

Secret Years

Sixteen Lesbian Life Stories



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Foreword

This book, along with the film of the same title, makes up part of the lesbian oral herstory project launched by *Labrisz Lesbian Association*. In *Secret Years*, elderly and middle-aged lesbian women detail their lives, relationships, and search for self, partners, and community over the past decades. Their narratives come together to create a colourful picture of recent Hungarian social history: the Kádár era of the 1960s to 1980s and the period of transition. We believe this series of interviews will be valuable to non-Hungarian readers as well, hence this translation. Beyond the stories of the women's personal lives and communities, the interviews reveal a great deal about this chapter of history in Central Eastern Europe. The focus of this book is an area that has been little explored until now. While gay and lesbian archives can be found in the West with outstanding and remarkable collections, access to such stories in Hungary is limited, which is why we consider it especially important to collect and publish the information we have been able to gather. We hope you will enjoy this slice of Hungarian lesbian herstory.

Secret Years – the title of this book, is multi-layered, like the book itself: it refers to the hidden dimensions of personal lives but also to the broader social history of the recent past. Our interview subjects' personal lives are not the only stories that have remained hidden for so long; they also form part of a larger, wider, collective "herstory"¹ that has been widely ignored. Lesbian history occupies a special place within women's history and is even less visible. Fortunately, the last decades of lesbian history are still accessible directly through the first-hand accounts of women living today, such as those interviewed for this book. It is these personal and community-based stories that the latest volume of the Labrisz Book Series attempts to bring to light.

This book has had significant precursors, and we hope the project will continue in the future. The interviews form part of a larger and continuously evolving body of work: the development of a Hungarian lesbian herstory archive. As part of this project, we interviewed women who, as adults and as lesbians, tried to accept themselves, form relationships, and build communities under communism. The widely screened and acclaimed 2009 documentary *Secret Years* is a significant result of this project.

The book is made up of 16 interviews: we have added five interviews to the eleven that were conducted with the women featured in the film. It gives voice

¹The term 'herstory' is a play on the word 'history'. It reflects on the fact that history, generally narrated from a male perspective, populated by male characters, has a much less visible but equally substantial and important women's side as well (which, of course, does not operate separately from the 'mainstream').

to a generation and a half of women. Aged forty to eighty, the women are professionals, employees, artists, and catering workers, and their stories span the oppressive atmosphere of the fifties through the gradually increasing openness of the sixties, seventies and eighties. Many of these women would later become activists and the founders of the lesbian movement of the nineties. Coming from diverse social and economic backgrounds, they express different perspectives on the communist government but have similar experiences when it comes to the need to hide their identities and personal lives as lesbians. Their stories reveal the socialist regime's methods of control, as well as the hidden and partially hidden spaces where women were able to meet. Their lives also reflect how, after the end of socialism, a formerly taboo subject became part of public discourse, as the first gay and lesbian activist movements and events were born, and coming out became more common.

Partly due to the structure of the interviews, each woman's story reveals a clear path from a lonely search for self-discovery through confusion, recognition, and coming out to the search for relationships and community. The degree of coming-out and the opportunities to do so differ for each woman, reflecting individual differences in personality and social status, but for everyone this process entails a great deal of soul-searching and struggle with the outside world. The search for identity often means turning to activism and helping others. For many it marks the strengthening of personal integrity, while others interpret it as a personal failure.

The need to hide – especially among the older generation – often creates a double life, with separate spheres hermetically sealed from one another. But questions of identity, the reconciliation of one's self-image with externally imposed images (often coming from the dictionary definitions and homophobic jokes of the time), and the complete lack of representation and role models is a significant problem for younger generations as well. Most of the quotations chosen as titles reflect this split between self and world. The interviews present a wide range of life strategies, from being completely closeted to completely out – sometimes within the same person's life. The borders between public and private spheres cannot be easily defined. For lesbian women, the question of public space is one example of this intersection. Being a lesbian is considered a "private affair," but the public visibility of a lesbian couple – among family and friends, at work, on the street, even in the media – also forms part of the personal realm. The rise of media representation in the nineties has offered the opportunity to formulate and articulate an authentic individual image and voice, which marks a significant point in the process of coming out.

A supportive, affirming community can be a great help in the coming-out process, often serving as the only support of lesbian identification. Subcultural spaces, "private" or semi-public spaces, groups and parties create a kind of

hidden, interconnected network. Within such social networks, women were able to form friendships that made it possible to bear government oppression and social exclusion. Sometimes this involved marriages of convenience that could be held up as proof of one's heterosexuality to family and at work. The first place that served as a regular meeting spot for lesbians was established during the early eighties at Ipoly Cinema (since closed). The cinema was visited by 40 to 50 people every Friday night for five years. Nearly all of the women in this book mention the cinema, either as somewhere they had personally been or as a place they had heard stories about.

