

An Interview with Katalin Pecsí

Survival: Lives of Hungarians under Communist
and Capitalist Governments 1956-2006
Oral History Series

Interviews conducted by
Virginia Major Thomas
in 2004

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Discursive Table of Contents— Katalin Peci

Family's Judaism, Zionism and trip to Palestine--Parents' Communism, father's deportation to camp and escape--Mother's work in anti-Nazi underground--Upbringing in ignorance of Jewish heritage--Discovery of Jewish heritage, meaning to Katalin--Marriage to non-Jew, travel as a student before marriage--Editorial work, PhD, children, travel to Germany and USA--Father's suicide, discovery of Jewish music and Holocaust history--Jewish practices in USA, Jewish secrecy during Communism--Children and Judaism, political divisions in Hungary today

Biography

Katalin Peci is a professor of literature at the Central European University in Budapest and the director of education at the Budapest Holocaust Memorial Center. She is also a founding member of Esther's Bag, a group of Jewish women in Hungary which promotes research on the history of Jewish women and engages in writing, discussion and exhibits about women in the Jewish community.

Katalin was born in Budapest to Communist parents. Her father's background was that of an assimilated Jew, but her mother came from an Orthodox family and her maternal aunts and uncles belonged to a Zionist organization Hasomer Hacair and spent some time in Palestine. Her parents as Communists eschewed all religious beliefs and Katalin grew up not knowing she came from a Jewish background. There was little discussion of family members killed in the Nazi concentration camps, ostensibly as political prisoners, and no observation of Jewish holidays. The child had, however, a visit from St. Nickolas on Dec. 6 and from Santa Claus on Dec. 25, and their identities puzzled the youngster: were they twins or the same person?

While at the university she discovered her Jewish heritage and ever since has been exploring it. In Germany she discovered traditional Yiddish music, in the United States she learned to observe Jewish holidays, and she has read extensively on the Holocaust. Her marriage to a non-Jewish, non-religious physician ended in divorce partly because of her strong identification with Jews. She has raised her two children as Jews. She feels strongly that Judaism is "the most important part" of her identity. She is happy about the post-Communist Jewish renaissance in Hungary but feels the country today is politically very divided ideologically.

- THOMAS: [This is Major Thomas and the date is November 12, 2004]. I am at Csorsz utca [5] in Budapest, Hungary, and I am interviewing Katalin Pecsí, and we might begin by asking you, Katalin, when and where you were born and a little bit about your family.
- PECSI: I was born here in Budapest in 1951.
- THOMAS: And the date?
- PECSI: The 29th of March. I was premature?
- THOMAS: Premature.
- PECSI: Premature, yes, yes, yes, early, because my mother was overwhelmed with work, and Holocaust experiences maybe, and I was born in the 7th month, and my younger brother, who is 4 ½ years younger than me, he was born in his 6th month, also premature.
- THOMAS: But the 7th month was March?
- PECSI: Yes, it was March.
- THOMAS: And a little bit about your parents. Who were your parents?
- PECSI: Both of my parents are Jewish, but they come from 2 different backgrounds. My mother was born in the eastern part of Hungary in a small village. The name of this district is Szatmar and a bigger part of Szatmar district belongs to Roumania now. And the Jews in Szatmar were very religious orthodox ones. .
- THOMAS: And how do you spell Szatmar?
- PECSI: S-Z-A-T-M-A with an accent-R. This is a province, it is near the border with Roumania, the eastern part. And my mother was the 8th child in the family and she has a younger brother too, they had 9 children. My mother came from what is Roumania now, because that part was divided in the Trianon 6 months after the First World War. So she was separated from her family, and she came from a family where the children, I mean my grandmother, where the children were educated and so the mother of my mother learned Greek and Latin and Hebrew with an evangelical priest in her family and she was educated and she read the literary review which was sent her from Budapest. And she met her husband, my grandfather, at the market or something like this, but he came from an uneducated and poor family and this was a kind of misalliance but it was a big love maybe, but my grandfather was a very good-looking man, yes, I can see it in the photos, he looked really great, he was very tall. And they were....
- THOMAS: And your father was....

PECSI: No, it was not my father, it was....

THOMAS: I know, but I was asking about your father.

PECSI: Yes, yes, yes, but I have to continue. My mother, yes, was raised in an observant and very very poor family in a village where there were only a few Jews in that day, but she said that they had a very good relationship with the Hungarians, I'm not sure that that's true but she always said that. And then, when she was about 6 years old her favorite brother told her that God doesn't exist and my mother lost her faith. And then later on, when her bigger sisters and brothers got married, all of them had counseled marriages because then the Jewish young people in the village, the matchmaker found husbands and wives for them, and they all got to live separately in neighboring villages, and then this brother and then a sister of my mother's left the village, they were the younger so they didn't get married and joined first the Hasomer Hacair movement, this was a Zionist youth movement. (She spells it) And so I don't know how, because it was a family secret, I will tell you why, and so, they were Zionist, and the brother and the sister of my mum joined them first in Debrecen which is a big city in the eastern part of Hungary, it was the closest big city to their village, and then they came to Budapest. And then my mother was about 18, instead of getting married in her village she left too, and she joined them, not them but she joined the Hasomer Hacair for a couple of months, and by the time her brother and sister left Hungary to Palestine, they pulled a secret trip and I suppose that the family had no idea about it.

THOMAS: This would have been about what year?

PECSI: It was in '33, 1933.

THOMAS: Good time to leave.

PECSI: No, yes, maybe, yes, but for the worse time they were back Because both of them, and the husband, because my mother's sister they met them in Palestine and they got married and all the free people joined the family's party, the Arabic family's party, because there was nothing else and they realized that Zionism was the best thing and they have to fight against the imperialism together with the Arabic comrades, and then the English police arrested them, they were imprisoned and they were sent back to Hungary in time to catch the train to Auschwitz. And my mother, when his brother came back, he told my mother that this Hasomer Hacair was not a good place, it was a mistake, and Zionism, and so he invited my mum to join him in the communist party, and my mum joined the communists, and the Zionist adventure, which took only about 2 months, I think, it was such a big secret for her that I learned about it when I was about 30 years old and she said that she would like to tell us something but she would like to speak about these things only once in her life. So she told me and my husband and my brother at the same time and she had to wait about 10 years to have the good occasion and then she said, "I was a

member in Hasomer Hacaïr” and we were not able to understand, where is the story, that it was the story, because she, my mom, as a communist believed that it was a terrible horrible state and I suppose that during the Rakosi era in the ‘50’s it was very dangerous because Zionists were imprisoned, maybe that’s why she never told about it. And she never told about this adventure of her siblings in Palestine. My son, who is 28 years old now, went to a Jewish high school in the ‘90’s and he had an assignment to collect stories or something like that and he went to see her aunt and uncles and he asked them about the Holocaust stories, and he learned that they have not actually that kind of stories but her aunt had very nice photos about herself lying on the beach in Palestine and we were shocked because we had no idea. So this is my mother. And then my mother met my father in the communist movement, here, in Budapest.

THOMAS: And this would have been about what year?

PECSI: It was not a love story at that time, they just got together as communists, and the story continued only after the Second World War. And my father came from a different background, his family, everybody assimilated and a non-religious family for several generations. The men in the family were mathematicians and college people and they obviously were not interested in Judaism but they looked much more Jewish than my mother’s family. But he was not interested and it was a tangled bourgeois family but my father and his brother who was 2 years older, most of them joined the later communist movement at the age of 16. And at that time my father, for example, was able to read---what is the name of the main work by Marx?

THOMAS: Das Kapital.

PECSI: Yes, he was such kind of person. And he had a totally double life because he went to high school and he was very good student then and he was the leader of the---what is the name of this kind of group where students teach themselves, they give conference, lectures, each to other, it is a kind of---

THOMAS: I’m not sure.

PECSI: We have the traditional basic Christian schools too.

THOMAS: This is a Jewish traditional....

PECSI: No, no, this is a general tradition in high schools that....

THOMAS: In Hungary mostly?

