A Family of Orphaned Jews – Budapest

Local Personality – Kata Erdelyi

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We do not choose our family story; we are born into it, and the story has its own ways of perpetuating itself in our lives. Budapest is full of family stories, even if you didn't eat Gesztenyepüré (chestnut puree with whipped cream) at family get-togethers when you were a child. The stories jump out at you from the street corners, from the bus stops, or on the banks of the beautiful Danube at dusk, sending regards from distant relatives – even those you didn't know existed.

Hungarian, for example: soft, rolling, foreign. When I hear young people speaking Hungarian, I am struck by how wrong it sounds. Growing up, Hungarian was the language of old people sitting in green suede chairs with frayed edges, chandeliers hanging from the ceiling above their heads, a low glass coffee table for refreshments, and old oil paintings on the walls. That was the décor of Grandpa's house, and the soundtrack was warm and completely incomprehensible Hungarian chatter.

Other memories are hidden on the city's ancient streets. During my most recent visit, I heard about a new Jewish site that was now open to the public. A soft rain pattered lightly on the umbrella that I clutched with frozen fingers as I walked around Castle Hill. Moistness seemed to be penetrating everywhere: my forehead, nose, neck, ankles. I walked down the small, winding streets, passing shops with souvenirs from China, the type that can be found anywhere in the world, with just the name of a different city printed on them. The light and friendly atmosphere at Castle Hill in the summer months was replaced by the introverted grayness of winter. The few tourists around me hurried from store to store to fulfill their familial obligations before fleeing back to their hotels or to the next tourist attraction.

I would not have ascended the hill that day had I not been searching for the entrance to an ancient synagogue that was recently renovated and started to operate again, 350 years after being destroyed by the Christian coalition that conquered the city from the Turks. During that period, the Jews of Buda settled in the streets surrounding the castle, a reality that seems completely preposterous today. Yet, like an old family necklace forgotten at the bottom of the jewelry box, or a beloved children's book that is happened upon and brings back memories of safety and warmth, at the bottom of the street, the modest façade of the synagogue suddenly appeared, hidden between the picturesque neighborhood homes that are attached to one another. My heart pounded as I stepped inside.

On a different day and in a different year, I strolled leisurely alongside the tranquil Danube. For anyone who calls the Jordan a river, the Danube looks like an unsatisfied lake, trying to move itself determinedly and ambitiously from one side of Europe to the other, amidst bridges, forests, and castles. A lazy sun set in the west and the promenade along the length of the river bustled with men and women running in fashionable sports apparel, groups of teenage girls and boys whispering and giggling on the many benches scattered along the promenade, and mothers calmly pushing baby strollers. A cool breeze chilled the heat of

the day, which had finally started to dissipate, and gulls flew and squawked above our heads. The pastoral atmosphere was disrupted in just one place, where rows of bronze shoes are affixed to the bank of the Danube – small and large, women's and men's, high-heeled and flat – all telling the story of the Jews who were murdered and whose bodies were tossed into the river during World War II. So out of context at this twilight hour, the shoes unrelentingly cry out to the pedestrians: *remember!*

Unfortunately, it is not truly possible to share memories. Memories are not words; they are feelings, smells, sounds, and tastes. Shared memories are what creates a family. It can be Grandma's Dobos torte, with copious amounts of chocolate, honey, and sugar that would frustrate any nutritionist. It can be the memory of music flowing out of Grandpa's room, igniting a longing for a hug mixed with day-old beard stubble, or a memory of persecution and discrimination that creates an unmediated connection with strangers. What is certain, as Kata told me, is that "it is necessary to create memories so that there will be a shared future."

I first met Kata one autumn morning at the entrance to Dohany Street Synagogue, the most prominent Jewish monument in Pest. We didn't know each other until then and we were searching for very different things: Kata was looking for her future while I was looking for my past. I was on a family heritage trip, and Kata was our "local family": Fülop (Philip), Kata's great-grandfather, and Zigmond, my great-grandfather, were brothers. Zigmond was murdered at Auschwitz; Fülop passed away before the Holocaust. We didn't know them, but thanks to them, we met each other that morning at the entrance of Dohany Street Synagogue. Such is the power of a family memory.

Every tour of Jewish Budapest begins here. The huge Neolog synagogue, the largest synagogue in Europe, is so rich in embellishments and interplaying architectural styles, so tall and so prominent compared with its surroundings, that it seems as if the entire Jewish story revolves around it. But the synagogue, like monuments of magnificent proportions, is just a flamboyant façade for a deeper, more complex story – the family story of a large, ancient community that is constantly searching for its way in an ever-changing world.

