

DEDICATIONS

Gabriella Kovac:

I would like to dedicate this book to the people of this Earth who have lived through these turbulent times and to those who still have injustice in their lives now.

To the future generations, so they may learn from the past and have a better future.



GEORGINA
HOLOCAUST MEMOIRS

BY GABRIELLA KOVAC

GEORGINA Holocaust Memoirs

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gabriella Kovac was born in Budapest, Hungary, just after World War II had drawn to a close. She and her family immigrated to Australia in 1957, right at the end of the Hungarian Uprising.

Taking her cue from her mother, Gabriella has worked most of her life in the fashion industry, and has even published a book, *Magic Drafting*.

Enthralled by the stories she was told by her family, she has long dreamed of sharing their incredible tales so others could also learn from what they went through.

She lives in Sydney, Australia, where she maintains a keen interest in fashion, health and public speaking.

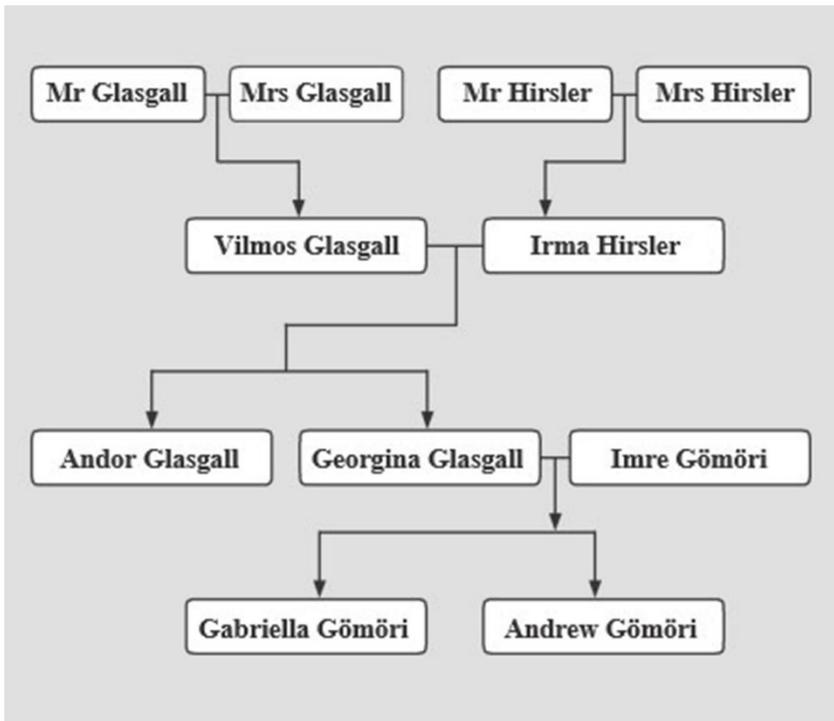
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There are many people who have helped make this book a reality. They have helped in the form of advice, guidance, editing assistance and in many, many other ways. Thank you to you all! In particular we would like to thank Rose Evans and Peter Shead for their help in the form of editing.

FAMILY TREE

This is my direct family tree, tracing all the way back to my great-grandfather and mother whose names have been lost in the mists of time.

You may like to refer to this as you read the book, so that you can more easily understand the relationships of the different people – it can sometimes be a little difficult to remember a whole bunch of names!



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Ago An enterprising go-between to the black market, Ago was a Yugoslavian citizen. His sister was married to the Yugoslav ambassador, but he was a Croatian by birth – and being a freedom fighter during the war, no-one questioned his activities.

Eichmann, Adolf An SS Colonel and a major organiser of the Holocaust, Eichmann was largely responsible for the transportation of hundreds of thousands of Jews to ghettos and concentration camps such as Auschwitz. After World War II he fled to Argentina, where he lived under a false identity until he was captured by Israeli Mossad agents and taken to Israel to face a war crimes tribunal. He was found guilty and hanged in 1962.

Glasgall, Vilmos Georgina and Andor's father, Irma's husband.

Glasgall, Irma Georgina and Andor's mother, Vilmos's wife.

Glasgall, Andor Georgina's brother, son of Vilmos and Irma.

Gömöri, Imre Georgina's husband.

Gömöri, Peter Imre's brother in law.

Hitler, Adolf Austrian-born leader of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945 and the instigator of World War II and the Holocaust

Horthy, Miklós Also known as Regent Horthy or Admiral Horthy, he became "The Admiral without a navy and the Regent with a Ruler" when Hungary lost its lands after World War I and no longer had a port, or a King. The leader of Hungary from 1920 to 1944, when he was deposed by the Germans.