PECSI: Yes, that the students organize a circle of ideas where it is a very big honor to be elected as the president or secretary of the circle as they teach each other, so he was the secretary or leader of this circle, but at the same time after

school he went to the movement, and his brother was arrested and imprisoned at the age of 17, something like that, and so he was fired from school, and he went to really work to a factory, and....

THOMAS: And when was this?

PECSI: My father was 8 years younger than my mother, and he was born in '24, and it must be....

THOMAS: It was in the '30's.

PECSI: In the end of '30's.

THOMAS: Before World War II.

PECSI: Yes, yes, and so it was a big shock for the family, especially for the father, that his older son was fired from high school and then he was in prison, he didn't want to go to visit him and I don't know much about that. And my mum and my father met in the youth movement. Every event took them to the mountains, excursions of hiking and some of the time they went to the country, and they have a lot of sports, and during the sports activities and climbing they have lectures, and the two kinds of activities were combined. And then when the Germans occupied Hungary in '44, in March, March 19, my father was sick with an infection, something like that, and he was lying in his bed, they lived on the Pest side of Margaret Bridge....

THOMAS: Your father was not in the army.

PECSI: No, Jews were not in army, but he was not in the forced army because he was young, no, he was not, but at that time he was 20 years old and he just finished high school but he couldn't continue his studies because he was a socialist and so he went to work in a factory.

THOMAS: But at the time the Germans came in he was ill.

PECSI: He was ill, but the Germans got the list of the members of the legal socialist party, and the members of the leadership, and my father was in both of them and he was obviously a leader too, so his name was on the list and so was his brother's name. And the Germans with some Hungarian soldiers arrived in the apartment, they lived in a neighborhood of academical and intellectual assimilated Jews, it doesn't exist now, so they arrived and he was lying down and they arrested him and took him immediately. But my grandmother, who was absolutely not interested in politics, but at that time she was very clever, she realized the situation and somehow she was able to contact her neighbor and told her that late event, my other son was anxious to come home, and so the neighbor went to the corner and went, my father's brother wanted to come home, she told him he shouldn't, and so, but he was a 20-year-old young man

and he was in love with somebody, and he needed a nice shirt from his home, and 2 days later he went home and he was caught.

THOMAS: He was caught by the Nazis.

PECSI: Yes, by the Nazis, and my grandmother was caught too because she was the hostage, and they were in prison in a prison which is now in the Margaret where the shopping center now is, a very famous prison where Hannah Szenis was kept, this was a Zionist hero. Okay, and then the sons and my grandmother were beaten up each in front of the others because they wanted to know the people who went to the house because my father had a so-called bourgeois family, it was much easier and more pleasant to me in his apartment where my grandmother offered tea and so on, and she knew everybody, but she realized at that time that it would be better not to tell the names, and she didn't, nobody, and they were beaten up and after a while they were transferred to another prison and then with other people they were deported to Auschwitz.

THOMAS: To Auschwitz.

PECSI: And that's a very interesting story because when I was child I was told that they were political prisoners because they never told me that we were Jewish, and that clue that they were arrested as political prisoners but I'm not sure that's true that they arrived as political prisoners. I don't know, it's too late now because there's nobody I can ask.

THOMAS: But you grew up not knowing you were Jewish?

PECSI: No, not at all, not at all.

THOMAS: When did you learn that you were Jewish?

PECSI: Oh this is another story....

THOMAS: Well, continue.

PECSI: It was much later when I was at the university, about my age of 19.

THOMAS: So when you were growing up you did not observe Jewish religious customs.

PECSI: Not at all, not at all. So, and then, my father arrived to Auschwitz, and he survived somehow, I know very little about his experience because he didn't like to speak about it, generally he didn't like to speak about himself and about Auschwitz either, and yes, I knew when there were the so-called death marches in German occupied and there were rows beside people and then he suddenly just jumped in a pit, but there were German soldiers behind the troops and they shot him, and his friends and other people saw him just fall in

the pit and he was bleeding and so everybody thought that he was dead. And the survivors who came back knew that much and they went to see my grandmother who also came back from Dachau and my uncle came back from Buchenwald, so that family came back, on my mother's side everybody dead, all her parents and brothers and sisters with their families, and my mother had at first not known they died, but all of them had died, but my father's family came back, and so they were told that people saw my father shot, but he was waiting for awhile and then he tried to get to the forest and then some Russian soldiers appeared on horses and they wanted to shoot him because he looked like a German with blond hair but he could extend his arm with the numbers, the Auschwitz numbers, and then he was saved and they brought him to a hospital and then to some hospital, a military hospital in the Soviet Union, and he came back one year later, I think.

THOMAS: And his family did not know he was alive.

PECSI: No, not at all, not at all. And my uncle was one of the leaders of the resistance movement and after the liberation he found the list that he could find the name of my grandmother and he went to Frankfurt. And it is a very nice story too because my grandmother who was a very, how to say, was a very typical woman that looks were very important for her, and so she had some teeth problems. She survived the camp and she had no idea what happened to her son, to her husband who died one year before in a hospital, so she had no idea about her family, but she was involved in her tooth problems, and she developed an abscess maybe, an infection, and she said that there were some Hungarian dentists among the liberated prisoners but she said the Hungarian dentists are not so good as the German dentists, and she wanted a real good German dentist and he wasn't even in the concentration camp, so she was lying in her bed, in the bunk waiting for the German dentist. And then her son arrived, and some mate, the barrack mate told her that outside the camp immediately there is a good-looking young man waiting for you. And my grandmother answered, no way that a man can have a look at me in such a terrible condition. And so my uncle had to answer the woman and so they met. And they came back and one year later my father who was a captive came and he was wearing very dirty Russian clothes and he just opened the door and he arrived. And then that time my mother who survived too, I will tell you, and she started to be active in the union movement, in the union movement of the textile factory workers, and then she just heard the news by chance that my father came back, and she liked him and....

THOMAS: She had known him before the war?

PECSI: Yes, before the war, and she respected him very much, and it was unbelievable that she could remember the other feeling that was socialist, and then they worked together, my father joined this union, and this is interesting also and this is typical in that era that my father was dreaming to become a doctor and he wanted to go to the university or the medical university, but the

communist party told him that no, we need economists and you have to go to the university of economics and you have to work in the union. So it was not his personal choice, he was sent there.

THOMAS: So this was after the communist government had come to power in this country....

PECSI: No, it was before, it was already before....

THOMAS: So it wasn't the government that told him he had to go, to become an economist....

PECSI: Not the government, the party, the communist party.

THOMAS: Oh, the communist party, of which he was a member.

PECSI: You see, he had become a member in the age of 16 and I could find his membership card and he has a very low number, I think, and it means he was one of the first.

THOMAS: Early. So they got married then.

PECSI: At first they worked defense and somehow they decided---this is a very funny story, because my mother who is a very straight personality and she always tells the truth, she is not very diplomatic, sometimes not very polite that the truth is very important for her, but in this story there is something which she just forgot to tell us---she forgot to tell us that we were Jewish and then she forgot to tell us that she already had a husband. It was by chance that I learned about it, about my grandmother on my father's side who said that she was a very nice widow woman, and I thought who are you speaking about. So first she decided she would never get married because she was very dedicated to work and for the country....

THOMAS: What kind of work did she do?

PECSI: At that time she was one of the leaders of this union. She was sent to the university of economics too and they went to the same, yes. It was not her choice because she was really interested actually interested in literature as she wanted to be a teacher of literature all her life. But she was sent to study economics. So I don't know how but my father asked her to marry him and she said yes and they married.

THOMAS: What year did they marry?

PECSI: It was in 1948, it was the year of the communist power.

THOMAS: The year of the communists coming into power in Hungary?

PECSI: Yes, in 1948, same year, and my mother was a deputy of the communist party that year, and I have a photo of her.

THOMAS: What does deputy mean exactly?

PECSI: Representative, representing in the parliament. But it was a formal one because there was only one party. No, no, no, no, at that time when she was elected, there were different parties, but when she was in the parliament, there was only one, yes.

THOMAS: And then you were born, in what year again?

PECSI: In 1951.

THOMAS: Were you the first child?