Some of the interviews touch on 'high politics' as well. Under Kádár's regime, lesbian women's existence was "tolerated" at best. Venues in Budapest frequented by gays and lesbians – the *Kis Rabló Pub*, the *University Café*, the *Diófa Restaurant* and the *Muskátli Kisvendéglő* in Kamaraerdő – were monitored by the government to keep a check on people thought to be subversive or dangerous to the regime. Thus, invisibility and surveillance were interwoven in a particular way: homosexuality was at the same time a threat and a means of control for the régime. Although no one in the book reports being monitored or compelled to be an informer specifically for being a lesbian, a number of women mention being watched or recruited, or threatened with losing their job because of their 'alternative' lifestyle or vulnerable social position. Lesbian politicization and the strengthening of the lesbian movement occurred in reaction to these interventions of political life in the private sphere. This also shows how the slogan "the personal is political" can carry multiple meanings in different cultural and temporal contexts. For citizens under the Kádár regime, who generally sought to protect the private sphere in reaction to political intrusion, the intersection of personal and political carried negative connotations. Meanwhile in the West, and later in Hungary as well, issues previously thought to be 'private' – domestic violence is a key example – were transformed into social issues requiring a comprehensive social solution.

Unfortunately, greater social and political visibility does not necessarily go hand in hand with greater acceptance and tolerance, nor does it imply a linear path of progress. In fact, in recent years, general attitudes in Hungarian society have begun moving backwards in terms of acceptance, as reactions to the Pride Marches clearly attest.²

It is interesting to look at the range of jobs held by the women interviewed: many of them are 'simple' employees, but the desire for independent enterprise and private business is very common, as well as the need for independent living, freedom of movement, and the avoidance of restrictive and controlling

² From the first Pride March in Budapest in 1997 until the one in 2007 Marches were quiet and peaceful, not requiring strong police protection. This changed in 2007 when the first violent attacks were carried out by extremist thugs during and after the March.

workplaces. For most of the women, their careers – ranging from wooden toy-making to teaching to photography – are more than just a source of income: they are vocations, the ground for self-realization and self-expression, personal or communal creativity, and reasons to meet, learn, make art and play. This entails for many some kind of departure from society, or spatial outsider status. The Szatina story is especially intriguing in this respect: the story of the countryside lesbian colony can be pieced together from various accounts and perspectives. This experience also provided literary material, offering the inspiration and the birthplace of Agáta Gordon's novel *Kecskerúzs* [Goat Rouge]. While some women look for alternative spaces in the countryside, others opt for a specifically urban environment – such as music bands, artists' societies, pubs, cafés, and the gradually emerging gay bars. But there are also women who lead rather ordinary lives.

For most of our interview subjects, being a lesbian goes hand-in-hand with some kind of general activist sensibility, particularly feminism. A number of interview subjects took part in the fledgling feminist movement of the 1990s, and many took or still take part in the work of gay and lesbian movements and organizations.

The interviews also illustrate the women's relationships to femininity and gender roles. Being a lesbian inevitably informs their perceptions, and they react strongly and critically to these roles. They are conscious of creating their own gender roles as women: for some, deviating from the norm means struggles and issues with self-esteem, while for others it opens new paths towards freedom and autonomy. Of course, the women in this book also express a diverse range of views and ideals between these two ends of the spectrum, and they offer a number of understandings of what it means to be 'feminine' or to be a 'woman'.

The interviews naturally include stories of platonic and romantic love, dating, sexuality, relationships, cohabiting and break-ups. The topic of motherhood is particularly interesting: one-third of the women married men and had children, and the interviews offer their accounts of what it was like to come out to their children and how their children reacted. But the book also offers glimpses of childless women's views on motherhood.

The sixteen women's stories reflect on how their lesbian identities fit into their lives as a whole and how they relate to the various other aspects of their lives: religion, work, motherhood, and friendship. They span generations and cover a wide range of socio-cultural backgrounds and 'habitats'. As several participants point out: lesbian and gay people can be found in every social group, and shared sexual orientation secures a larger social mobility among these groups than would otherwise be possible. At the same time, as many emphasize,

finding and maintaining real, lasting friendships and relationships is built on having more in common than just being a lesbian.

The interviews also map travels abroad and relationships that cross borders. Moreover, one of the women herself represents an international perspective in person. Berlin is the city most often mentioned and visited – both before and after the fall of the Wall, in the seventies as well as the nineties. Other cities and countries mentioned include Paris, Vienna, England, the United States, and even Russia and Georgia.

The eleven interviews that make up the film were conducted from 2008 to 2009 in Budapest, Szatina, and on a farm in southern Hungary. Sarolta Gábor was interviewed in 2005, the four other women in Budapest in 2010. The structure of the interviews is based on a loose series of questions, giving a common framework to the conversations, which of course branch out in various directions. The interviews used in the film were conducted by ethnographer Gyöngyi Schwarcz, who also designed the interview structure. The other five interviews were conducted by members of *Labrisz Lesbian Association*. We have done our best to avoid too many references that might not be understood by the reader. During the editing process we had to shorten the interviews and add clarifications where necessary, but we have tried to maintain the naturalness and stylistic features of the interviewees' speech.

It is both significant and telling that, with only two exceptions, everyone appears alongside her own name and image, in interviews that are often very personal and touch on nearly every aspect of their lives. The archival photographic material in this book was provided by the women themselves from their own collections, and the photos offer testimony to both their lives and their times.

The Hungarian book is the result of collaborative work. We would like to thank *Mária Takács* for making the film; our editors for editing the text; *Judit Szabó* for her help in Hungarian proof-reading; *Ilona Gál* for transcribing the interviews; *Gyöngyi Schwarcz* and *Eszter Zsófia Tóth* for providing workshops on interviewing techniques and oral history (herstory), respectively; for those working on the English translation and edition: *Dorottya Rédei*, *Andrea Dittera-Balogh*, *Balázs Béri*, *Krisztina Pozsonyi*, *Eszter Bagyina*, *Rita Béres-Deák*, *Antonia Burrows*, *Anna Borgos* and *Melinda Széll*; and last but not least, the sixteen extraordinary women for their participation and cooperation.

