május 1.”

In 1970, for the first time, she visited her sister in Los Angeles, but had no desire to live there. Her sister returned to Hungary for her retirement years.