PECSI: Yes, I am the first child. And at first my mother had difficulty with becoming pregnant I think because she worked too much. Oh I didn't tell you about her experience during the German occupation that she went to underground and she got forged papers from the party and she left some personal belongings and the bag and her documents and the police found them immediately and they went to see her sister and said that my mother committed suicide. And so she got different false forged papers with different names and sometimes she had unbelievable stories, for example that during sudden bombings she was staying in the basement of an apartment building and at that time she had a name for somebody and his comrades falsified an identity card with, they told that they stole a real identity card from somebody and then they copied it or something like that, and so my mother had the copied identity card but unfortunately the real person with the same name and the same text was staying in the same building, and my mother realized it. The German soldiers just came to check the papers all the time but she was lucky that the bombing was so heavy that they never came. She had several stories like this because during that time she had the illegal party's work all the time that she had to do. A lot of things.

THOMAS: But tell me about your education. You were educated in Budapest, elementary school, gymnasium, but you did not know you were Jewish.

PECSI: Yes, yes, yes. It was very difficult. I don't know why, I have some thinking about why, but I always was attracted by Jews, I mean that all my friends were Jewish in the kindergarten and in school, and all the boys, almost everybody was Jewish but we never spoke about it. And I think that the real cause of this was the similar family background, that we didn't have grandparents, that we didn't go to churches because we were not religious, yes, and maybe that's why, but we never talk about it. And later on I realize that I have a lot of friends and my cousins too who don't observe Christmas, for example. But we observe Christmas, we had Christmas tree at home, we

didn't have the typical Christian story with the small Jesus, in Hungary the small Jesus brings the presents to them but not to the Jewish communists, we had the Santa Claus . But only we had the Santa Claus, I just realized it now that it was a communist thing because in other families Santa Claus comes on the 6th of December...

THOMAS: St. Nicholas Day.

PECSI: Nicholas Day and we had the Nicholas Day and we had the Santa Claus....

THOMAS: And the Santa Claus at Christmas, on December 25.

PECSI: At Christmas, and I had the problem whether it was the same person who comes twice or maybe they are twins or, and this is how it is.

THOMAS: But you did not have the Christkind.

PECSI: No, not at all, not at all. But it was only when I was very small. When I was about 7 or 8 I just learned that it was my parents who gave the presents, it looked great under the Christmas tree together, it was a really good holiday.

THOMAS: But you didn't celebrate Hanukkah.

PECSI: Not at all, not at all. But we invited my friends who didn't have a Christmas tree at home and I didn't know why, I thought that they had so terrible parents who wouldn't let them. My parents were serious about this communist idea that they are not religious, they are not liberal, they are not Jewish anymore, and I was raised with the idea that there is no differences among people, everybody is the same and it was not strange for them that we don't speak about this. But so they couldn't speak about their family. It was so interesting, I remember that my family including the relatives that my mother had one sister and one brother who survived the Holocaust, the two ones who were in the underground too, and my father had one brother, and their children were my cousins, and my uncles and aunts always when they came to see us once or twice a year, not very often, they never spoke about the past or these kinds of stories, they were interested only in politics, they discussed about political things.

THOMAS: And about the current politics and what was going on.

PECSI: Yes, yes, yes. But I think that it was very dangerous for them to speak about the past, because the Jewish past was maybe dangerous, I don't know.

THOMAS: There was anti-Semitism, anti-Jewishness under the communist regime?

PECSI: Sure, because Rakosi was the first secretary of the party....

- THOMAS: Wasn't Rakosi Jewish?
- PECSI: Yes, he was Jewish, but he was sent here by the Soviet Union and he was an immigrant in the Soviet Union and it was very dangerous during the Stalin era when that was the process against the Jewish, conducted of some sort, and it was very dangerous, and so he was the biggest anti-Semitic Jewish secretary of the party ever. Yes, absolutely.
- THOMAS: So in a sense he did not admit himself that he was Jewish. He didn't practice Judaism and he....
- PECSI: Who, Rakosi? No, not at all. I think that only a few people observed Judaism because the observant Jews who survived the Holocaust left immediately after the war.
- THOMAS: You mean left Hungary.
- PECSI: Left Hungary because it was in fact not impossible but very difficult to observe Judaism.
- THOMAS: And so then when you finished the gymnasium you went on to the university.
- PECSI: Yes, I went to the university and I studied literature. And....
- THOMAS: That's what your mother had been interested in.
- PECSI: Yes, but that time my father was the journalist and he had....
- THOMAS: Although he did work in economics.
- PECSI: Yes, but they left it after a while, both of them left it, and....
- MT; They started out in economics but they did not continue.
- PECSI: Not at all, but my mother has become a dye expert in a textile factory and she isn't forced to deal with economical questions, but actually she was interested in books and literature and in politics, and my father has become a journalist in Nepszabadsag which was the newspaper of the communist party until the revolution, and then, no it was after the revolution, yes, it was in '57, after the revolution, this means "the liberty of the people", and now this is the most popular daily, but now it is not the party's anymore. He was there for a couple of years. But interesting that he was sent, because at that time the party sent people from here to there. Then he was sent to direct the Hungarian television, it was part of the '60's, and he just loved it very much, he loved television very much. And he was very interested in reforms, and he tried to turn the Hungarian television to western type television and he was criticized very

much because of that. And I can remember that I was a high school student and sometimes I watched the television with my parents when there was time. My father enjoyed it.

THOMAS: And what did you do after---you graduated from the university in the field of literature.

PECSI: First I would like to tell you how I learned that I was Jewish. I was about 19 years old and I was in the university and I went with some good friends for a couple of days to Transylvania and we went to Cluj, and we met some people from Cluj in Budapest and then went, it was my first trip there, and we met ethnic Hungarian people living in Cluj and there are many Hungarians, and we met a poet, a young woman who was a poet, in her 20's too and that was a very good company from Romania to Hungary, and then my friend who was my close friend as I said, he went to the medical university and he was Jewish too, and he said how interesting that by chance everybody is Jewish here in this group in Cluj, and I said that how can you say such a stupid thing, there are no difference among people, everybody has the same influence, for example I am not Jewish, I said, and then everybody started to laugh because everybody knew I was except me. (laughs) I am not religious, I don't practice.

THOMAS: You considered yourself an atheist.

PECSI: Yes, and all my family, yes, yes.

THOMAS: And do you still feel that way?

PECSI: No, no. I'm not religious but I don't feel this way.

THOMAS: Do you not now observe Jewish religious customs?

PECSI: No. I'm not answering yes, answering no, but I am not a believer. But Judaism is very, very important for me, I think it is the most important part of my identity, but I am not a believer.

THOMAS: If you'll forgive my asking, if it is not a religious identity what kind of a, is it a cultural identity?

PECSI: A cultural, and I think it is a faith that the Holocaust is the most important thing in this, that it is....

THOMAS: You say a fate, F-A-T-E?

PECSI: Faith, source, there is a faith that I have that all my family carries, that the Holocaust, that's for me very important that I belong to them, that I have a very strong connection to them....

- THOMAS: That you continue their heritage, is that correct?
- PECSI: Yes, maybe, yes, yes, and not long ago I thought that I have no chance to meet them, I mean the family, my mother's family, but their life has a reality in my life, I think that I thought of them, for me they are real people and they are very important for me. And this is very difficult to explain because it's not a rational thing, but when I observe a Jewish holiday or I put the Shabbat candle I can feel that all the Jews do the same thing at the same minute all over the world but I can feel it in the time too that I do that what my grandmother and her family did....
- THOMAS: So that in a sense they are in you, they are part of you, is that a way to put it?
- PECSI: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. My mother thought that I am absolutely stupid and she couldn't understand that and she said that I am a fundamentalist, and my younger brother says the same thing, so....
- THOMAS: Fundamentalist religiously?
- PECSI: Yes, yes. For them this is very difficult to understand how I can be Jewish if I am not going to....
- THOMAS: And they do not feel that they are religious [telephone rings]---let me pause this.

So your mother and brother don't consider themselves Jewish?