Anna Borgos



**“I was me – and not someone else – the way I was”
Ilona Gál (b. 1940)**

R: When did you first confess to a woman that you were attracted to her or in love with her?

IG: I was 24 years old when I first got into the kind of relationship with a girl where I could tell her. At that time, I was already completely aware that I was homosexual. I had already been in love before and there was a girl who I had even kissed before, but we never labelled it.

R: How did you meet her?

IG: I was 24 around the middle of the 1960s and was working at a taxi company at the time, and it was there, in the garage, that I met her. We got along really well and as time went by, we started getting along ‘even better’. It was romantic love. She was attending evening high school, so there were also love poems, and that spiced up the relationship. She was a really beautiful girl: 19 years old, blonde... We even lived together for one and a half or two years. I have really pleasant memories of her. I have pleasant memories of everyone I was with, of course, but especially of her.

R: Was she your first relationship, or the first girl who you told about your feelings?

IG: Both. I had already told someone before, but I only said that I was homosexual and not that I was in love with her. I told her because we were friends. We would talk, and I would get involved in her life and her problems: her divorce, her new partner, and so on. And I thought I could tell her about the problems that I had in my personal life. Maybe it was inappropriate...

R: Why?

IG: Because she said she knew that there were people like that, but she’d rather we didn’t talk about it any more. So we didn’t really... Bori, my first girlfriend, knew that I was homosexual because there was an auto shop manager who had tried to make a move on me earlier and I told him that I liked him very much and he was really sweet, but that I had really had enough of men...

R: At 24?

IG: Yes. I told him that what I really wanted was a close relationship with a woman. And then this beautiful blonde angel appeared, and every morning – because we worked the night shift – we would go to the Bolero Pub together, which was near Keleti Railway Station. We had breakfast and we could also have beers in the morning, and we would analyse poems by Ady.³ We would talk about different aspects of our lives... and we grew closer and closer. Our breakfasts took so long that it wasn’t worth it for Bori to go home to Kőbánya.⁴ I was living nearby, in the seventh district, so it was much more economical for her to come over to my place. We soon figured out what to do, and the relationship worked fine. If I remember rightly, my mum was in the hospital at the time and when she came home, she was shocked to find someone sleeping in her bed. But we were only there during the day, and she could sleep there

³ Endre Ady (1877-1919): Hungarian poet.

⁴ A suburban part of Budapest.

at night. Eventually, we ended up sharing my bed. In the meantime, my mum got married and moved to Pestszentlőrinc,⁵ but Bori and I kept on sharing a bed. Some people came to visit, but no one was bothered by it.

R: And what about your workplace? After all, you met her at work. Did your colleagues ever notice?

IG: Oh, of course! The car washers were ethnic Slovak women and we would constantly tease each other, but it was all in good fun. So it was obvious that they knew. When we had our 'lunch break' in the middle of the night, we hid away in a car. I mean, we didn't do anything indecent, because back then not even heterosexuals had sex in public. We just hid away and sat really close to each other... It was a bigger problem that one of the sons of my mother's new husband was a mechanic in the same garage, so our little romance became publicly known in Pestszentlőrinc as well. It was probably awkward for my mother, but by then it made no difference to her, because I had always caused problems for her anyway, ever since I was born. The old man, her husband, was completely cool about it, he didn't care at all, so Bori and I would go visit them just as we would visit Bori's mother, like any heterosexual couple would. The biggest difference was that nobody ever said anything out loud about the nature of our relationship. Maybe that would have been strange anyway.

R: Was this something that was usually kept secret at that time?

IG: It tended to be, yes. It was considered acceptable for me to live with another young woman, because why not? It could have been for economic reasons, for example. Students live together too; there is nothing strange about that. It was also OK that we were in such a close relationship that we would visit each other's families and spend our free time together. But we didn't talk about it. It didn't bother us either, because there was nothing to talk about. Back then, heterosexual relationships weren't showcased much, either; when a boy and a girl walked around in the street, they behaved the same way if they were dating or if they were just classmates.

R: So are you saying that back then, because relationships were so hidden, it might have been easier to be a lesbian in Budapest, in Hungary?

IG: Well, for those who had a partner, if it wasn't easier it definitely wasn't harder, either. But I can't draw a general conclusion based on this one relationship I had when I was so young, because the reason it was easier might have been the fact that we were so young. Had we been older, it would have been more obvious that we were constantly going everywhere together. But I didn't think about that at the time, because I didn't cause me any problems. I also knew some older lesbian couples who didn't have any problems. But they weren't in touch with their parents any more, just with their children and grandchildren, as if they were the grandparents. To me, it seemed like those who had partners weren't so terribly miserable. The miserable part was the difficulty of finding a partner. Nowadays that part's become easier, especially for young people.

R: Were you rejected a lot?

IG: Yes, I was rejected a lot, because it almost always happened that whoever I fell in love with was straight. There would rarely be two lesbians at the same workplace or apartment building or wherever. Maybe I would pass another

⁵ A suburban part of Budapest.

lesbian on the street, or in another situation where people don't usually open up. Or we didn't fancy each other. There were no places where it would have been obvious that the other woman was also... like today at, say, gay and lesbian clubs. Once, back at the shorthand and typewriting school, there was a girl that I was really good friends with, and then at one point we started kissing. After that, we took every possible – and impossible – opportunity to kiss. We would go hiking a lot, in a group – like three, four or five of us – and whenever we weren't climbing, we'd disappear for a while to make out. If anyone was bothered by it, the others would tell them to leave us alone.