Kádár, János A peasant-born communist revolutionary, Kádár at first worked with Imre Nagy to help manage the Hungarian revolution against the Russians, but soon turned against him and became the figurehead for a Russian invasion. He became the leader of Hungary from 1956 to 1988.

Krushchev, Nikita A commissar (political officer) in the Russian Red Army during World War II, Krushchev became Premier of Soviet Russia from 1958 to 1964, and was responsible for removing many of the harsh policies of his predecessor, Joseph Stalin.

Lakatos, Géza A Hungarian general during World War II who retired from service, then was called back by Miklós Horthy to serve briefly as Prime Minister of Hungary from August to October 1944. A protector of the Jews, he was captured by the Nazis and then captured by the Russians. He was eventually released and immigrated to Australia.

Mindszenty, József The archbishop of Hungary, imprisoned by the communists in 1949 but eventually freed during the Hungarian revolution in 1956. After the revolution he was pardoned and allowed to leave the country.

Nagy, Imre A Hungarian communist politician, he served as Prime Minister under Mátyás Rákosi, but due to Rákosi's scheming, he was removed from office in 1955 after just two years. During the 1956 uprising he was again made Prime Minister, but was betrayed by János Kádár and captured during a negotiation. He was executed by the Russians in 1958 on charges of treason.

Ninotchka A Yugoslavian woman who worked for Georgina in Australia.

Rákosi, Mátyás A Hungarian communist statesman, Rákosi once called himself "Stalin's best Hungarian disciple". Rákosi was largely responsible for the brutal purges that ravaged Hungary after the war, resulting in hundreds of thousands of

people being arrested, executed or sent to brutal Siberian prison camps. He was forced to resign in 1955.

Stalin, Joseph The Premier of Soviet Russia from 1922 to 1952, famous for his brutality.

Steiner, Mr The reclusive old man who lived under Georgina's flat in Budapest after World War II. It was rumoured (despite his German-sounding name) that his son had been a Russian general and had been shot by Germans during the war, which made him a hero. He was often visited by important people though exactly who, we never knew.

Szálasi, Ferenc The leader of the Arrow Cross, a virulently anti-Semitic political party that modelled themselves on the Nazi party. When the Germans deposed Horthy and Lakatos in 1944, Szálasi was made the new Prime Minister. His rule lasted 163 days. When the war ended, Szálasi was captured by American troops and returned to Hungary. He was tried in a people's court and hanged for war crimes.

Sztójay, Döme A Hungarian soldier and diplomat, he served as Prime Minister of Hungary after the March 1944 coup by the Germans. Under his authority, Hungary began participating in the Holocaust and hundreds of thousands of Jews were sent to concentration camps and executed. After the war he was tried for war crimes and executed by firing squad.

Wallenburg, Raoul A true hero, Raoul Wallenburg was a Swedish diplomat with little experience and enormous daring. Using every possible means, he saved the lives of some fifty thousand Hungarian Jews, defying the Nazis and the Arrow Cross at every turn. After the war he was arrested by the Russians on charges of being an American spy. He was sent to Russia, where his fate remains unknown.

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FOREWORD

This is a story about my mother's life. Her great courage, intelligence and love of life has captured my imagination and become an inspiration to many others who have heard this tale.

Hers is an audacious story of incredible escapes and daring. For a Jew to survive the Second World War in an Axis country is in itself an extraordinary feat. For a whole family to survive is even more extraordinary. But for them to go on from that to flourish in the face of such adversity is almost unheard of.

My mother led a magical existence. She truly believed – in fact, she knew that she would not get hurt and was protected by what she termed a “bubble”. Georgina thought she was untouchable, and so she was.

The remarkable thing about my mother was that she was not content to merely survive. She would never accept mediocrity. Anything she did, she had to excel at.

As with many dynamic people, you either hated Georgina or you loved and worshipped her.

Perhaps it was because of the hardships she had endured that Georgina started to play a game of challenging the unchallengeable. It was a game for her - even to defy such terrors as the communist regime.

I have written this story of my mother's life from the stories she told me, and the stories of other family members who gave me more information. Many times it came from me listening in to the grown-ups talking (usually when they didn't know I was there). Unfortunately, with such a story there are many details that are lacking, but the tale itself is accurate and the stories I was told match the history books. Please forgive any vagaries or slight, apparent inaccuracies – remember that memoirs are from the person's own viewpoint and therefore there are subjective differences.