- PECSI: No, no, not at all. My mother just died now, but she would consider that she is Hungarian and European and internationalist and cosmopolitan but not Jewish. And my brother is absolutely not interested in Judaism, and sometimes he can demonstrate for his sake that I am arrogant but not Jewish.

END OF TAPE ONE, Side One

- PECSI: All my friends were Jewish, and they were like me very upbeat and a lot of things, and we organized camps for handicapped children, I mean who were handicapped in their family background and who didn't have a chance to get enough....
- THOMAS: You mean poor?
- PECSI: We were very sensitive in social problems and we developed volunteer circles and best of all for common problems.
- THOMAS: You get that from the Hebrew prophets!

- PECSI: Yes, maybe, yes. My best friend, who was my best friend in high school, we went to the same faculty, and sometimes she was the secretary of the youth movement in our class and I was her deputy and sometimes I was the leader and she was my deputy, and now she is the first reform rabbi woman in Hungary, yes, and she started and finished from the rabbi school in London in her 40's.
- THOMAS: Really! And she's the first reform rabbi of any kind, not just the first reform woman....
- PECSI: No, in Hungary, she's the second one in Europe, in all Europe, and now there are some other women but she was the second one....
- THOMAS: She was the second reform rabbi or the second woman reform rabbi?
- PECSI: The second woman reform rabbi in Europe and she is the only one in Budapest, she is the only reform rabbi and the only woman rabbi here because the progressive movement is not officially accepted here and they can't get any share of the money from the government.
- THOMAS: Are they accepted in Judaism by other branches of Judaism?
- PECSI: No. The other branches don't want to share with them. They try to prevent them from becoming a member of the Jewish community. And it is very interesting but typical, we never thought about our Jewishness, never, and I was amazed when I just started to read a Jewish newspaper there in the Jewish community or something like that and I read an article about my best friend Katalin that she was enrolled in the rabbi school and then I came back and she has become very famous here and I made an interview for my newspaper Shabat and I asked her that how can you explain that you who were very active in the communist youth movement with me when we were high schoolers now you turn to Judaism, to the reform Judaism, and she said that she cannot see the difference, they're the same, that she always liked socializing and the uplifting in social life and she always wanted to turn the world a bigger part. She said that that's the same in communism and in Judaism.
- THOMAS: So by social life you mean social activities in society.
- PECSI: Yes, yes, yes. So she can combine and adjust very well these two activities. Very interesting. And then that time when I was in high school I went to a club here in Buda which was officially the club of the youth, the leaders in the youth organization in high schools, and they had a good night once a week and there was some lectures, but they were not political, lectures in that time in the second part of the '60's, communism was not very severe here anymore, it was only like an umbrella, it was an umbrella organization but it was organized....

THOMAS: When you say it was not very serious do you mean, what do you mean, that people didn't take the doctrine very seriously?

PECSI: Yes, and the goal of some organizations was practically not ideology but socializing. And it was the time that the first rock-and-roll band was formed, it was formed inside the youth movement, and me, for example, I went to the club to meet nice guys there and we went rock-and-roll, and then I met some very good friends....

THOMAS: So you went to some of these to meet nice young men.

PECSI: Yes, and then we had some lectures, we listened to some lectures, sometimes they were very interesting, about psychological things, about music, and so on and then we had parties....

THOMAS: Was this when you were in the university?

PECSI: No, it was in high school, but everybody in this class of people who went there became very well educated people with very good jobs and they are famous now in their fields, it's very interesting that it was an absolutely elite place, and I met my husband there who went to the medical school and since he has become a psychiatrist and first we were friends and a couple of years later we married, when I was in the last year at the university.

THOMAS: What year was that? When you were married.

PECSI: It was in 1974. I didn't realize it until later on that he was only person in the class who was not Jewish. He was not Jewish. And we had a lot of common things, and it was one of the common things that we were absolutely not interested in religion, for example, and he didn't have a religious background. He was raised by his grandfather and he was not religious either, and he didn't have----and maybe, and we realized later, that he always was attended by Jews, and he had Jewish girlfriends and Jewish friends because he never went to church and he had nothing in common with people who went to church, who were religious.

THOMAS: So he had no Catholic or Protestant upbringing.

PECSI: No, no, absolutely nothing. Yes. And what is interesting that I didn't realize this problem, and much later on in the '90's when I was teaching in a Jewish high school, the Jewish high school here in Budapest, and I met there the father of one of my students who used to be a member of that club, and we recognized each other and we were very happy. And he said that a couple of years earlier, he was waiting for his daughter who was in high school at that time and who was coming back from Israel, and it was her first trip there and then he went to wait for her in the lobby of the Ferihegy airport and he just recognized that everybody was there from the former club, all the parents, and

they were waiting for their kids, and it was maybe the first trip from Hungary, it was in the early '90's and was the first trip organized by the sophomore, the Jewish agency, that young people from high school, from Budapest high school to....

THOMAS: To go to Israel?

PECSI: To go to Israel, and then he realized, that guy, I think that he was one of the leaders of this club, he was an economics student at that time, he realized that everybody was Jewish in the club, the Jewish people were active everywhere. It is very interesting. And I had the same or a similar feeling later on when my younger son who went to a Jewish high school and he played in different musical events and he organized a separate Jewish band and they had some very nice concerts, they were really very good, and I went once, I was invited to listen to them in a club, in a basement club, and I just recognized a lot of parents who were familiar to me from the club and from the youth camps, yes, it was the same people continuing their activities in different fields but the activities are the steady elements. So, and when I was in the university I was more and more critical with the social system. I was not very interested in politics, but I couldn't understand the limits in my field, literature, I mean it was a time when there was big theoretical discussions about two approaches, structuralism and formalism, and I wasn't a bit interested in it and I was absolutely against official communist position and that's why I can remember that my husband, who was not my husband only boyfriend at that time, and he asked my opinion that he would like to join the communist party because he would like to be a good doctor and he thought that as a communist he can change maybe the conditions in the country and I was absolutely against and I was hysterical that he would join. Later on he accepted that I was right but he was idealistic, but in that time I was not. I had one more experience, that I could remember that during the occupation of Prague, I mean in 1968, with Hungary to fight with Czechoslovakia, I can remember that all my parents were not only discussing but it was a quarrel, they were shouting, actually, because my father was absolutely against....

THOMAS: The Hungarians joining the Russians against the Czechs....

PECSI: Yes, yes, but I think that both of them admired this kind of "socialism with a human face", it was the slogan for it, but my mother could better accept the official decision but my father not and I appreciated a lot because for me it was a very separate, a very good way, this Czech way.

THOMAS: Did you have arguments with your parents on the subject of your disagreements with the communist literary position?

PECSI: Yes, a little bit. And I can remember something else. I studied French literature, at that time it was impossible to go to western countries, then we were students and we couldn't get out....

- THOMAS: Didn't you rebel against that? Didn't you feel that was wrong, as a university student?
- PECSI: Yes, but....
- THOMAS: But there was nothing to do about it.
- PECSI: Yes, and then my father, who was a journalist, he went officially to the United States, and his luggage was lost and he got some compensation money, and when he came back he shared his money with my brother and me, and so I went immediately, within one week, I went to France. And I could live my studies one month for \$100. It was in 1969 and it was a very miserable condition but I just loved it.
- THOMAS: How could you go to France? Wasn't there a limitation on your travel to the west?
- PECSI: Yes, but if you had money maybe you could.
- THOMAS: You could get a passport?
- PECSI: Yes, I could get a passport because I had the money for it.
- THOMAS: You had the passport because you had the money that you could spend in France.
- PECSI: Yes, and it was officially in the bank. So I could get it, otherwise you could get a passport in every 3 years, only, but maybe, university students were sometimes refused. But it was very difficult. But I was very lucky that I could go there, and then....
- THOMAS: What did you do in Paris?
- PECSI: Oh, I saw everything, and I met people, and I had some contact people for example John Marisz who was correspondent of either television or maybe some newspapers, and he invited me to a big festival organized by the United States which is a big festival every year, and it was fantastic, this was a big crowd, a fantastic program, I think the best from every branch of arts, St. Ibert, the Jacques ballet, it was fantastic, and people could just join the communist party there, and the atmosphere was fantastic, everybody was open, everybody met, stranger people just talked to you, it was fantastic, and I almost joined the French communist party because I just loved them, everybody looked like hippie but they were very relaxed, it was....
- THOMAS: It was fun.