R: Were your schoolmates really that understanding?

IG: I don't know. I think back then it was like it is now, that people know very few gays and lesbians they know to be gay or lesbian. In my experience, those who knew this about me didn't reject me. Maybe they didn't want to talk about it – I have decades-long friendships where we still don't talk about it. But other than that, there's nothing missing from those friendships. My mother didn't want to know about it either. I think that she'd already been avoiding the truth for a while, so it wasn't such a huge shock for her when the news came from the Autotaxi Company that I had got involved in that sort of romance there. For her there were antecedents from when I was in elementary school, only I hadn't realized. I only found out about that later.

R: What happened in your childhood?

IG: There was a teacher no one liked – she was really obnoxious. She made a strange remark about me that having such intense emotions for some of my classmates wasn't going to end well – something like that. After so many years, it's hard to recall it exactly, but it was very strange, because I knew exactly what she meant. Or I would have understood if I had had my own words for it. We didn't dwell on it any longer, and as for me, I had already been feeling for years that things were somehow different. Or rather, that *I* was different. So I just took it to be another teacher's hostility, of which there had been a lot more of, and I just swept it aside.

R: Didn't she hurt your feelings?

IG: Not terribly, I just felt that I couldn't do anything about it. Had I been more honest with myself, I would have been able to do something. But even then, I wouldn't have had words for it. I wouldn't have been able to put into words for myself what it was that she was referring to and what I was really feeling. I didn't see anything wrong with it, and I didn't understand why it would lead to anything bad.

R: Did she say it would lead to something bad?

IG: Yes, she did. "It won't lead to anything good", or something like that. She called my mother in and talked to her and when my mum came home, she wasn't mad at me for a change, but at that teacher. I realized thirty years later that the teacher must have talked more openly to my mum than to me.

R: When was this?

IG: At the beginning of the fifties. And then it did lead to something bad. I was transferred to a different elementary school every year. I don't know why; nobody ever gave me an explanation.

R: What do you think that teacher was referring to? What was she trying to protect you from?

IG: I always had female schoolmates whom I loved a lot. But, of course, at the time, there didn't seem to be anything strange about it to me. It was just a vague urge. I didn't even feel the need to name it. Nor did I know how other kids felt. Yet, the word 'love' did show up in my diary entries of the time, about a girl named Baby... These things are so contradictory... I didn't call it anything, but I still wrote about something that I hadn't really thought about consciously. It wasn't something I was able to process.

R: Do you recall the moment when you first put it into words – when you first said out loud to yourself that you were a lesbian?

IG: Yes, it was in the autumn of 1956.⁶ We had holed up in the basement – or in the grocer's semi-underground apartment, really. Half the building was stuck there hiding. I was head over heels in love with my boss, Edit, and I was dying to get out, because I was terribly worried about her and I wanted to visit her. And that wasn't all – this grocer had a daughter who was seven or eight years older than me, and the rumours were that she was living with another woman! People kept using this expression, *csíra*.⁷ And even though she had a policeman boyfriend, with whom she had a child, she didn't live with him but with a woman. By that point, I somehow already had words for it too. Where from? I don't really know, but I did. I kept pondering, thinking about stuff from the past, and analysing my feelings, and at that point I had to finally admit it to myself. Before the events [of the Revolution] in October, I got to know a boy, and we were fond of each other. He was sweet and kind, and we enjoyed each other's company. Another thing I liked about him was that he never came on too strong – you could just hang out with him, go to a café or a bar to talk. Even when we said goodbye, we would only give each other a kiss on the cheek, and I liked it that way. But in the midst of the revolution, I didn't miss him at all – I didn't care at all that Jancsi had stopped visiting and that I had no idea what was happening with him. The only thing on my mind was that Edit was living on the main boulevard, and she must be in terrible danger and I had to get there. And I did, and by then I knew...

R: And when you were sitting there, in the underground apartment, in November 1956, how did you manage to articulate it – what were the words you used for yourself?

IG: In the basement I was able to verbalize to myself that I loved women. My feelings for Edit were sexually charged. It wasn't purely an emotional thing. The following summer I took the opportunity to tell Edit who I was, what I was. At that point, I told her straight out that I was homosexual, that I loved women and that the way I felt about women was something I'd never felt for men. Well, poor Edit turned as pale as a sheet when I told her. She said I was still young – I was 17 – and that I shouldn't rush to take it for granted a hundred percent, and that I should keep trying [with men]. Because I hadn't had a sexual relationship with a man, either. So I really did try, dutifully, even though it wasn't really deliberate, it just happened. I got together with a young man at a holiday resort at Lake Balaton and then we continued the relationship here in Budapest, for a little while, until I'd had enough of the whole thing. Later I had

⁶ The Revolution of 1956 broke out on 23 October. It was an armed revolution, and people were hiding in the cellars of houses in Budapest.