There are many communities in the world, and each one of them is a family story in itself. Why talk about family specifically in Budapest? Family is the home we were born into; family is the people who accompany us and the compass that directs us at the crossroads of our lives. Family can give meaning to our actions, a source of closeness and warmth, assistance and security. A source of strength. Family can also be a source of heartbreak, pain, strife, and tension. The reason is one and the same: we care about our families. One thing is common to all families – family is for life. Even if you think that you left, even if you changed your name, moved away, and deleted your contacts – family remains with you. Likewise, a family cannot get rid of its children – even if it thought they had forgotten them, even if they ignore them, or choose to focus their gaze elsewhere. They will chisel their way back with fingers and soul, looking for their home, looking for their family. The Jewish community in Budapest underwent one hundred and fifty years of tossing and turning: from modernism to schism, from the Holocaust to communism, from democratization to increasing nationalism – but its very existence was never doubted. What preserved this living, vibrant community is a deep sense of family, mutual responsibility, belonging, and a need to create appropriate frameworks for every Jew

according to their beliefs and outlook. In Budapest, multiplicity is strength and flexibility is power.

If Judaism is one big family, then Hungary, and Budapest in particular, is the cool aunt. It's the aunt who, even at age fifty, shows up to family occasions with purple highlights in her hair and revels in the shock on the faces of everyone present. She dresses a bit differently, reinvents herself time and time again, driven by curiosity and the originality of a free spirit. An inquisitive aunt who chooses her own path with a self-confidence reserved for older siblings.

While the rural areas of Hungary is where a reaction to modernism gave rise to the most introverted Orthodox Jewish groups, Budapest is the city where innovative experiments in shaping Jewish identity are constantly being performed. It is a city where family and national memories are blended in a rich goulash stew that heats the stomach but burns the mouth. Only here, it was the Orthodox who split away from the lap of the community, and not progressive Judaism. This is where Theodor Herzl, architect of the Jewish national movement that eventually founded the State of Israel, grew up, but up until World War I, the community rejected the Zionist idea vehemently. And only here, the prominent Jewish denomination to this day is one that does not exist anywhere else in the world: the Neologs.

Like all the Jewish denominations that were formed in hopes of promoting national-social improvement in modern history – from Hassidism to Zionism – the Neolog movement strove to strengthen the Jewish family by adapting it to the changing reality. The movement was established in the early nineteenth century during a period when the winds of modernism and nationalism were sweeping through Europe and Jews were offered equal rights. The Neolog movement, which wanted to bring closer those who had accepted this offer and started to drift away from Jewish life, focused primarily on ritual changes (and less on Bible criticism), such as the design of the synagogue, the language of prayers, and secular studies, in hopes of making the rituals more pleasant. Although there were barely any theological differences between the different groups of Jews in Budapest, the tension between the Neologs – who strived for optimal integration into their surroundings – and the Orthodox – who wanted to protect the old customs, constantly increased. In 1869, the Orthodox Jews established their own community, separate from the Neologs. The schism gave rise to a third group that did not identify with the religious zeal of Orthodoxy but did not agree with the changes implemented by the Neologs either. It was called the "status quo." More than it indicated weakness, the schism testified to the community's strength: a strong family knows how to offer each family member the path that suits them in order to remain part of the family, without forcing uniformity on everyone. Over the years, the community honed its ability to develop a diverse range of frameworks for Jewish belonging, and today, Budapest offers a dizzying selection of organizations and social groups that give each person the ability to choose the depth and style of Jewish life that best suits their needs.

Our family – Kata's and mine – came from the rural areas to Budapest at the beginning of the twentieth century. The family was very religious but in the big city, each of the brothers chose their own path: some lived as long-bearded Orthodox Jews who were stringent about religious observance. My great-grandfather, who was an officer in the Hungarian

army and one of four Jewish judges in the Hungarian judicial system, attended synagogue every day but wore modern clothing. Kata's great-grandfather left religious life completely, to the extent of eating pork. All of them, without exception, made sure to marry Jewish women; in other words, they didn't leave the family. The Jewish community of Budapest succeeded in giving each of them the Jewish framework that suited him, and thus did not disconnect from them, regardless of their Jewish lifestyle.

