

Biographical Memoir

(Excerpts)

Anthony Klein

Ancestry

The opening chapter of a biographical memoir should, traditionally, be about origins, genealogy and all that, which required a lot of research that I was not so sure about, so I left it for later and began with Chapter 2, about my childhood and earliest memories. One of my main reasons for leaving the ancient history for later was that I had always felt that genealogy is bunk, to echo Henry Ford's thoughts on history. Let me explain: with 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great-grandparents and so forth, any individual can claim to be descendant from 2 to the power n after n generations. So even going back a modest 10 generations, conventionally about 250 years, one has 1024 ancestors.

Going back 20 generations – to sometime during the renaissance - one would have over a million and after 30 or so generations something like a billion direct ancestors, that is more than the whole world population at that time! Tracing back through the family tree one could therefore claim to have descended from practically anyone, including all the famous people who have lived at that time, say at about the turn of the first millennium. By the time we go back about 2000 years therefore, I can claim with virtual certainty to be descended from Jesus of Nazareth. (On his Mother's side, of course). Beat that, you who claim Charlemagne or William the Conqueror as your ancestor!

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The earliest factual connection is with my great-great grandfather, ... , David Klein (b. ca. 1800) somewhere in Hungary, possibly in Kolcse, which is a village in the Szatmár region, in the Northern Great Plain region of eastern Hungary, bordering on what is now Romania. No idea what he did for a living, other than noting that the region in question was a hotbed of ultra-pious religious Jews, so perhaps he was another rabbi, carrying on the Eisenstadt tradition. Indeed, the town of Szatmár (Satu Mare –Large Village- in Romanian) is the birthplace of a famous rabbi (the Szatmári rebbe), the founder of an ultra-religious sect of Jews, spread all over the world, including an enclave even in Melbourne. They are known for wearing outlandish garb, having lots of children and embracing many fundamentalist ideas about Judaism.

David Klein married Fina Fischer, a young lady from the same village, who gave birth to my great-grandfather Abraham Klein (*Asher Avram ben David*) in 1831. Regrettably nothing much that is factual is known about him. Again, no idea what he did for a living, apart from procreating, after marrying Borbala (Barbara?) Leichtman who gave birth to 2 girls and 4 boys, whose names, for the record, were: Amalia (?-?); Rella (1876 – 1946 - echoes of Fiorella?); Vilmos (William, 1863 – 1911), Lajos (Louis ? - ?); Moritz (Morris, 1864-1927) and Antal (Anthony, 1867 – 1911), my

grandfather, the second youngest, whose name I carry. Each of them had several children, Moritz (my father's uncle *Moishe*) in particular, who fathered no fewer than 10), all born around the start of the 20th Century.

Grandfather Antal Klein - uncle Tony , or Tony bacsi in Hungarian, (Antal being the equivalent of German Anton or English Anthony) - is identified on my father's Birth Certificate as a "liquor retailer" of 6 Rottenbiller Street in Budapest. The place is still there, of course, but no longer a pub or liquor store. I visited it in 1994: It is in the erstwhile Jewish quarter, not far from the famous and monumental Budapest Synagogue. I was very chuffed indeed when Maia sent me photographs of herself outside the same place that she visited too, on a continental holiday in her student days.

My grandpa Tony married a very beautiful young lady called Anna Gramis (Gramisch) who hailed from a place near Bratislava in Slovakia - another place where Jews prospered after being driven out of Austria, but still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A photograph of the young couple from around 1890 shows her in profile standing next to and holding hands with her seated husband. Without a doubt the hereditary Klein nose is clearly identifiable as inherited by me and along with that, her good looks passed on to Maia and to cousin Thomas's beautiful daughter Fiorella. Anna Klein, after whom Anita is named, had masses of beautiful wavy dark hair too, which I also inherited... that's when I still had lots of hair!

In due course she gave birth to four boys, of whom my father, Imre, (German equivalent Emerich, English: Emeric) was the second youngest. The oldest two were Artur (Arthur) and Miklos (Nicholas) and the youngest was Dezsö (Desmond). Tragedy struck in 1911: Both my grandparents came down with pneumonia and died a few months apart, leaving their four boys orphaned. A family conference agreed to pack them off from Budapest to the provinces, namely to '*Vetter Moishe*' – Uncle Morris in the village of Kolcse near Szatmár. From there, the older two were sent to a boarding school in Szatmár, thereby separating the four boys.

The story that my father told me is that great and unhappy wailing accompanied the preparation of the horse-drawn cart that was to take the older boys away but uncle Moishe pacified the two younger ones, aged 10 and 7, by setting up a couple of seats on boxes, on the ground behind the cart, making the young ones think that they would travel along too. The cart duly set off, much to the dismay and consternation of the little kids who were left behind. A cruel trick indeed that remained engraved on their memories.