⁷ Slang word (lit. 'germ' or 'sprouts'), used to describe someone as homosexual.

another, similar attempt, when I got to know a guy at a *KISZ*⁸ party, with whom I got more intimately involved, but it was just as boring as the previous relationship, and it served more just as a prop for having fun. Because after all, I couldn't just dance with another woman... that would have been impossible, unimaginable. And then Edit swung into action and she said that she was going to find me a doctor – and she really did get me one, who referred me to a clinic to be examined. And they really did examine everything from the top of my head to the sole of my feet, but they only did so to keep me there. And then they sent me to a psychiatrist. Well, he and I had a great conversation, but then the physician and Edit didn't have full faith in his opinion, because he was a homosexual as well.

R: Was that obvious to you?

IG: No, not to me, but they told me afterwards, "Of course he would say it's something you can't change, but we shouldn't take that at face value, because he's involved himself." After that, I was sent to Lipót,⁹ where they made me go through some test where they showed me pictures and I had to say which ones I liked and which ones I didn't. Well, in any case, they eventually said we should let time decide which way I would go. They even sent me to a gynaecologist, who took a pap smear, I don't know why.

R: Did anything ever happen between you and Edit?

IG: No, the furthest she ever went was to give me a French kiss once, and even that was just a reward for me graduating from high school. I was in love with Edit for a very long time. Even while Bori and I were together I would still send flowers to Edit on her name day. I was quite the gentleman.

R: Did people around you think homosexuality was a kind of illness?

IG: Yes, people who weren't immediately and unequivocally repelled by the subject did consider it an illness.

R: What about you? Did you think of yourself as ill? Or just different?

IG: I didn't consider myself ill, or, well, I didn't know... But I didn't want anyone to cure me! Because I was me – and not someone else – the way I was. Especially because I didn't have any lesbian role models. So I couldn't have that kind of identity either, just a sort of a male identity. The models I had – for how one should feel or behave, the kinds of attitudes one should have – were all taken from men. I had a separate world of my own, and I only stepped out of it when I absolutely had to. Like when I had to take another person into consideration and had to pay attention. Other than that, I got along very well by rewriting my experiences in my head, for myself. In my thoughts, I experienced amazing things. But this also meant that I spent more and more time doing that, instead of making things better in real life. It became a kind of an obsession, like a drug, that has been with me ever since, almost to this day. So I need to hold on to reality just so much that I am aware that it won't happen tomorrow, but it will eventually – that I still have to wait for a few years before it happens. Because, you know, the only way you can daydream is to think that the dream might come true someday. Now that I'm over 65, the prospects have become so narrow that they don't correspond even to my reality

⁸ Abbreviation of *Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség* [Young Communists' League].

⁹ *Lipót* was the nickname for the National Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology, located at Lipótmező (part of Budapest), commonly referred to as a mental hospital.

any more: there's no point in daydreaming when there's no future ahead of you. Now I really have to think. Before, I would resolve conflicts by just brushing aside everything that was uncomfortable, and then I would turn those thoughts into amazing pictures in my head, where I could be anyone and anything.

R: And couldn't these be realized in real life?

IG: Maybe most of them could have. Now, when I look back, I think that they could have. It's very hard, though, living your life feeling lonely all the time. I could really only daydream about finding a nice lady who might then become my partner for the rest of my life. There was very little chance of this happening. And then, of course, when you're young, it's easy not to appreciate the opportunities you have. I had a girlfriend once who I could have had a long-term relationship with, and later I regretted it terribly that I hadn't appreciated the relationship as much as I should have, and because of reasons like being tired and this or that, I gave up on it and let it fall apart. And afterwards I deeply resented it, but by then that ship had sailed. It wasn't as simple as it seems to be today – they get together, then they break up, and then they get together with someone else or they get together with each other again, because, after all, they go out to the same places, they constantly bump into each other, and then they realize that neither of them has been able to find anyone better since then. And then they live happily again for a short while, or maybe even a long while.

R: Did you start identifying as a lesbian later?

IG: Yes. These days I no longer care about playing gender roles. Now when I identify myself, I usually say that just like there are old men and old women, there are also old lesbians and old gays, who also happen to be women and men. But back then, traditional gender roles were still very strong in everyday life. So if a woman did not feel attracted to men, she had to consider herself a man in some way.

R: Would you have undergone surgery?

IG: Yes! Back then I didn't know that such a thing was possible – it was just one of my fantasies like so many other things. Well, pregnancy and giving birth were wonderful! So I wouldn't have wanted to give those up – but that came much later.

R: When?

IG: About ten years later. I was 28 years old when my daughter was born. At that point, I felt almost like I was of 'reduced value', because of the thought that I wouldn't be able to get pregnant and give birth to a child.

R: Did you want to have a child?

IG: At that point I already did. I just didn't know how. It would have been impossible to explain to a man that I only wanted a child from him and I wouldn't want him to take part in my life afterwards.

R: Did you ever try?

IG: Well, it's true that I didn't try, either. I came across a lot of men in the middle of the sixties, when I was a taxi driver. Ninety percent of the men travelling alone tried to make a move on me in some way or another. They differed in how classy they were about it, but there were some very polite gentlemen, too. Eventually, the deed was done and I got pregnant. A number of people expressed their worries to me – what was I going to tell the child,

what if this, what if that, and the economic difficulties... But none of their concerns mattered to me. I was born out wedlock too, and so was my grandchild. It's become a family tradition.

R: Did you ever consider getting married?

IG: No! God forbid! Marrying a man and living with him didn't even occur to me as a possibility or a path to take. What for? To have him around all the time? Even though there never were so many men wanting to marry me as when my daughter was little.

