



Tracing My Hidden Family Heritage in Hungary and Serbia

by Erica Hahn

WHEN I WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, MY MOTHER ASKED me a question which sent me on a life-long quest. We lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, where my mother's family had resided for generations. She was divorced from my father, George Hahn, the son of Hungarian immigrants, and she asked me whether I experienced any discrimination because of my Jewish ancestry. Sputtering, I replied, "But I don't have any Jewish ancestry!" She told me that years earlier she heard my father's mother refer to her husband, Michael Hahn, as Jewish — but my mother did not know if the statement was true. Oddly, my father didn't know either. He had been raised Catholic and was proudly Hungarian. When I was younger, I had asked him why our surname was German, and he said that long ago some of our ancestors had migrated from Germany to Hungary. For many years, I had no contact with my father or his family, so no one could answer my questions. Finally, in 2000, I decided to try to find out more.

My research begins

The only real clue I possessed was my grandparents' 1914 marriage certificate, which I had found in my father's papers when he died in 1991. Although the

document was in Hungarian, which I couldn't read, I saw that my grandparents, Michael Hahn and Elisabeth Sebestyen, were married in Budapest. I also gleaned my grandfather's date of birth — April 8, 1888 — and the names of his parents, Jozsef Hahn and Tirza Taube Allein. Not until much later would I discover that the document had more to tell me.

I began my work at the Family History Center in West Los Angeles. A researcher there introduced me to the index of passengers who had come into the United States through Ellis Island. An entry on www.ellisland.org listed the July 29, 1920, arrival of Michael Hahn, age thirty-two, nationality "Servian." The date was likely but the nationality seemed wrong.

The researcher suggested I write to the National Archives and the Social Security Administration for my grandfather's naturalization records and Social Security application, which I did. According to the naturalization papers, Michael was born on April 8, 1888, in the

Above: The Subotica Synagogue was built in 1902 in the Art Nouveau style. Although designated as a "Cultural Monuments of Exceptional Importance" by Serbia, the condition of the long-vacant building has greatly deteriorated. Courtesy of Stephanie Comfort, jewishpostcard collection.com.



The 1914 Hungarian marriage certificate of the author's grandparents, Michael Hahn and Elisabeth Sebestyen.

village of Csantaver in Hungary. Before emigrating, he lived in the nearby city of Szabadka. In 1920, as part of the redrawing of national borders after World War I, territory including Szabadka and Csantaver (renamed Subotica and Cantavir) became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

I eventually located my grandmother Elisabeth through similar research. The Ellis Island site showed her arriving in 1921 with a three-year-old child, Ladislaus. After a few minutes, I realized the child was my uncle Leslie. Elisabeth's naturalization and Social Security papers listed her birthplace as Zalaszentgrot, a village in western Hungary.

In 1930, my father's family first appeared in a U.S. census, in Manhattan. Michael, proprietor of a film exchange, was listed with Elisabeth and their two sons, Leslie, age twelve, and George, my father, age seven.^[1] From family lore I knew that Michael also ran an import business with two brothers, Janos and Emmerich, one living in Hungary and the other in Paris. In 1942, Michael's draft registration stated he was living in Wheeling, West Virginia, and his occupation was "movie theatre owner and operator."^[2] After Michael's death in 1975, Elisabeth lived with my father, by then, a writer in London, England. Elisabeth died in London in 1986, and my father died there in 1991.

Over the next few years (2001–2006), I chased many leads but didn't uncover any new clue to Michael Hahn's ancestry. (I did find an intriguing entry on Radix, a Hungarian genealogy site, that showed a Jozsef Hahn and a Jakab Allein working in Szabadka for the Hungarian railway in 1911.^[3]) I learned that my grandfather's region was home to a significant number

of ethnic Germans, mostly Catholic, who had arrived 150 years earlier at the invitation of the Austrian monarchy after the Turks had been expelled. I came to accept my father's belief — that being from a German area with a German name, Michael Hahn was an ethnic German. Many German Catholic Hahns lived in villages throughout the area. I pored through Catholic church records on microfilm, but I could never make a connection.