- 1 -

THE STREETS ARE PAVED WITH GOLD

Nothing will ever harm you.
“There is a bubble around you. Whatever you want, you will get it. Whenever you are in danger, it will protect you.”

Her father said it, so she knew it to be true. “You are special, Georgina. You see, my darling, you really are a princess. Your grandfather – my father – was related to Scottish royalty and as he travelled through Hungary he fell in love with your beautiful grandmother. He fell so deeply in love with her that he gave up his heritage and became Jewish so he could marry her.” Georgina’s eyes were huge. She drank the story in. “You are a descendant of two great races and you are in a magic bubble.”

It was just after the Great War. Their entire world had collapsed and it was still in great upheaval. And yet Georgina noticed little of it. They were driving in a Rolls Royce from their home to the mill. The countryside beyond the windows was picturesque. Her family was flourishing.

Her father, Vilmos, continued, “Georgina, you are my most precious little girl. You are very beautiful, very smart and all this belongs to you,” he gestured to the land around them. “Your mother and I have been able to do this and you will learn how to do it for yourself. It is within you to always find the best way.

“You see, the streets are paved with gold. One just needs to know how to pick it up!”

This idea was to define Georgina’s whole life.

* * *

You could say my family line really started with an unlikely love story.

A Scottish man by the name of Mr Glasgall was travelling in Hungary when he met a beautiful Jewish girl and fell deeply in love. Now, he didn't speak much Hungarian and was certainly not Jewish. In fact, he was by all accounts a big, red-headed man who would have stuck out like a sore thumb – but love knows no bounds. Mr Glasgall converted to Judaism and married his beloved, living in Hungary for the rest of his days.

It is interesting to note that from then on the men in my family mainly had reddish-blond hair and red beards. My mother certainly inherited his romanticism and daring, but not his outward appearance; in contrast to the rest of her family she had dark skin and black curly hair.

Their son, my grandfather, grew up to be a very distinguished gentleman by the name of Vilmos. Vilmos was a tall man who wore round-rimmed glasses and smoked long cigarillos. He was very well educated, had a law degree and worked as an engineer. He was also fluent in Latin, German and English.

As a young man, Vilmos met and married a young woman called Irma. She had blonde hair, bright green eyes and was strikingly beautiful.

In fact, I remember my mother once telling me a story about how as a young girl of sixteen, she came across an old man stumbling along with a walking stick. He asked her, "Are you Mrs Hirsler's granddaughter?" and when she told him that she was, the old man shook his head, turned and walked away muttering, "Not as beautiful, not as beautiful." This could have dented the pride of any sixteen-year old, but not my mother! So the fact remains, the women in my family must have been very beautiful.

At the age of 13, Irma's mother had grown ill with a heart condition and was bedridden. As the eldest of four children, it fell to Irma to run the household and the servants on the family farm in Zalaegerszeg. This she did with remarkable competence and ease.

Not surprisingly, Irma became a wonderful cook and she passed the love and skill of cooking down to me. I remember standing next to her in the kitchen as she rolled out pastry. She would always give me a small piece and tell me to touch it with my finger to feel the texture, and when potatoes were cooking she would say, “Smell them. You can tell when they are ready just by the smell.” I have now passed her teachings on to my children, and in turn they are teaching their own children.

Not long after their marriage, Vilmos and Irma had their first child, a reddish-blond boy they called Andor. And four years later, in March 1917, Georgina was born. She had the opposite complexion to her brother with curly black hair, dark skin and the most unusual golden eyes.

I was told that Vilmos was so engrossed with Georgina’s looks that he forgot to register her for two days. From then on, Georgina’s birthday was celebrated over two days for the rest of her life.

In Hungary, the Jews were largely accepted in those times, thanks to one of the early kings of Hungary, Corvin Mátyás who had a motto, “Do not fear strangers as they can widen one’s vision and one can learn from them.” The Jews in Hungary were mostly “neolog” Jews. They considered themselves Hungarian first and Judaism was their religion.

My grandparents Irma and Vilmos lived in a large town called Nagykanizsa in the south west of Hungary, near what is now the border of Croatia. A beautiful baroque town with an ancient history, Nagykanizsa at that time was in the doldrums. It had flourished until the end of World War One, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up, with both Austria and Hungary ceding large tracts of land and population.

In fact, although Georgina didn’t know it, the country was in turmoil.

A hasty revolution in 1918 had ousted the Imperial government of Hungary, ending the four hundred year rule of the Hapsburg Emperors. The new government promised they could stop Hungary’s lands being given away. Hundreds of thousands of displaced refugees from these lands had already led to

rampant inflation, mass unemployment and deep discontent. There were food and coal shortages and a general feeling that the government wasn't doing all that it could to help.