R: How did you usually find a partner?

IG: Well, I wouldn't say 'usually', because I rarely had the opportunity. I had a girlfriend who I got to know in a pub without even noticing. For some time, I went there regularly, with acquaintances or alone to have lunch, and then my daughter was born, and understandably I had fewer opportunities to sit in pubs. In fact, I didn't have any at all, because I was alone with the kid. Late one night, I went down to get cigarettes and the bartender started asking me questions while she was serving me. I was in a hurry, so I only answered briefly, but I did say something about my daughter and where I lived and this and that, all kinds of details about myself. One night she rang my doorbell, came up, we talked, and all of a sudden she asked me if I was gay. I said yes. And after that we were on the right track. She told me that she had had a girlfriend, but her girlfriend was in jail and had found another partner there. Incidentally, that happened to me later as well... For a long time it was a really good relationship, but she could always only come at night and had to run home before the break of dawn so that she would be home by the time her child and her aunts woke up. After a while I grew tired and became more and more irritable and somehow the relationship fell apart. Later I regretted that, of course.

R: Did you regret it because you think you should have stuck with it?

IG: Yes, I should have! It could have been quite a long relationship. She was ten and some years older than me, but that didn't really matter much. After her there was nothing at all for a very long time, except perhaps a few things here and there. Actually, I had a circle of friends then where there was group sex as well. It's not a recent invention, nothing new under the sun, it's just that at the time it couldn't be advertised in papers, but if you happened to find the right people, you could get involved if you wanted to. If not, you stayed out of it, nobody forced you. It was a really nice, truly friendly group.

R: Was it a mixed group?

IG: Yes, and beyond friendship it was only about sex, so I couldn't have a personal, separate relationship with anyone. It was good and interesting, but not a lifestyle.

R: How could one fall in with a crowd like that in those days? Was this in the sixties?

IG: Yes. It was a very interesting era. First of all, there was widespread political apathy. Basically, nobody had any real problems and there was nothing to care about, because everything was taken care of for us. So men had only one thing left to do: have sex. And the same for women, really, but they also had the children and the household. In my youth, most men had a 'poor, sick wife' and a notebook with names and phone numbers on the side. My daughter's father was like that, too.

R: What other ways did you try to find a partner?

IG: In the sixties and seventies you always got hints from somewhere and so I wandered around everywhere – for example, around the Emke Café. But wherever I went, there weren't any gay people... Of course, when my daughter was little, I didn't really have the chance to go. Around that time there was a lesbian couple living on the same floor. They were older: one of them was a pensioner, the other was a tram driver. The older one asked me once in the outside corridor of our apartment building, while I was smoking there, whether I was gay. I said yes. I don't know how, but she knew right away. She could always tell and always knew about everyone who was 'batting for the same team', and most of the time she was right. The two of them had been living together for more than ten years, but they didn't have a lesbian circle of friends. They lived a pretty lonely life, so they were happy to have me. We were friends for years, and we moved to Kőbánya together when our building was demolished.

R: When did you move to the countryside, and when did you come back to Budapest?

IG: In 1998 my daughter wanted to get a place of her own, and we could only do that by buying a house in the countryside, and actually pretty far away, because the ones close to Budapest were all too expensive. I felt really isolated there.

R: Did you move there alone? Didn't you have a partner then?

IG: My mother came with me, but she moved to a nursing home in Mátraháza¹⁰ about two years later. She was even lonelier than me. Because I somehow stumbled upon some sort of a religious community and then I thought, why not? They were so sweet and kind, so I attended their gatherings. This went on for quite a while, but then I shared my doubts with them and I made jokes that were probably inappropriate. And also, I could not get used to the slogans they used, like "God willing, I will go to the market tomorrow." I go to the market when I want to, and I don't when, for example, I don't feel like carrying heavy things. So I couldn't really adopt their sayings, just like earlier when I had had similar bursts of religious enthusiasm.

R: Did they ever make nasty comments about you for being a lesbian? It sounds bad, but did they ever call you a faggot or anything like that?

IG: I can't say that, no. But I've been afraid of a lot of things throughout my life, even at times when I shouldn't have been. I avoid conflicts to this day, *ad infinitum*, so to speak.

R: Do you think the reason you never had real conflicts related to being a lesbian is because you avoid conflicts, or because you've been lucky and have met tolerant people?

IG: Because I avoid conflicts. If somebody ever asked me if I was homosexual, I would say yes, because someone who asks isn't going to react badly if you say yes. If someone completely avoids the whole subject, the last thing they would do is ask about it, it doesn't even cross their mind. But I rarely ever brought it up myself and I simply accepted it if someone didn't want to deal with it or refused to acknowledge it. But there were a lot of situations, in which – retrospectively – I was more afraid than was reasonable. There was a similar situation in 1957, too, though that was about something totally different.

¹⁰ A village in the North-East of Hungary.

R: What happened in 1957?

IG: In 1957, I was recruited by the police as an informer. Maybe if I'd known that it would have done me good to go to jail, I wouldn't have let myself be recruited. It was only much later that word spread that lesbian life was flourishing more in prisons than outside. I didn't know that back in 1957. My being recruited lasted for three months. Well, it was a strenuous thing... Not only because it really was a rotten thing, but also because it spoiled socialism for me. Had they not caused me this trouble, I wouldn't have had a problem with socialism.