Next to Dohany Street Synagogue is the seventh district, the center of Jewish life in Pest for the past two hundred years. Quiet streets intersect with each other between old residential homes with inner yards, and the atmosphere is intimate. In recent years, the Jewish district has undergone an accelerated process of renewal, with the opening of new restaurants, upbeat pubs, and the speedy renovation of old homes. Hungarian Jewry, which was suppressed for almost eighty years by an authoritative Hungarian government, the Nazi regime, and then communism, is peeking out again from every corner, like small flowers pushing their way out between the pavement cracks. The city's Jewish memory is reinventing itself in a multiplicity of expressions and with characteristic flexibility. It is a surprising and creative process in a surprising and creative city. Not only is the physical Jewish home being renewed in Budapest, with the opening of new synagogues and the development of social initiatives and community centers, even Jewish life itself, composed of thousands of personal stories of discovery and connection, is redefining and reshaping the concept of the Jewish family in Budapest.

Kata is also part of the renewed Jewish memory of Budapest. Babi, Kata's grandmother, and Eva, my grandmother, were cousins. When they returned from the camps and the ghettos after the Holocaust, my grandmother fought to immigrate to Israel, while Kata's grandmother decided to stay in Hungary. The two grandmothers were in their twenties, and although their social circles were composed primarily of Jews, who they tended to trust more than the Hungarians, Kata's grandparents made the decision to assimilate into Hungarian society. They lived as atheists and baptized their children in order to protect them from anti-Semitism. It was only when Kata's father came home one day and cheered for the Arab armies during the Yom Kippur War that his father divulged to him that he was in fact a Jew. He was 23 years old. "I'm lucky," Kata added when she told me this story, "because I found out that I was Jewish when I was 19."

Kata's father married a woman from a Protestant family, who was an atheist like himself. "But," says Kata, "looking back, I realize that my closest friends as a child were all Jewish." Similar to the Neolog denomination, for Kata's atheist family as well, assimilating into Hungarian society never meant giving up the Jewish family. Most of Babi's friends were survivors of the same camp that she had survived, and they made sure to meet up every year. They felt more comfortable among Jewish friends and even today, Kata says that "Jews receive 10 extra points from me for security." Within the family, you don't need to introduce yourself. The same is true of the Jews in Budapest – when they meet, they won't smile and say to each other, "Nice to meet you, I'm a Jew." They feel that they are meeting a family member. To be safe, they might say something like, "My aunt lives in Israel."

When she was 19, Kata wanted to travel to a summer camp in the United States, but on the registration form, she was asked, to her surprise, to write her religion. She turned to her father for advice, and he suggested that she write Jewish – "because we are Jewish."

At the camp, she met Israeli teenagers and encountered Jewish culture for the first time. "For years, an enticing gift had been sitting in my room and I never noticed it," she described that period in her life. "Only once I started to tear off the wrapping paper did I start to become truly interested. From that moment, I wanted to know more and more about what was hiding inside." Kata started to ask questions about her Judaism. She dug for information wherever she could: from family members, Jewish summer camps, Jewish student organizations, religious organizations. "My father told me that Judaism is part of my life and my history – a part of who I am. But I didn't understand. What is this thing that I am a part of?!" She became closer to her grandmother, but it was only before Kata's first trip to Israel that Babi started talking to her about the family. "Until then, the photographs on the dresser were just old items belonging to an old woman," she said. The puzzle pieces started to come together.

During the coming years, Kata traveled to Israel at least once a year, sometimes more. She traveled the country, studied Hebrew, met new friends, and spent time with new family members. "It was probably the only time in my life that I could give my parents something that they couldn't obtain themselves," she recalls today, "by showing them that we had more family. Our family is very small, and I always wanted a bigger family. Cousins are like bonus family – they aren't close like siblings, so there's no tension, but they're close enough to be there for you when you need them."

Kata reclaimed her family history and thus rejoined the Jewish family. "There are certain things that you need to understand in order to understand yourself. A family transmits to its children hopes and fears that are rooted in the collective family memory. For children, it's a given, they're born into it, but if they don't understand where it all came from, they will never be able to understand who they are." Kata says that memories are passed down in the family even when no one speaks about them. It's like Holocaust survivors who will make sure their shelves are always stocked with food – as will their children.

Kata calls Jews who grew up without knowing that they were Jews "orphaned Jews" because they did not know that they were part of the family. She views her renewed connection with the Jewish family as a miracle that is the result of coincidences, openness, and acceptance. Today, this family is already a part of her, "like being Hungarian," and although she is not actively involved in the Jewish community, she prefers knowing what she's choosing to refrain from over not knowing at all. For the same reason, Kata also chose to live in one of the three areas in Budapest where there is a large concentration of Jews. She chooses the Jewish frameworks that suit her, even if they are not religious ones, and also decides how much she wants to be involved – without disconnecting. The abundance of different programs, their diversity on the spectrum of Jewish existence, and the flexibility of the Jewish community in Budapest allow her to choose how she wants to be part of the family.