At the insistence of the Western Powers, the government disbanded its army and agreed to the demarcations laid out by the Treaty of Trianon, created at Versailles. But more and more concessions were demanded, until it seemed that Hungary itself was disappearing.

Whilst the new government attempted to negotiate with the Western Powers, a new outspoken political party emerged: the Soviets.

As months went by and anger mounted at the apparent weakness of the government, the Soviets made it clear that they offered something much better: equality for all. To a people mired in poverty and with no clear future, it was just what they wanted to hear.

The Soviets were led by a half-Jewish intellectual named Béla Kun, who had fought in the Hungarian army during World War One, been captured by the Russians and turned to communism during his imprisonment. He had subsequently come to be trained by Lenin himself, even fighting in the Russian revolution of 1918, where he planned his own revolution in Hungary.

Béla Kun was thirty-three years old with a buzz cut, slightly baggy eyes and thick lips. However, he was quite handsome and clearly incredibly charismatic. His philosophy was extreme: "Revolutionary offensive by any means."

Kun had started up a communist newspaper, delivered dozens of hate-filled speeches against the new government, organised angry rallies, marches and strikes. For his insurrectionist activities, he was even arrested and thrown in prison – though he was still allowed to direct his party from his cell.

Then in late February 1919, a note was sent to the Hungarian government from the Western powers. There was to be no reprieve. Hungary was to be divided up. Some would go to Yugoslavia, some to Czechoslovakia, and some to Romania.

This was the worst point of all. After all, the Romanians had been defeated in 1916 and sued for peace. But two years later they had reentered the war and begun taking lands that the Hungarians considered their own. And now they were to be allowed to take Transylvania itself – one of the heartlands of Hungary.

The shock to the national psyche was incredible.

Outrage was instant and vocal. How could the government let this happen?

Realising that to resist would mean fighting a war against half a dozen countries at once, and to give in to the demands would be political suicide, the Prime Minister resigned.

It became clear to those left in a position of power that their situation was grim. They needed an ally. Desperately. But who could they possibly turn to? They were surrounded by a sea of foes.

There was only one alternative. They could turn to Soviet Russia, which was even then in the midst of its own revolution.

That was when they realised they would have to approach Béla Kun. With his close ties to Lenin, it seemed likely that he could call upon the Soviets for aid. Confident as ever, Kun dictated his terms – from his jail cell. Such was their desperation that they accepted them all.

For Kun, this was the opportunity he had been waiting for. He dissolved the current government, subsuming it into the Hungarian Communist Party and on March 21, 1919 Hungary officially became a Soviet Republic.

Kun promised to defend Hungary's traditional borders. He gathered the Hungarian Red Army, ill-equipped and poorly trained, but high in enthusiasm.

For months Hungary was filled with the fervour of the same revolution that was gripping Russia. Many Jews joined the communists, believing that this was finally a chance for equality and freedom for them. It was an important moment in history. To many, it seemed that seeing as Béla Kun was half Jewish and many of the top figures in the party were too, that *all* Jews were Communists.

The Hungarian Soviet Republic soon showed its true colours. An on-again off-again war started with Romania and Czechoslovakia. Hungarian national monuments were toppled, national symbols were banned and thugs were used to keep control.

Within his own party, Kun found himself barely able to keep control over the rival factions, let alone organise to run an entire state. His heavy handed tactics provoked outrage and fury. Communism rapidly became something hated and reviled.

And then the battles turned against him as well. No help was forthcoming from Soviet Russia – they were simply too busy in their own war to worry about Hungary.

Frantically trying to maintain their power, even as the Romanians invaded the Hungarian heartland, Kun unleashed a wave of brutal persecutions against anyone opposing the revolution. It came to be known as the Red Terror.

Homes were looted, people were beaten, raped, intimidated and hundreds were simply executed.

It was barely ten months after he had taken power that Béla Kun and his Soviet party were finally and totally removed when the Romanians occupied Budapest itself. For Hungary, the collapse was total – the humiliation complete. A hated ancestral enemy had subjugated them and marched through their beloved capital, parading in front of their own parliament building.

Béla Kun himself escaped to Austria and then finally made his way to Soviet Russia, though ironically he was eventually executed in 1938 by Stalin for some imagined plot.

The scars left by the Soviets were deep. When the Romanians left and a new party took power, a storm of retaliations and reprisals were levelled at anyone connected with the hated Bolsheviks. Unfortunately, in many people's eyes, because many Jews had been so enthusiastic in their support of Kun, they were *all* branded as Reds.