The breakthrough

In 2006, on an Internet list devoted to German ancestors from Hungary,^[4] I wrote that my great-grandmother's first name was Tirza. Someone commented that Tirza wasn't a German name, and an ethnic German would have a German name. I knew that the name Tirza wasn't German; it's an Old Testament name. With this prod, I visited the JewishGen website, and tried the surname Allein in the Hungarian database. Three people with the last name Allein appeared in a document titled "A List of Subotica Jews, Victims of the Fascist Occupation, 1941–1945": Jozefina, age sixty-nine, wife of Jakob; Andrija, age thirty-seven, "fabricant" [manufacturer]; and his wife Magda, age thirty-one. The women were sent to Auschwitz, and Andrija, a forced laborer, died in Russia. Jozefina's age suggested that her husband Jakob might have been the Jakab Allein who worked with Jozsef Hahn on the Hungarian Railway years earlier. This information chilled me to the marrow. Could Jakob be the brother of my great-grandmother Tirza? Were these Alleins Jewish relatives of mine who had died in the Holocaust?

I checked JewishGen often, trying to coax more data from it. Visiting the site months later, I found records from the World Jewish Congress collection which included documents for Elisabeth Allein Ribar, a nurse born March 8, 1909, in Szabadka. Elisabeth was in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944, and then LEFT in December of that year for Switzerland. Her name was on a 1949 list of survivors in Switzerland. I didn't know who Elisabeth was or how she managed to leave Bergen-Belsen in 1944, but I was certain that an Allein from Szabadka had to fit into my family.

In 2008, I finally discovered Michael's origins with the aid of Andras Koltai, a professional genealogist in Hungary.^[5] From the beginning, he thought my Hahn ancestors were Jewish. He sent researchers to Subotica and Cantavir to examine the civil and Jewish records and visit cemeteries. Their findings conclusively proved Michael was Jewish and not ethnic German. Another clue had long been available. Andras studied

my great-grandparents' marriage certificate and noticed that Michael's religious affiliation had been altered. Although it was a civil document, the religious denominations of the parties were listed. Elisabeth's denomination was Roman Catholic. However, Michael's original religious denomination — recorded when the marriage was registered in 1914 — had been blacked out when the certificate was issued in 1917, but one letter could still be discerned, "z." The word for Jewish in Hungarian is *Izraelita*. "Roman Catholic" had been added in a different handwriting. During this time many Hungarian Jews were converting to Christianity to better their circumstances. Michael had a Christian wife, and I suspect she persuaded him to convert between 1914 and 1917. Had I been able to read Hungarian I might not have spent eight years trying to learn whether my grandfather was Jewish.

Andras also constructed an extensive family chart. As I had guessed, Jakab was the brother of Tirza (Allein) Hahn, my great-grandmother. Andrija Allein was his son, and Elisabeth (Allein) Ribar was his daughter; Andrija and Elisabeth were my grandfather's first cousins. I continued to wonder about Elisabeth, and discovering her story became my new quest.

Hungary during World War II

Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany in World War II. Whether Hungary became so for political reasons is not clear, although an anti-Semitic Fascist party arose there in the 1920s. Hungary nursed a grievance which arose from Allied actions after the First World War. Under the Treaty of Trianon, the Allies stripped Hungary of two-thirds of its territory. The Nazis promised to return the land, and after the war began the northern portion of Serbia was returned to Hungary. Because Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany, not a conquered country, the Hungarian government controlled the fate of its Jewish population and did not engage in mass extermination. Thus, Jews in Hungary felt relatively safe.

A Jewish lawyer in Budapest, Rezső (Rudolf) Kasztner, a

Zionist, believed that the situation for Hungarian Jews was going to deteriorate. In 1942 he and some friends established the Aid and Rescue Committee, a refugee agency in Budapest, to help Jews leave Hungary. While conditions were already dire, the situation deteriorated dramatically in 1944. Germany invaded the country to prevent Hungary from making a separate peace with the Allies and the Nazis began exterminating Hungarian Jews.

Germany, now on the verge of losing the war, decided to give Kasztner the opportunity to "buy" Jewish lives. After the invasion, he personally negotiated with Adolph Eichmann and his people in Budapest. A deal was struck for 1,684 Jews at \$1,000 each. Those selected were housed in Budapest until money was transferred. Kasztner included some of his relatives in the contingent, as well as orphans from a local orphanage, prominent Jews, and wealthy Jews who paid for those who could not raise the money themselves. Kasztner selected a number of nurses and teachers. He thought they would be needed after the war in the Zionist state he envisioned. Elisabeth Allein, a nurse from the hinterlands, was included.