R: After that, you couldn't identify with the system the way you had before?

IG: You didn't have to identify with it. Only a very small group 'identified' with it – most people just lived in it, and relatively well, and that was it. You couldn't get very rich, but we got by just fine, and actually, we were doing better and better as time went on. So there remained a certain kind of vision for the future that things would be getting better and better, which of course came to an end with the transition. So I would have been even enthusiastic [about socialism], but this recruitment really took the spirit out of it for me.

R: Back to your recruitment. Was it something serious, connected to being a lesbian?

IG: No, I am absolutely sure that it wasn't connected to that. One afternoon in 1957 they brought me in from my workplace and asked me all sorts of questions, mostly concerning what I'd done during the events of 1956. I had to tell them a lot of times, I even had to write it down. They read it, tore it up, threw it in a trash can and told me to write it down again, because something was still missing from it. Well, as far as I knew, I had written down every single thing. They were threatening me with all kinds of things, but they didn't hurt me. It must have been well into the night when I told them to just tell me what they wanted from me. Finally, they spit it out that I still hadn't talked about that man with a moustache. The thing is, I only knew very little about the man with a moustache: his name was Józsi, I didn't even remember his last name, and he was a miner, maybe. Or at least that's what he had claimed to be.

R: How did you meet him in 1956?

IG: I went to visit Edit on 30 October. That part of Ferenc körút was closed down, and there were armed men strolling around and dead bodies all piled up against the walls of the houses. Other than that, there was peace and quiet. And then I was stopped by this guy called Józsi, asking me where I thought I was going in my little red jacket. I told him I was looking for number 36, to visit a friend of mine. Józsi started to come on to me and walked with me to the street entrance. I didn't pay much attention to him, even though he talked and talked, because I was so preoccupied with Edit. I went up to her apartment, I spent some time there, and when I left, Józsi was still waiting for me at the entrance to the building, and he walked with me as far as the edge of the blockade. He couldn't go any further anyway, because he was on patrol in that area. I, of course, went ahead. However, Józsi also checked my ID card. Perhaps I should have done a better job standing up to him – I should have gotten rid of him, but I was gutless as ever, and he had a gun. A few days later the janitor came to me saying that armed young men had been looking for me and had wanted to go upstairs to the attic, but he kicked them out. That's all that happened. After that I forgot about Józsi, as if he had never existed! And the

police were hunting for Józsi. By that time I was so afraid of policemen that I signed a paper that I would inform them about all kinds of things. Obviously, I shouldn't have done that... Maybe this led to much worse consequences than if I'd put my foot down more firmly.

R: What were the consequences?

IG: Well, the whole thing didn't last that long. I was working at an academic institution and I was probably supposed to find out and report certain things concerning certain researchers. But I was like a child compared to them, and they more or less treated me like a child. Had they been organizing resolutely against the régime, I would definitely have been left out of it. Furthermore, we were out of Budapest for weeks at a time, as we were travelling through the country for a research project, in which I was working as the stenographer. When I was in the office, I was busy writing; I had no time to pay attention to anyone who wanted to overthrow the socialist régime. So I had rather one-sided conversations with the two officers I had to report to. After three months passed they made me sign a piece of paper that said I accepted that this assignment had come to an end, but also that it could be revived by them later at any point.

R: And did they want to revive it later?

IG: No, they didn't. I felt embarrassed about it for a while, but this was because of the issue itself.

R: Was avoiding conflicts like this characteristic of you later as well?

IG: Yes. Nothing has really changed about that. I could also have been braver, pushier somehow about being a lesbian. After all, this was in direct contradiction to the masculine attitude I purposely adopted, because men usually don't behave like that. And there I was, just waiting for a miracle.

R: And did you make a change after the end of socialism?

IG: What did prompt me to act was that in 2001 my granddaughter moved in with me. And she had all kinds of problems and had already tried looking for a help hotline, but for some reason she couldn't find one. And then I also checked hotlines in the phonebook and there I found *Háttér*¹¹ and the phone number of their hotline. I nearly fainted! How could I have known that it was there in the phonebook? I don't normally read phonebooks! And then it took me weeks to work up the courage to call *Háttér*, because I didn't want to talk in front of the kid. Not that it would have mattered, she had already known about it for a while. She knew, or at least suspected. The young man that I finally got to talk to was really nice and immediately provided me with all kinds of information. I couldn't make use of all of it at the time, because I couldn't leave the kid there and run back and forth to parties or events in Budapest. Yes, 1998 was another time I should have put my foot down and asserted myself and said that I would not move to the countryside! But in the end, I went along with it to keep the peace.

R: Did you have a good relationship with your daughter?

IG: Yes, I did. The only times it was bad was when she would get something into her head and insist on it. But it would have been easier to split the apartment in Budapest in two, and even now it would be much easier, because

¹¹*Háttér Society*, formerly *HáttérSupport Society for LGBT People in Hungary*. Founded in 1995, it is the oldest and largest existing LGBT NGO in Hungary.

then my granddaughter would have her own space and so would I. My granddaughter and I lived in the countryside until 2004, and then we came back to Budapest, because my daughter was already living in Stockholm by then.

R: Did anything change for you immediately after the change of régime? What hopes or expectations did you enter 1990 with?