Being a super-pious family, the little ones were put not only in the local primary school but also enrolled in the early-morning religious instruction class – the Cheyder - attached to the village prayer room. With early morning rising and stripped-to-the-waist washing as well as the regular prayers made the whole experience a very unhappy one for the poor kids, in spite of the example of Uncle Moishe's own kids. Some time later, following bitter complaints about their terrible treatment, the two younger kids, my father and young Dezsö were 'rescued' by Aunt Kati who took them back to Budapest. A maiden Aunt on the mother's side, Aunt Kati brought up the two young boys, effectively as their stepmother, until they finished their education, in a Commercial High School in Budapest, and got jobs as 'chalk-boys' in the Budapest stock

exchange. (This means that they stood on a long balcony above the trading floor and recorded the shouted transactions on a blackboard that lined the wall behind them).

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As was quite common among Hungarian Jews, even before the Second World War, each of the Klein brothers, with the exception of my father, changed their Jewish sounding German name to one that sounded Hungarian: Miklos Klein took on the surname Kis – a direct translation of Klein (Little). Artur Klein followed suit – but by that time there being too many of them, Kis was no longer available, so he became Artur Kadas. Dezső was next – he changed his name to Kelen. Thus, the honorable ancestral name of Klein was retained only with my father, thence passed on to me but, having no sons, it will disappear in due course. (My daughters Anita and Stella retain it as their professional names but that will eventually disappear too).

So, back to my father: Imre (Emeric) born in 1902, grew to adulthood in Budapest but decided sometime in the early 1920s to betake himself to the provincial city of Temesvár – a couple of hundred kilometers to the south of Budapest – which by this time, following the carve-up of the Habsburg Empire after the First World War had become Timisoara and was a part of Romania. There is strong suspicion – but no proof – that he wanted to escape the clutches of some woman in Budapest and so, started a new life in Timisoara where he met, courted and eventually married my mother, Rose Teichner, when they both in their 20s.

Initially working as a shop assistant in a large grocery, his prospects didn't look all that good (as seen by his future father-in-law) but being an ambitious and commercially talented lad he rapidly picked up the import-export aspects of grocery and aimed to go into that type of business – which he eventually did, importing chemicals rather than groceries. My mother continued to work as a commercial secretary for a few years until he was sufficiently well established and so I came upon the scene at the end of 1935.

Before continuing, I must now delve into the maternal side of the genealogy and examine my mother's antecedents which are centered around the town of Temesvár (Vár = castle in Hungarian), today called Timisoara, situated in the western-most end of Romania and one of its most important cities.

Castrensys de Thymes the castle on the river Temes, is first mentioned in a 12th Century chronicle but the surrounding area had been settled since ancient times. Destroyed by the Mongol invasion in the year 1241, it was re-built as an important Hungarian town in the 14th Century and became one of the bulwarks of Western civilization resisting the advances of the Ottoman Turks who repeatedly besieged it and finally conquered it in 1552. It then became the administrative center of an Ottoman province and stayed in Turkish hands until the year 1716.

The liberation from the Turks was accomplished by a Habsburg Imperial army led by Prince Eugene of Savoy, who was renowned for having defeated the Turks at the gates of Vienna a few years earlier. Having surrounded and besieged the city of Temesvar for a few months, he then called a 'parley' with the Ottoman Pasha, told him about his earlier feat in Vienna and

advised him to go quietly. Whereupon the Turks folded their tents and disappeared without a shot being fired – or so the story goes.

Temesvár thus became an increasingly important Habsburg city, protected by a stone fortress built between 1732 and 1765. Apart from Hungarians, a large number of Serbs and Romanians inhabited the city and surrounding villages as part of a genuinely multi-cultural area. Later, under the rule of empress Maria Theresa, a large number of German and other nationalities were brought in to settle in the area. The new, hard-working settlers drained the marshland around the city and reclaimed very fertile agricultural lands by digging canals and regulating the flow of the rivers. (One of the puzzling results of this activity was that the river Temes, after which the city is named, is now some ten kilometers to the South having been replaced by the Bega, one of its earlier tributaries, which now flows through the center of town.

Along with the mass resettlement of German and other migrants came a fairly substantial number of Jewish people who became a pivotal part of the population: They were needed because they were very enterprising, having learned to be like that following centuries of persecution, but also because, unlike most of the surrounding population, they were literate, having acquired such skills as part of their religion: They were indeed the “People of the Book”. Thus they became the traders, merchants, shopkeepers, and organisers of markets in the city as well as in each of the surrounding villages. In short, they were responsible for the development of commerce and also banking, tax collecting and other highly resented activities.

Later they also became involved with the founding of various industries, usually in the out-lying suburbs, concerned with the processing of primary products. Thus, factories for brewing, distilling, manufacturing leather, textiles, tobacco products and so forth, became established and managed (and principally owned) by Jews. They also gravitated towards the professions – doctoring and lawyering having had substantial proportions of Jews involved. There were also many less prosperous Jews – my maternal ancestors being mainly in the latter category, initially not city-dwellers but living in the surrounding villages, as farmers or shopkeepers.

The earliest records show my maternal great-grandfather, Salomon Kohn, orphaned at an early age. He married another orphan, Therese Mandl (born in 1852) who had been brought up by a wealthier family and whose dowry may have financed the budding family business. Initially a hawker, or rag-and-bone man, he became a second-hand dealer. (My late cousin Vic Spitzer used to say that, because of my proclivity in eBay dealings, I inherited his talents!) The Kohns lived in Temesvar, spoke German, and in due course had 3 daughters and a son. (The Kohns clearly belonged to the hereditary, priestly sect of Jews, the Cohens, thus my first wife, Mavis Cohen was not the first Cohen in the family).