The leader of the new Hungarian government was Admiral Miklós Horthy. A 52-year old retired admiral, he had fought in World War One and been wounded in battle with an Allied blockade fleet. He was considered a war hero – commanding the

fleet during the engagement until he finally passed out from his wounds.

Horthy termed himself a “Regent” for the absent Hapsburg Prince, Charles IV. Because of this, it was often joked that Horthy was an Admiral without a Fleet and a Regent without a Ruler. In fact, he was Regent in name only – when Charles IV tried to return some years later, Horthy strictly refused him. He knew well that if he had allowed a Hapsburg Prince back on the throne, not only would Austria have started meddling in their affairs again, but the West would have invaded.

Horthy was a patriot, but he was also pragmatic. He had survived through some of the most turbulent times in European history and he had not done so by fighting everyone who came his way. Now being at the head of a small country like Hungary, decimated by World War One and surrounded by potential enemies, he knew he would have to choose his struggles carefully. He also knew he would need powerful allies if he were to ever regain Hungary’s lost lands, which was very much an ambition he harboured.

Most of Horthy’s supporters were men who absolutely hated the Communists and usually, therefore, the Jews as well. Their widespread and utterly vicious persecutions were termed the White Terror. At first, Horthy did little to countermand their activities. But as their scale increased, he eventually stepped in and demanded they at least turn their attentions to more worthwhile targets – such as “the big Jews” who were actually in Béla Kun’s party.

The Jews later did forgive Horthy for the actions of his men. It seems that practically every group has a bunch of madmen attached to it.

Georgina grew up through all this, but somehow she and her whole family remained almost entirely untouched by it. In fact, they flourished as never before. Her father, Vilmos, started a biscuit factory using his wife Irma’s recipes. Biscuits were a rarity at that time and theirs were something special. Soon enough, their biscuits were famous throughout Europe. By the time Georgina was four years old she was the daughter of a

millionaire. They not only made the biscuits, they also owned the land for growing the wheat, the flour mills - they even owned one of the only Rolls Royce cars in Hungary.

Vilmos took Georgina with him everywhere. He even had a playpen set up in his office so he could take her to work! A vibrant, optimistic man, he instilled in her a feeling of immense power. She could do anything she turned her talents to. There was no obstacle she could not overcome.

Through the years and the changing times he would continue, "You are beautiful and you are intelligent, Georgina. You will always get what you want. If you find there is a problem, you will also find there is a solution. Next to every door that closes is one that is open."

He used to call her his "little gypsy princess".

His optimism in life was unshakeable. After all, he had survived discrimination, hatred and two wars to finally succeed at a level he never would have dreamed possible. And now whatever he turned his hand to yield ever more successes. Life was beautiful.

"Never fear an enemy," he said. "Even a dog can smell fear. If one faces their foes, they will crumble."

He repeatedly said, "You are beautiful and you are intelligent, you will always get what you want. You will find men who will do what you wish and will adore you. If you do not like the circumstances of your life, it is *you* who will change them. Circumstances do not make you; you have the ability to make them!"

He also instilled in her keen business acumen. "You know, Georgina, when one wants to be in a trade, the best things to be involved with are either food or something for women. Everyone needs food. And women will always find a way to get something they really want!"

"But Georgina, the most valuable thing I can give you is not the wealth you see around you. It is the wealth inside to have the imagination to achieve whatever you may wish in life. To be able to imagine and to make what you imagine a reality. This is power, and I know you have this gift within you Georgina. You

are my beautiful girl. For you, the word ‘no’ does not exist. Do you understand?”

“Yes!” she said her eyes full of unshakeable belief.

In hindsight, I wonder if Vilmos had some sixth sense of what was to come, and groomed his lovely daughter to survive in the future no matter what.

As Georgina grew up she was mostly home-schooled, as many children were in those days. Her father was an educated man who could teach her almost anything she wished to know, and had the money to afford private tutors. But as she matured into a young lady, Georgina’s parents decided with great reluctance that she should be sent to a Swiss finishing school, as was commonly done those days by wealthy families.

On her 18th birthday, in 1935, Georgina returned home a competent young lady. She was not over tall, more like a pocket Venus, with dark skin, arresting golden eyes and luscious black hair flowing in dark curls over her shoulders. One of her other assets was her beautiful hands, with shapely fingers tapering into almond-shaped nails.

She now comported herself with the elegance of a lady. She was fluent in German, well-educated in music, poetry and all the arts and was very well-read. Reading was one of her passions and stayed with her all her life.

But her homecoming was not at all what she expected.