- PECSI: It was fun, and when I came back and told this story my father said, oh big splash, communists are lucky. But he had some idea about the communist
- THOMAS: You mean some criticism?
- PECSI: Yes. But his possibilities were limited, I think, because he was a leader.
- THOMAS: Both your parents were members of the communist party but you were not.
- PECSI: Absolutely not.
- THOMAS: And your husband was not?
- PECSI: He was, because he was a doctor and he joined the communists when he was a university student, but he had problems, for example, he was in his 20's, a young doctor and he was very talented and he was liked a lot by his professor. But he wrote an article about treatment for psychiatric patients at that time in a critical review that deals with social issues, and the following day of his publication he was invited to the secretary of the party, at that time he was the first secretary of the party at the university and my husband worked at the university clinic, and he shouted to him....
- THOMAS: He scolded him.
- PECSI: Yes, yes, yes, and he could stay in the position because his professor saved him, I don't know how, so his situation was very difficult because he was critical while he was there, he was very optimistic and he thought that he could change something that he couldn't.
- THOMAS: When he worked at the university or at the hospital was he essentially working for the state?
- PECSI: Yes.
- THOMAS: Because the hospital was not private.
- PECSI: Yes, of course. But it was the university hospital, that means that they, not only the state hospital, but, I'm not sure that the system is the same in the United States, but here in a university hospital means that you teach the students, that there is research, there is the teaching, and there is hospital practice, the 3 things together.
- THOMAS: In the United States there are both what we call city-county hospitals, that is, run by the city-county or the city or the county, and there are private hospitals that belong to, say, churches.
- PECSI: That did not happen in communism.

- THOMAS: But you do now, don't you, like Roman Catholic hospitals or possibly other church hospitals. Don't you have that now?
- PECSI: I'm not sure that they are really private or only semi-private....
- THOMAS: When I say private I mean not state, they are owned and run by somebody, run by a private organization that is not the state or the city or the county, it's not state, it's like a church organization or even a private company of some kind. We have that in the States.
- PECSI: Not here. So I was never really interested in politics and I hated it that my parents were too much interested and involved in politics and it was the most important thing for them.
- THOMAS: But both you and your husband were interested in social problems, helping people who were poor or....
- PECSI: Yes, and I was interested mostly in literature and fashion, and that's why I hated that there was a so-called conscience of politics by the communists and I hated it, that they wanted to say it was much like, a kind of art so I was annoyed.
- THOMAS: When you got out of the university did you teach?
- PECSI: After the university? No. Because I always wanted to teach and while I was at the university we had a staff and we prepared and Saturday mornings we gave free lectures to the students who were handicapped and we tried a new unit and I was interested, but by chance, I was invited, when I was in my last year at the university, I was invited to join a publishing house....
- THOMAS: Doing what?
- PECSI: To do editing, to be a lecturer, I mean to read the manuscripts and give her or his personal opinion about this, and it was very accepting for me because it was a publishing house of sometimes foreign literature, first, and another reason for me that I could refuse this offer that I have to go there only twice a week and I could stay at home the rest of the week and it was a great thing because I wanted to do my PhD work and at that time it was not a formal study, you can do it during your work and this way I had time for it, and I wanted to have a family and so I chose to join this publishing house...
- THOMAS: Was it a state-owned publishing house?
- PECSI: Yes, state-owned, but not only state-owned but the director of it was not only a communist, he was not a former communist he was currently a communist but he was a former AVH, this AVH it was a secret branch of the communist

party who eliminate some inner enemies inside of the communist party and he was a....

THOMAS: Was it a reform communism, to reform communism?

PECSI: Not really a reform but he was in prison during the Rakosi era in the '50's and he was, his fate in the cell was with the best comrades of Kadar Janos and with one who had become later on a very popular writer and these two people protected each other after the revolution and he could count, after he came to the publishing house, that this big comrade and collaborator of Kadar Janos protected him, so it was very paradoxical and very difficult for you to understand, that he was there a good communist on one hand and it was no room for reform movement or protest or something inside of the publishing house, but on the other hand he was the most courageous publisher who started to publish the first western European and American books, books of some dissidents, and at the publishing house it was great, but he was just very dull, he didn't communicate, and he was a very crazy and very scary person. So I joined this place but I hated it all the time because....

THOMAS: But it could publish western dissidents because he was protected by the chum of Janos Kadar.

PECSI: Yes, yes, and so it was a very exciting spiritual workshop but on the other hand it was not a workshop because sometimes people, editors, people who were there were reported in the police, sometimes I had colleagues who were arrested, for example, and I was responsible for the French literature but French literature wasn't publishable all the time and so I was punished too because of the French literature and it was just terrible, absolutely terrible.

THOMAS: It sounds frightening,

PECSI: It was very frightening, very frightening, but I didn't care a lot because I knew why I was there, it was not so important for me, I needed only the time til the PhD was finished. My tutor at the university was a very great person, I liked it very much. And then I had my family, and 2 children, it was very comfortable for me and I could spend more time with them, but....

THOMAS: How long did you work for the publishing company?

PECSI: Theoretically it was 16 years, but practically I went to Germany with my family for 1 year, I went to the university for a post PhD program for 4 years, and then I went to the United States for 3 years, so I spent the rest of them, but at that time in the communist era it was good that I could reserve my position there but I didn't work there actually.

THOMAS: What did you do in Germany and the United States?

PECSI: My husband was invited for research.

THOMAS: Your husband was doing medical research, psychiatric research.

PECSI: Yes, yes, and when we went to Germany my 2nd child was 8 months old, he was a baby and it was good for me again that I could stay at home with him. The older son was 4 years old. It was a vacation for me, and when we went to the United States it was a research for him. It was not so good because I didn't like that I had no chance to get a job there. I was offered a teaching job at Columbia University, I could have taught Hungarian as a foreign language, but I had no social security number. Three years was not enough time for changing my status. But going back to the time, my father, when I got married in 1944, no, '74, and I got pregnant, at that time my father developed a very deep depression. At first they didn't realize it was a depression but after a while they realized it was a depression and at that time medicines were not so effective, it was before the Prozac era, and he decided to quit the television job and he went back to the news agency and he was sad about it because he liked the television job much better. But he was very very ill, I can remember there were weekends when he was lying on top of his bed with his eyes closed and in normal life he was a very optimistic and very cheerful person, laughing, and it was terrible. And when I got pregnant I went to see the doctor on a Friday, and, oh, after I got married we didn't have an apartment, it was very difficult to get an apartment, you couldn't buy one but we didn't have money either, but you had to apply for an apartment to the state but you knew as a student and doctor you had no chance, so we lived together with my parents at that time, and my husband was installed in his hospital and my mother, I don't know, I cannot remember where she was, but I was together with my father who was in a very bad condition and I said to him that I was pregnant and he couldn't be happy with this because he was so depressed, and the following was a Sunday, the following day on Monday he committed suicide. And I think it was not related to my pregnancy but this news, good news found his bad condition. My mother was a very strong person, that she could get on with her life after she had lost her parents and her siblings and now my father. My brother was just admitted to a university, he wanted to study musicology and sound engineering and he tried it several times but in Hungary this profession, this direction, didn't exist, you could go to study musicology or you could go to study engineering at the university, the Polytechnic, but in Warsaw there is a special school which has both together, and my brother was just accepted, he was admitted, and my mother has said to him that he should go there.

THOMAS: So when your father committed suicide he was gone, your brother was gone?

PECSI: No, at that time he was here because it was December but he was admitted in May or June and after a couple of months we got an apartment with my husband, and we left and my brother left and my mother just was by herself

and it was a very difficult time, a very hard time. So that happened. I cannot remember the '80's.

THOMAS: Were you with your father, that is in the apartment, when he committed suicide?