Once underway, the agreement almost collapsed. The train left Budapest on July 1, 1944, but was refused permission to cross France on the way to either Spain or Portugal, and the group was transported to Bergen-Belsen and settled in their own separate section. After constant negotiation by Kasztner, a group of 318 was released and arrived in Switzerland on August 21. The remainder of Kasztner's group — less those who had died due to conditions in Bergen-Belsen — reached Switzerland on December 7.^[6]

My visit to Serbia and Hungary

I continued to wonder about Elisabeth's later fate. I wanted to know whether she immigrated to Israel. As part of reparations after the war, the German government funded an International Tracing Service (ITS), which still operates today, to find or chronicle family members lost in the Holocaust.^[7] In 2008, feeling



The author with Robert Szabados, the president of the Jewish congregation in Subotica, September 2010.

Further sources

- List of the Rescued on *KasztnerMemorial.com*, also on the Holocaust Database on *JewishGen.org*
- The website for “Killing Kasztner,” a 2008 documentary by Gaylen Ross, is *www.killingkasztner.com*.
- Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994)
- Anna Porter, *Kasztner's Train: The True Story of an Unknown Hero of the Holocaust* (New York: Walker and Company, 2007)



Agnes Szivos, September 2010.

a bit foolish seeking the whereabouts of a distant cousin I had never met, sixty years after the fact, I filled out the request form online. I received an initial response acknowledging my request and a year later, I got a letter. The ITS worked through the Hungarian Red Cross and successfully traced Elisabeth.

Elisabeth had married, probably some time between 1936 and 1940. What happened to her immediately after the war is somewhat unclear; different sources

have her in Szabadka in 1946, Budapest in 1948, and a refugee facility in Switzerland in 1949. Within a few years after the war's end, she and her husband, Pavle Ribar, moved to Budapest, and lived there the rest of their lives. They had no children. Elisabeth died in 1976 and was buried with her husband in a Jewish cemetery.

The ITS contacted me again a few weeks later, and told me a woman living in Budapest, a friend of Elisabeth's, wanted to hear from me. In September 2010 I visited Serbia and Hungary. In Serbia I visited the grave of my great-grandparents, Jozsef Hahn, 1852–1926, and Tirza Allein, 1865–1940, in the Jewish cemetery in Subotica, as well as the cemetery in Csantaver where their parents rest. I went to the address in Subotica given by Michael Hahn on his immigration paperwork. I should have guessed — it's a movie theatre!

At the Subotica Archives I learned more about Elisabeth Allein. In 2004, the head of the Archives, Stevan Mackovic, wrote a book, *Industrija I Industrijalc Subotice (1918-1941)* [*Industry and Manufacturers of Subotica*]^[8], which included the history of Jupiter, a Subotica battery factory founded by Elisabeth's brother, Andor (Andrija) Allein. In 1940, the factory was

owned jointly by Andor, his sister, and her husband, Pavle (Pal) Ribar. In 1942, after Hungarians retook control of the area, Andor and Pal, as Jews, became forced laborers; only Pal survived. The company continued operating under Elisabeth's management, but she was forced to lease the company to non-Jewish Hungarians from Subotica. In 1945, by verdict of the County People's Court, the company was returned to Andor, who had died, so actually to Pal Ribar. Soon after, when the new Yugoslavia became a Communist country, the company was put under the management of “the people's goods” and in 1946 the property was confiscated. Since Elisabeth and her husband had been factory owners — although their assets had been seized — perhaps they paid for Elisabeth's seat on Kasztner's train.

In Hungary I visited the grave of Elisabeth Allein (1909–1976) and Pal Ribar (1898–1981), and met eighty-four-year-old Agnes Szivos, a Jewish Holocaust survivor, who knew them. In 1948, Agnes began working in Budapest as a secretary for Pal Ribar, then a functionary in the Communist industrial operation in Hungary. Elisabeth, who was not working, socialized with Agnes's mother and aunt. After four years, Agnes left the job and moved away, although her mother and aunt kept up the friendship. Agnes knew nothing about the lives of Elisabeth and Pal in Serbia.