In addition to the underlying principles of multiplicity and flexibility of the community-family, there are two more external factors that make Budapest's Jewish community unique and captivating. The first is the huge size of the community. In Poland, whose modern history resembles that of Hungary to an extent, there is also an extensive phenomenon of "orphaned Jews" who keep discovering their connection to the Jewish family, on the personal and national levels. However, while the number of Jews in Poland

reaches a few thousands, in Budapest alone, there are tens of thousands of Jews. The established Jewish communities in Budapest are numerous and diverse; almost every international Jewish organization runs a program in the city; resources invested in reviving Jewish life are enormous, and correspondingly, the options for connecting to the family are extensive.

The second factor is the fact that Hungary is trapped between the European regions that speak Latin, Germanic, and Slavic languages. It speaks a language from a different family and views itself as belonging to a separate ethnic group – the Magyars (in Hungarian, magyarok). This gives them the character of a cultural island isolated from its surroundings. As a cultural enclave with its own unique lifestyle, Hungarians tend to keep to themselves and enjoy their own rich culture. Hungarian Jews feel very connected to Hungarian culture, and most of the young people who connect to Judaism do not do so through religion, but rather through social or family ties. In a family, you do not need to prove that you belong; it is enough to feel that you are part of it, or in Kata's words, "the Jewish community is like a social club. You go there for companionship… the meaning of being a Jew is not to express your Judaism, but to feel Jewish." This is one of the reasons why Jews in Budapest are concentrated in areas where… well, other Jews tend to live. In those districts, Jewish identity is a sense of familiarity that is not necessarily based on Jewish institutions or religious observance. The neighborhood is the Jewish family of its residents: they meet at the park, at cultural events, at the bus stop, and at the kosher shop selling Elite chocolate and Bamba snacks. They know that most of the people around them in the neighborhood are probably also Jews, and the sense of partnership and common identity connects them to Judaism.

The large number of Jews in Budapest, and their identification with the cultural Hungarian island on which they live, create unique social phenomena. In recent years, one of the most interesting of these is a social hub called Auróra, which expands the definition of family and includes additional, surprising circles. Marom, the organization that operates Auróra, is a Jewish young adults' organization that is dedicated to bringing young people closer to the Jewish world through relaxed social encounters and *tikkun olam*.

Auróra meets both needs. In an old building renovated in the neglected eighth district of Budapest, there is a pub, various cultural events, and live performances by local artists in the evenings. During the day, the building hosts a range of social organizations that represent minorities, human rights groups, and LGTBQ organizations. Though there are Jewish cultural events at the site, it does not limit itself to the Jewish circle alone, opening its gates to any person or organization promoting *tikkun olam* and a struggle for justice in the city and in the country. The focus on *tikkun olam* in Marom's vision means that from their place in the Jewish family, they are able to look outward at the world around them. This is a worldview that is in contrast with most of the established Jewish organizations in Hungary, which focus on strengthening Jewish life, which means "keeping it in the family." At Aurora, the ideals are synthesized: the coalitions forged with non-Jewish organizations that share similar worldviews – the need to protect the rights of minority groups as an important element of community life – are what strengthen the sense of belonging to Judaism. Lending a hand to your neighbor is, if you will, what strengthens the sense of belonging to the family, in the shared home where the Jews of Hungary live. For the

members of Auróra, the day-to-day tasks common to Jews and non-Jews in order to build a more just society reflects the realization of the values upon which their Judaism is based, and therefore makes it relevant, alive, and more meaningful than ever. On the other hand, in the political reality of Hungary today, this type of activism is not welcomed warmly. The authorities are constantly threatening to close Auróra's operations, not because of the Jewish content, but because of the civil-social nature of its activities. In certain places, there is a price to "opening the family."

In the Torah, we are called the Children of Israel, a name that encapsulates the way that Jews perceive themselves as family to this day. It is no coincidence that the word familiarity comes from the word family. Within a family, we enjoy a sense of intimacy and informal atmosphere. The circles of belonging of Budapest's Jews, and the informal manner in which many of them relate to the Jewish family – as a connection that is organic, social, and based on friendships rather than religious ceremonies – are clear evidence of the community's strength. The phenomenon of the "orphaned Jews" is exceptionally widespread and intense in Budapest, but the fact is that neither these people nor the community have given up on each other. Although it seems like an act of choice, both sides understand that this is not the case. You are born into your family, and you don't choose it, even if many years pass before you become aware of its existence. The question with which Jews grapple all over the world – what connects us as a group, what makes us a people – has a simple answer in Budapest. We are family. To the question, what preserves the family – the answer in Budapest is: a multiplicity of options and social flexibility.