PECSI: It was the next day. I can remember that we were together all the time but not really together, I was busy doing some translation, I was lying on his bed, well, with his eyes closed, or something like that, and I can remember that I tried to contact him, I wanted to invite him for a walk but he would not respond.. And then my mother came back for lunch and so did my grandmother, and they were, everybody was talking about a suicide which happened, somebody who, and I think now it was maybe encouraging for my father that somebody else....

THOMAS: You mean maybe he heard and was influenced by hearing about somebody else's suicide?

PECSI: Yes, but I was always told, he told me, that when he was in Auschwitz he had something but it was his choice that he was alive or he died. And I admired it. And so was my mother who had something too, not in Auschwitz, because my mother was here in Budapest, she was in hiding, but she had a box of tablets. But she realized it after the war that a doctor, a woman doctor who was a communist too, who told my mother after the war that she would be taking poison, and not very long, because she was not sure that my mother was strong enough to take it. But I think it was a good feeling that they had that control. And then I learned the news about my father's committing suicide I thought that Oh my God that he survived Auschwitz and he didn't use his tablets, that now maybe he thought that it doesn't work for him, he cannot control his life anymore. And so I can understand his suicide.

(pause)

THOMAS: Tell me what happened in your life, if anything, with the change.

PECSI: I should go back a little bit earlier when we were in Germany in '80 for something, a very important something, that I didn't want to go to Germany at first because I had such issues against Germans, I was not very....

THOMAS: Why?

PECSI: Because all I thought that all Germans were Nazis and I had things against Germans and I hated the language. I had a lot of stupid things....

THOMAS: But it was basically because of the Nazis and what happened, the Holocaust.

PECSI: No, there were 2 reasons. Yes, one because of the Holocaust, and the other one, I never liked Germans and the German language. I don't know why. My parents wanted me to learn German when I was 5 years old, they tried twice and I hated the language all the time. And then we arrived in Pfalz, it was very close to the French border, the name of the town was Landau and my husband was in the Landau hospital. And we met a very nice family and especially the man was very very nice and I just made friends with him in the first minute, and I told there one or two stupid things, saying that I thought all the Germans are Nazis and I hate all of them, because he had told family and he was so nice. And then we were invited to their house after one or two weeks we were there, for dinner, and he was a psychiatric lectureship and a psychiatrist, and he put some music, and it was such a music that I never heard before, that I just fell in love with it, it was very cheerful and very celebrative, finally it happened to be some Yiddish music, it was the first time in my life I had listened to something like that, and he was a Jewish German, actually, and that's why, because I have a feeling that I know this face. Because there are Jewish types.

THOMAS: Was his wife Jewish too?

PECSI: No. But he was Jewish, and he had a lot of Jewish music, and....

THOMAS: And you were not familiar with this music?

PECSI: Not at all, it didn't exist in Hungary. But in Germany at that time you could buy music like this in the bookstores or music shops but it was not before because of the Nazis, but people had become, what is the word for it, they just started to become interested in Judaism and Jewish culture and don't have inhibitions.

THOMAS: What language did you speak in? Did you use Hungarian? Between you and this family? You and your husband with this family?

PECSI: No, no, no, my husband spoke German and I spoke French. In that place, in that area everybody spoke French because France was so close, and what was great was that in the place it was very close to France and to French culture and they were very proud of France and they drank their wine and they went shopping to France and so on and it was a very different culture, and this man for example told us that a Bayreuther or north German person was a third character for him than anybody there, I mean it was a different culture because he was closer to the, that was a mixed history and a mixed of people there, the Palatine in Germany that is a long history, and then maybe there was some mixture between French and German people, I think, because most of the people had dark hair not blond. In any case he was Jewish. So it was very important for me because at that time I just started to be interested not only in the Holocaust but in this music and in the interland Jewish history and when we came back in the '80's I was more and more interested in Jewish culture,

and in the second half of the '80's the first publications appeared about the Holocaust and then about Judaism, but it was very difficult to get these books because, I mean the first book by Braham, about the Holocaust, appeared, you know that Braham is one of the Holocaust historians of Hungarian origin but he emigrated to the States and he is a professor at the City University of New York City and he had a big book about the Hungarian Holocaust, it is the best one, and it was published in the late '80's in Hungarian but you couldn't get it in the normal library....

THOMAS: How do you spell his name?

PECSI: Braham, Randolph Braham, B-R-A-H-A-M, and his 2 volumes book about the Hungarian Holocaust was published, but you couldn't find it in the book stores, but you had to ask or say something or you could get it only if you were inside a secret circle.

THOMAS: So they had it but it was what we call "under the counter".

PECSI: Yes, yes, and there was some other book about the state, about Jewish history some century, by an authority of some Hungarian origin, and he was a professor in Paris but now he is a professor here, his and some other publication was forbidden. And then a friend of mine who is a social psychologist at Eotvos-Lorand and a sociologist at Eotvos-Lorand made an interview, and the question and the title of the book is that "How Did You Learn that You Were Jewish?" So I just learned that it was not only my personal problem, it was particular for my generation, I mean in the second generation, that everybody had to learn in a way, in a special way, and it was not normal in our family.

THOMAS: Was this limited to Hungary?

PECSI: Maybe yes.

THOMAS: Would this have been true in France or Italy or Switzerland?

PECSI: In Switzerland I think it was, in Switzerland there were not so many Jews as here, you know, here there are about 100,000 Jews, that's a big quantity of Jews. In Switzerland maybe nobody cares who are Jews or not, for they are not so important. In France I don't know. But here it is a special thing that Jews are in the margin not in the main stream like in the United States or like in the western countries.

INTERRUPTION

PECSI: So about this problem, I realized that's why my parents never told about the Jewishness, because our parents who were active in the left movement were

serious about their refusal about Judaism, and the people who accepted Judaism either left the country or they were not very....

THOMAS: They were not practicing.

PECSI: Yes, but they had a secret life maybe, because I know now that there were several people who went to synagogues or who observed kosher household but they were not very....

THOMAS: It was kept secret.

PECSI: Yes, and I never knew people like that, but for me it is very important to speak about our Jewishness to my children, but they were not interested that time. Because children, I think children don't like to be reminded, because they want to be in the middle.

THOMAS: They want to be like everybody else.

END OF TAPE ONE

THOMAS: Did this change only when the political situation changed, when the Communist government fell?

PECSI: No, because they had a chance that we went to the United States in 1987 for one year but it was renewed twice so we stayed for 3 years and then our children went to public school in New York state and there is a Jewish majority and all the Jewish holidays were observed, and it was the first time I heard the names of the holidays and it was like a miracle for me, it was fantastic and I was attracted all the time and they observed Hanukkah, it was called the winter contract, and almost everybody was Jewish who was not Korean or Hispanic in the school.

THOMAS: Did your children then become interested in being Jewish?

PECSI: Yes, yes, yes, it was very interesting, for example that my younger son went to the second grade in the elementary school and he had some class where they prepared for the winter holidays and the teacher, Mrs. Eisman, asked that who would like to make a picture for Christmas and who would like to do Hanukkah, and David said that, you know, I will make them both because I am a half-Jew and this was that he learned because we just bought a book and we learned from the book how to celebrate Hanukkah and it was the first time in my life, in our life.

THOMAS: He said he was a what Jew?

PECSI: Yes, I explained that he said "I am a half-Jew, I will observe both, I will make two pictures because I am a half-Jew," and then Mrs. Eisman said, "How can

you say such a stupid thing, David, that you are not a half-Jew, you are such a rich person that you have two whole cultures”, and David was so proud of himself when he came home, and I think the Americans are wonderful in this problem, it would be unbelievable here in Hungary, you are either Jew or Hungarian, the opposite is not Christian or Jewish here but Jewish or Hungarian, in the United States you are Jewish American not Jewish or American. It was great and all of us were more and more involved in the Jewish life because all our friends happened to be Jewish and we were invited to Jewish parties and Jewish holidays and events, Jewish weddings and so on and on, and during that time there were the political changes here and we came back, well everybody has changed. But for my husband it was more and more difficult because he had the feeling that I am too Jewish now and I am too much interested, it was true, I was involved very very much in this problem and he had the feeling that he was like a Shabbat boy, you know Shabbat boy?