So what was gained from my quest? Learning the reality of my Jewish heritage has been harrowing. My background used to be run-of-the-mill British ancestry, an odd dash of Hungarian, and a bit of German, nothing too unusual. Now I find my roots are also in the exotic and tragic world of Serbian Jewry. And I have learned that if you are tracing modern European Jewish ancestry, you must march straight through the Holocaust. The truth does not so much set you free as burn you to the core.

Notes

¹ 1930 U.S. Census, 10th Assembly District, Borough of Manhattan, New York City, New York, ED 254, p. 14B, NARA series T626, roll 1558. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

² United States, Selective Service System. *Selective Service Registration Cards, World War II: Fourth Registration 1942*. NARA. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

³ The 1911 Directory of Hungarian Railways is on the Radix-Genalogy Research in Hungary site at *www.bogardi.com*.

⁴ The Banat-L Mailing list on *Rootsweb.ancestry.com*, focuses on Danube Swabian genealogy and culture. (Ethnic Germans in Hungary are known as Danube Swabians or DanauSchwablen.)

(continued on page 43)

interviewed many kind people who have helped me and who have my heartfelt thanks. I have been able to locate all the homes of my ancestors with the exception of those of the first David, which were so many . . .” Although his goal was accomplished, perhaps Thomas undertook a few more research trips before his death, at age eight-four, on October 4, 1938, at his home in Milton, Mass.^[7]

While some elements of Thomas Hibbard’s genealogical journeys belong entirely to the past, other aspects of his research are quite relevant today. Thomas Hibbard accomplished his goals because of his persistence, his willingness to make multiple trips to an area, and his practice of writing letters before and after a trip to elicit additional information, contacts, and resources. Thomas Hibbard also seemed to have had a knack for drawing others into his genealogical quests — a useful talent in any era.

Notes

¹ Mss C 2597, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections Department, New England Historic Genealogical Society.

² Augustine George Hibbard, *Genealogy of the Hibbard Family Who Are Descendants of Robert Hibbard of Salem, Massachusetts*

(Hartford, Conn.: Lockwood & Brainard, 1901).

³ Albert Nelson Marquis, ed. *Who’s Who in New England: a Biographical Dictionary of Leading Living Men and Women*, 2nd edition (Chicago: A. N. Marquis & Company, 1916), 538.

⁴ Edward Hibbard Kenerson’s book, *Inbred Yankees: the Story of the Kenerson and Ryder Families* (1966), includes excerpts from Thomas Hibbard’s account of their genealogical journeys. Edward Kenerson died at age 87 on April 24, 1968; his obituary was published in *The Boston Globe*, May 9, 1968, p. 29.

⁵ Possibly Henry V. Partridge, *The History of Norwich, Vermont* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth Press, 1905), although I did not find a reference to David Hibbard purchasing land from Stephen Palmer.

⁶ Sidney Perley, *The History of Salem, Massachusetts*, vol. 2, (Salem: the author, 1926), 15, 417.

⁷ *The New York Times*, October 5, 1938, p. 23.

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“Tracing My Hidden Family Heritage,” continued from page 36

⁵ Andras Koltai’s website, Hungarian Jewish Roots, is www.jewishroots.hu/.

⁶ After the war, Kasztner moved to Israel, where he became a member of the Labor Party government. When accusations arose in 1952 that he collaborated with Eichmann and kept knowledge of the extermination camps from the Jewish community, a libel suit was brought on his behalf by the government. He lost. The judge said Kasztner sold his soul to the devil. An appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court reversed most of the judgment, on the grounds that, given the circumstances, Kasztner did the best he could to save lives. On March 15, 1957, he was shot dead in Tel Aviv by an extremist. Kasztner is not mentioned at Israel’s Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem. In Budapest’s Museum of the Holocaust, Kasztner’s train is mentioned, but exhibit text also states he knew what was happening in the camps and failed to warn his fellow Jews. Many researchers and survivors, including me, believe he has been unfairly maligned, and was actually a hero.

⁷ www.its-arolsen.org

⁸ Stevan Mackovic, *Industrija I Industrijske Subotice (1918-1941)* (Subotica: Istorijski arhiv Subotica, 2004). Translation provided by Stasa Centkovic of Novi Said, Serbia.

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