Their oldest offspring was my grandmother, Regina (or Rebecca – Hebrew name Rivkah) Kohn, who was born in 1875. Her sisters were great-aunts Esther, born in 1885, and Frieda, born in 1893. (Little is known about their youngest son, Paul Kohn, who died on the Russian front in the First World War). Esther married Karl Spitzer, a well-to-do land-owner, and their son Louis and daughter Nelly bear the distinction of being the pioneers who first came to Australia around

1930 – presumably to escape Louis Spitzer’s conscription into the Romanian (or Serbian?) army at age 18. Nelly was about a year younger. Great-aunt Frieda, the prettiest of the three sisters was so fussy, according to family folklore, that no young man was deemed to be worthy enough, so she ended up an old maid. All the Spitzer family eventually emigrated to Australia, some before and some after the Second World War, and also Frieda, as well as my grandparents and my side of the family. More about this in a later chapter.

Grandma Regina married Joseph Teichner, my grandfather, who was born in 1872 in a village near Temesvár. He was the son of Ignacz Teichner (b. 1830) who hailed from Galicia, in the Polish end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a region that had a sizeable Jewish population. Nothing much is known about great-grandpa Ignacz who lived in the small town near Temesvar where he died in 1916. He and his wife (whose name is not recorded) had two sons and two daughters. The daughters, Katy and Frieda, got married and lived in Budapest.

Grandpa Joseph’s older brother Franz Teichner (1868 - 1920) became a rich grain merchant who lived in the town of Orsova, on the Danube, some 100 km to the South. (This town disappeared sometime after the 1950s when a dam on the Danube flooded it and its neighborhood). Franz and his wife Giza (Giselle) had one daughter and two sons, one of whom, Arthur Teichner was quite an interesting character: He worked as a sailor in the British Steam Navigation Company on the Danube; was consequently interned as an enemy alien and survived the Second World War unscathed, only to re-surface in Timisoara after the war, full of fascinating stories.

We now come to Grandpa Joseph whom I knew quite well as a child and from whom I think I inherited many character - as well as physical – traits, including colour-blindness (of the classic sex-linked genetics, shared with cousin Vic and passed on through my daughter Stella to my grandson Benjamin). Later in life it became clear that I also inherited grandpa’s bald pate. He was a friendly, gregarious and likeable character who, before World War I, lived with his wife and 3 daughters in a cottage inside the large central brewery in Temesvár where he worked, as what would today be called the Transport Manager. In practice, this meant that he was in charge of a large stable of Clydesdales that used to pull the beer carts, which delivered barrels to the many pubs as well as to the railway station for transport to the provinces. He had under him a motley crew of drunken louts who were the drivers of the beer carts. Apparently, while he kept them on a short leash, making sure that they were sober and available for service early each morning, they loved and respected him as a sort of surrogate father who was fair and approachable. It seems he was a very good manager, with great people-skills and a great sense of humor that he maintained throughout his life.

Although relatively old by the time the war broke out, he was nevertheless conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian (Royal and Imperial - K. und K.) army artillery corps. Luckily he was sent to the Italian front, not the Russian front where a huge number were killed. His battery of horse-drawn guns was one of many that kept the Italian army in check. Eventually after the defeat of the Hapsburgs he was de-mobilised and returned to the family and to the brewery. Apparently he used to dream about his military experiences and talk about them in his sleep. One of Grandma’s stories was that she used to try and quiz him and try and extract more

“confessions” until he would wake up and give her rude and evasive answers. He also acquired some strange habits, such as eating ham, which was simply not on, in Grandma’s kosher household. A compromise was reached whereby he could eat the ham that he used to buy...but only off the paper wrapper, not off Grandma’s crockery, which remained kosher. Thus, in my family, the rot set in two generations ago as far as transgressing the dietary laws and other religious strictures goes.

Eventually grandpa retired from the brewery job at about the age of 60, bought a property consisting of a several modest ground-floor apartments around a central courtyard, one of which they lived in and rented out the others. A deep well, a vegetable garden, and quite a few fruit trees stay in my memory, including some apricot, pear, plum, sour-cherry and some most accessible mulberry trees. Climbing them used to keep me entertained as a little child when visiting grandma and grandpa, along with a little stool, a bagful of apricot pips and a hammer for cracking them. There were also chooks, geese and ducks. The ducks were known to get drunk and fall over after eating fruit that had fermented after falling off the trees. However the fallen plums, apricots and pears used to be assiduously gathered up and left to ferment in barrels, later to be distilled into schnapps by grandpa.

By the time I was born, great-grandpa Kohn had been widowed and was living with the grandparents. My memory of him, whom I called “little grandpa”, was of a very old man, sitting very close to the tiled stove and mumbling an indistinct reply to my greetings. He died at the age of 91 in 1940, when I was 5 years old.

To be continued in the next issue of our Jewish Timisoara website