THOMAS: No, what is that?

PECSI: That in an observant Jewish family it is forbidden to work during the Shabbat and it is forbidden to make the fire or to cook or something like that, so somebody, a boy, a goyim, is asked before the holiday to have them, to do those things, and he said because all our friends are Jewish, and I can understand now that at that time I was not very accepting for this and I had the feeling that he wanted to prevent me and he tried but he couldn't, and when we came home I went to teach. I told you that I always wanted to teach but I hadn't a chance for that, but after the changing my state-run publishing house just fell apart. Later on it survived, but it was then a private publishing house and had a different profile, but everybody was fired, and so I thought that it was a good sign from the top that I should leave and I went to teach in an orthodox Jewish school. But I didn't realize it was orthodox because there are no orthodox Jewish people in Hungary and it was sponsored by some company of American orthodox Jews, but it was not told us. We had a principal who was a lecturer or a professor at the Marxist department at the university for Marxism, he came to the orthodox school and I thought oh that's okay he has a Marxist point of view for the school but it was terrible because it was a double plague that the children, I mean the students, they were high school students, were forbidden to eat non-kosher food and it was forbidden to bring any food to school, girls and a woman teacher were forced to wear only skirt, and so on and on, and we had religion and Hebrew teachers coming from Israel who had no idea about the standard there and about Hungary, and it was just terrible and I left after two....

THOMAS: Did it affect your teaching? That is to say, did they say that you should teach certain things a certain way? So you were restricted as to what you could teach in literature?

PECSI: Yes, yes, yes.

THOMAS: That would be very hard.

KP No, because the students, it's very interesting, the first students were so good, so bright, bright but deviant students who cannot fit in the frames, but I like this kind of thing just very much, but they were very, I never had so smart students, never so bright students because it was a foundation school, it was the first time that they had been in a non-state-run school, and a lot of parents thought that it would be great, and very European, very cosmopolitan maybe, the diploma or the final exam means they can go to university in the United States, and so on....

THOMAS: So some of those students were not from orthodox Jewish families....

PECSI: Nobody was from orthodox because there are no orthodox Jewish family, only the literary teachers were orthodox, nobody else, so it was, we were fighting all the time.

THOMAS: Isn't that difficult.

PECSI: It was very difficult and very ridiculous and very tragic.

THOMAS: Did the school survive? Did it continue?

PECSI: In a different way, after the second year, there was a rebellion organized by the teachers, 17 teachers left the school, and the principal was fired, and the American orthodox group sent more teachers, and almost all the children left, only the very best students stayed who had no chance to change schools and some who wanted to be orthodox and now they have classes of 3 or 5 children, the bright children left first. But it was very interesting experience for me, and the students who were about 15 or 16 year olds, at that time, they were a little bit too old because some of them have finished the 9th or 10th grade somewhere else, but they came to the 9th grade again because they were so happy because they are there at a Jewish high school, so they lost several years here, but they were so great, young people that I see many of them at every interesting cultural event, they were very good. So, but at the same time both of my children had difficulty with those things....

THOMAS: With religious things?

PECSI: Yes, and both of them decided to switch Jewish schools, to other different Jewish schools. My older son who is interested in humanities and literature had difficulties with math and physics because in Hungary it is much stronger but he never learned these subjects and so he was cut out and he switched to another high school which was a faith-run high school, it existed during the communist era but at that time there was only 3 or 4 children, they were secular Jews, but they had no chance to continue their studies at the university....

THOMAS: Under the Communists?

PECSI: Yes, and the level of education was not very high but they had a strong Jewish identity, but that time, when my son decided to go there, everybody came there from my former school, from the orthodox one, and they have a great school, about 160 students, and it has become a very liberal Jewish school, not a very high level but a very liberal school....

THOMAS: But not high academically?

PECSI: Not high academical but for my son it was good because he didn't like formal education but he was a big reader and he spent several times sick at home and he read a lot and he was admitted to the university immediately on his first try and he finished archaeology....

THOMAS: But he could go from that school to the university, no problem.

PECSI: Yes, he had no problem and now he's working at an academical institute for research and he is in the field, and it was just made for him because he didn't like not having time for his stuff and he could get it. And the other son, who was always a very competitive and very talented child, went to a music program in New York, and he is a musician and he is good at everything. It was very interesting, because before he went to the States he was in the first grade and he went to a music school where they have all the music chorus and they sang Gregorian and it was at an almost professional level, and then when he came back he went back to the same class and then they were at a real professional state and they were invited for example to the world expo in Spain and they had a real contract and it was really good. But they performed several times in churches, in Catholic churches, and everybody prayed except him and they were put out. And I sent him to a Jewish camp....

THOMAS: You mean he was not allowed....

PECSI: No, but he wanted to pray, but everybody else was Catholic except him because he realized that it was a religious thing, not only about, not only worked just as the music or the sound but as the culture, but his teacher and almost everybody else were Catholic and they kneeled and prayed and so on and it was very embarrassing for him. And the first summer I sent him to the newly founded Jewish camp, it is founded by a millionaire in the United States, he comes from a Hungarian background, and it was a wonderful camp where the camp and the programs are around the various students with the leaders and the programs are very effective and it is a real democratic life, and very emotional, very open, everybody loves everybody and they encourage Jewish identity, and after the camp, the first camp, David had a very strong Jewish identity and they had a mass group and they know almost every Jewish student from every high school and they went to parties and had talks together and so on and so on. And on Pesach, which was almost at the same time as

Easter, it was the two years after the political changes, Passover and Easter, that somebody organized a common Easter-Passover contact in a very nice concept, and that is recalled in my mind as a Christian chorus, and they have some uniforms like in the....

THOMAS: In the Catholic church, those kind of robes....

PECSI: Yes, yes, it was that kind of robes, and David was very proud of that chorus because it sounded wonderfully. But during the rehearsal he recognized in the Jewish clothes his friends from the Jewish camp and during the pre-concert they just sang wonderfully and the Jewish kids have got a little bit funny because it sounded like an opera program in a camp but not a music, not a real music, but David had a very serious problem that he had the feeling that he could join the professional singing and then he decided that he would like to switch to the Jewish school, which was liberal, and open school and there is no mandatory religious but they have a Jewish identity and Jewish side and Jewish tradition. And it was maybe the last thing for my husband, that he was absolutely fed up, that everybody is assigned a straight place in the family and he was absolutely unnerved and upset by this.

THOMAS: How did he feel when you all lived in the United States? Did he go to the, did he observe the Jewish holidays with you? Rosh Hashanah? Yom Kippur?

PECSI: Yes, absolutely. Yes, yes, yes, in the United States he had no problem with this. He had a problem when he came back because that time it was only a treat for a vacation or a kind of....

THOMAS: It was just at that time, not forever.

PECSI: Yes. I don't know why but here it was very difficult but we did that with a lot of other things that Hungary just, Hungarian society just started to split, to divide into two parts, and it is something right now, that there are the so-called real Hungarians, the nationalistic and right wing people, and there are the left wing and liberal people who are mostly Jews. And he was in the liberal and left wing party but he's not Jewish, that he had the bad feeling that he's not accepted in this party but I think that's a complication of ideals for Jews, but he was more and more fed up with us. So in the '90's our relationships had become worse and worse, we were really alienated, and then my sons and me became vegetarians continually and he was a minority again, that he was the only person in the family....

THOMAS: But that is not particularly Jewish, vegetarianism....

PECSI: No, no, no, but he was always determined and he was always in a minority in the family.

THOMAS: That's hard.

- PECSI: Yes, it's very hard. What is interesting that we separated and some plus years later we divorced, but he has a new wife now and she is Jewish too.
- THOMAS: Really?
- PECSI: Yes, he is attracted to Jews all the time but that is not the only interesting thing but his wife comes from a very assimilated intellectual family who knows nothing about Judaism and this is my husband who wanted to observe Shabat and they have candles and....
- THOMAS: Really?
- PECSI: Yes, yes, yes, my son told me that they gave a book for Passover Haggadah because he didn't have a Haggadah there, he could remember only sometimes, yes, and he is not a vegetarian but he eats only very rarely meat. I think it is very funny.
- THOMAS: That's very interesting. That's hard to understand. It happens, I guess.
- PECSI: Yes, because the last sentence when you went to answer the phone, that the situation is here different, I think, for the Jewish community and Jews were always in the middle of everything, the big majority of lawyers, actors, people in the show business....
- THOMAS: Now you're talking about the States.
- PECSI: Yes, the States, but not in Europe. Maybe. I don't know. Jews always had the feeling that they can move the things here and Hungary can be, should be very thankful to Jews because Jews built this nice city in the early centuries, and so on and so on, that Jews contributed a lot to the society. But on the other hand there is a big split, you know, and you can see it in the government that now there is the liberal government and the other part of the city, which is only fifty-fifty, is against everything, it is very difficult now to lead this country because the opposition who are the right wing nationalistic so-called real Hungarians are against everything. And when they are in power, at that time they remake everything. But that's the same with the school system for example in the times when the liberals are in the fore, for example, there are big reforms in the school system....
- THOMAS: What kind of reforms?
- PECSI: This government would like to change, changes in the Christian, very strict, you know, very undemocratic....
- THOMAS: The present government would like to make the school system more liberal?

- PECSI: More liberal, more democratical, with electives, and with less facts and more thinking, and so on, but the part of the Hungarians and most part of the teachers are against it because they are on the con side of this fight. And they tried to turn this discussion into a Hungarian-non-Hungarian discussion: they say that these fringes, the fringes means the Jews, would like to undermine our Hungarian culture or something like that, so there are ideological issues all the time.
- THOMAS: That position sounds a little like what the Nazis preached.
- PECSI: Maybe.
- THOMAS: That the Jews had a world-wide conspiracy to take power.
- PECSI: Yes, yes, we have the same thing.
- THOMAS: Are they considered or called neo-Nazis?
- PECSI: We have no Nazis, so they are not the neo-Nazis, they are not extremists, they are the main stream like the politicians that say that and so on and so forth, no, people don't say they are neo-Nazis.
- THOMAS: And do you think the Hungarian people are about half-way divided fifty-fifty between the liberal and the right-wing?
- PECSI: Yeah, yeah.
- THOMAS: But there are extreme right wing and then medium right wing?
- PECSI: Yeah.
- THOMAS: And extreme liberal and medium liberal? Is that right?
- PECSI: Yeah, maybe yeah. But it is very problematic because it is very difficult to make any changes because the government has no time for it because people are fed up after 4 years and they elect the other party and they remake everything again.
- THOMAS: And this keeps going back and forth, the different parties come in every 4 years?
- PECSI: Yes, yes, it has happened again since the early '90's, yes.
- THOMAS: It's difficult.
- PECSI: Absolutely.

- THOMAS: It seems to me I remember reading that the Hungarian government did not want to allow the Nazis to send the Hungarian Jews the way the Nazis wanted to the concentration camps because they said they couldn't run the government without them. It seems to me that Horthy, I've read that Horthy told Hitler that.
- PECSI: You're right. We would like to wash Horthy white but he was..... .
- THOMAS: I've read that he talked anti-Semitic talk but that actually when it came to practice he had Jewish friends and kept Jews, allowed Jews to continue to have positions of authority in spite of the anti-Semitic laws, in medicine, law, government, business, whatever....
- PECSI: Yes, for a while, yes....
- THOMAS: For a while....
- PECSI: Because he had some Jewish relatives, some in-laws, I don't remember, a daughter-in-law or something. But at the same time he sent Jews to forced labor and....
- THOMAS: But he stopped on July 7, July 7, 1944, he stopped it.
- PECSI: He was a dead politician, in addition to that. Yes, but it was a big year, with a demonstration with his---I forgot the name of it, what is when they put a dead person---interment----
- THOMAS: Yes, interment. That means bury.
- PECSI: Yes, bury. They organized a big new interment for him in the early '90's.
- THOMAS: For Horthy? I didn't know that.
- PECSI: Yes, yes, at that time the right wing was in power.
- THOMAS: There was of course a big reinterment for Nagy, Imre Nagy.
- PECSI: Yes but it was very typical that everybody had a new, yes, burial, and they tried to make him a hero, a national hero.
- THOMAS: Horthy?
- PECSI: Yes, Horthy
- THOMAS: Is he now considered a national hero?

- PECSI: There are two perceptions for that, real Hungarian and other. For the real Hungarians people with changed their hearts or something like that.
- THOMAS: So life really changed for you when you came back from the United States and the government was different, it was really a big change in the life here for you?
- PECSI: Not that big, actually, but I think that intellectual people are privileged in every society, they have knowledge about things and they have....
- THOMAS: Intellectual people?
- PECSI: Yes, intellectual people, because if you have a good natural intelligence you can survive everything and I think that for us it was easier or less difficult to survive because we could come back and we could get information about the political situation so I think the difference is not so great than for local people, for example, who had no chance to know and that's why I think it was not so different for us. Another answer is you can travel freely outside but the problem is money now, that people maybe have less money, some people have more.

INTERRUPTION

- THOMAS: But it seems to me when you all came back, for example, the practice or discussion of Judaism was more open.
- PECSI: Yes, it was great, that was the case.
- THOMAS: And the school was different.
- PECSI: No, the school was not different, only the Jewish. But no, the school system is the same, it hasn't changed.
- THOMAS: But the Jewish school was different, I mean, that didn't exist before.
- PECSI: Yes, not only the Jewish school but there are Jewish newspapers, Jewish programs, Jewish organizations, that is really great.
- THOMAS: Jewish culture....
- PECSI: Yes, Jewish culture, there is really a renaissance of Jewish culture.
- THOMAS: And there was more free speech, more ability to express your political, whatever, opinions after the change?
- PECSI: Yes, but who cares, because I can speak only to the people who think the same as me, I never have the idea to discuss it with neo-Nazis. We live in our

ghettos, we live totally separately, but I know which are the restaurants, cafes, cinemas, pools, where there are other people, and I never have the idea to go to other places.

THOMAS: You know what they say in the United States, the situation is now, you go with people who agree with how you think and there is no more discussion, there is just argument. If you talk with people who disagree with you, you don't have a discussion, you just argue.

PECSI: Yes, yes.

THOMAS: I don't know why that is, it seems a terrible shame.

PECSI: Yes, absolutely.

THOMAS: Is there more freedom, there is more freedom of press now? That is to say, for example, there is the Jewish press that exists now that didn't.

PECSI: That's true, but on the other hand we lost something. This is very interesting, and I can remember that I have read something similar in the United States, but I cannot remember also the words about that. There is a pluralism of values and nothing is really important, you know, and that is the same here, that before there was some interesting works, something else, I mean some film or something, everybody bought it and everybody had the same books in their pockets, you could recognize people who acted like yourself. If we had a festival of French films or a festival of Czech films, everybody I knew was there in the line and wanted to get to it, culture was very important because it was a kind of demonstration, we could see how many people we are. Now there are a lot of very good newspapers and reviews and books and nobody is directed anymore. Nobody buys them, the very good newspapers and books. The problem is that there are so many interesting things that it is much easier not to choose anything. We lost something, yes. And it was so interesting when I was writing, I had a postdoctoral thesis, it came from the Soviet system, it was an academical dissertation, it was about semiotic philology and I had difficulties to get in my literature and, it was in the '80's, and I spent hours and days of poking by hand the technical details because we didn't have the possibilities for copying or getting the new books. And then we went in the university I realized that the professor was a French semiotician and very big in his field and I sent him a letter and asked him to invite me and he did and I went there and after his lecture he distributed a list of the literature to the students and every book and every author on it I could collect for myself during all my life and he could get it immediately in that first of the courses. But they were not interested, they just left it or put it immediately in the wastebasket, and I then realized that this abundance is not so good for what's important now, there is a shortage of things you want much more to get.

THOMAS: Yes, yes, maybe too much abundance, an overabundance. We must stop, I can't keep you any longer. Thank you so much, so very much.