IG: I didn't have any expectations at all and I didn't think it was going to be better for me. First of all, I had got used to not caring about politics at all, so I wasn't following the events at the time. It was more noticeable that everything got much more expensive in the shops, even though I had a pretty good salary compared to the average. And then I got a lung disease and got pensioned off in 1990, when I was fifty years old.

R: So the change of régime didn't make it easier to meet people?

IG: I was very preoccupied with my family at the time, because there was a new baby again, and I was quite active in taking care of her. And I was happy to do it, too. So I didn't really have time to get into that. I didn't even know where to look. However, before I retired, I was working for the small-ad paper *Expressz*, where it was already possible to advertise for a romantic or leisure-time partner.

R: Why, hadn't that been possible before?

IG: No. If the person who wrote the ad didn't write "seeking a partner for marriage", then we would have to add that bit. And, of course, one had to look for someone of the opposite sex.

R: Was there a way of phrasing it to make it clear that it was a woman seeking another woman?

IG: No, for a long time not even that was possible. When I started working for *Expressz*, the only advertisement of this kind was for marriage. Leisure partners only came later, towards the end [of socialism]. In 1990 there was no such thing as looking for a same-sex partner. You could look for a friend to spend free time with, but most people running and reading ads actually meant it literally.

R: Did you ever look for a partner through an advertisement?

IG: I tried, but only later and not in *Expressz*. Sometimes it worked for a while and other times it was just friendship. When I talked to the people at *Háttér*, they helped me subscribe to *Mások*¹² magazine, and at the time lesbians had some sort of a regular night of their own on Belgrád Embankment.¹³ It happened once a month or so, but I never made it there, as I wasn't living in Budapest at the time. It was difficult, because even if I had gone, I wouldn't have been able to talk to anybody. In 2002 I didn't even dare to go to the [Pride] March; I was wondering what the kid's teachers would say if they saw me on TV. But in 2003 I did, and it was that year that the anthology entitled *Előhívott önarcképek* [Developed Self-Portraits]¹⁴ was published by *Labrisz*,

¹² The word *mások* literally means 'others' or 'different ones', and it can be used as a term to refer to gay people.

¹³ A few meetings for older lesbians were organised in the bar *Limó* at the time, on the Belgrád Embankment in Budapest.

¹⁴ *Előhívott önarcképek. leszbikus nők önéletrajzi írásai*. [Developed Self-Portraits: Autobiographical Writings of Lesbian Women.] Published by Labrisz Lesbian Association, Budapest, 2003.

including a piece written by me.¹⁵ Because in 2001 I didn't only subscribe to *Mások*, but also to the Labrisz Newsletter¹⁶. And there I found a call for submissions to the anthology. I travelled to Budapest for the book launch event; I sat through it and then almost left without exchanging a word with anyone. Finally, Vanda and Judit Rózsa¹⁷ noticed me and we talked a little.

One of my distant relatives is struggling with a similar problem – she was about twenty years old when she told me. But she's at least as shy and pathetic as me. I keep inviting her to lesbian meetings, to watch films, to Labrisz Evenings, but she can hardly ever bring herself to come, and even then, she can't talk to anyone else me. There's some sort of inhibition that can hold you back from socializing casually like young people do.

R: Do you think that the young lesbians of today are more relaxed than you were?

IG: For sure! Both gay guys and lesbians are, even though there still aren't many people who are out to everyone. Still, even in the way they move you can see that they're not as closeted as we were, and they lead much more confident, vibrant lives than I did; or my relative – she has a lot of fears and inhibitions as well.

R: Do you think this sense of inhibition comes from within you, or is it a product of the era or the atmosphere that you grew up in?

IG: I think it's more of something I inherited from my family. There are people in my generation who are a lot cooler and braver in other respects, too.

R: Did it help you get over your inhibitions when you found this gay and lesbian community?

IG: Yes, of course. But I really actually started getting to know people by advertising in the "friendship" column of the pride.hu website in the autumn of 2002, and by responding to an advertisement. Judit Szabó¹⁸ and I started an e-mail correspondence, and then we met at the 2003 Pride March. And then I met more people through her. When I moved back to Budapest in 2004, it wasn't really Labrisz Evenings that I attended but *Flamingó Circle*,¹⁹ with the guys.

R: Why did you start attending that group? You mentioned earlier that there was a period when you wanted to be a man, but not any more. How do you identify: a lesbian woman or rather a man?

IG: My masculine identity was rooted in a lot of things, like feeling totally uncomfortable in the female gender role, for example. And then, as far as the female members of my family were concerned, I felt a lot more distant from them, whereas my male relatives were meek and direct, and none of them were really loved by the women they lived with. You could tell. But the men loved these women and they got by just fine. So I just absorbed that male gender role and identity more. Later, as I met more lesbian women, in *Labrisz*, for example, it gradually grew less and less important for me to maintain a sort of a masculine identity. So it doesn't really matter to me any more; there's no

¹⁵ Her autobiographical piece was published under the pen name Helén Tamás B.

¹⁶ A double-sided, photocopied newsletter with news and programs about lesbians, sent to subscribers by mail.

¹⁷ Two activists in *Labrisz*.

¹⁸ Judit Szabó, a former *Háttér* Board member and activist. See: Chapter 5.

¹⁹ The now defunct group *Flamingo Group for Ageless Lesbians and Gays*.

point in clinging to such masculine 'values'. Not because of my age, but because I no longer find the male role more attractive. As for gay guys, you can talk to them more casually; they obviously wouldn't try to hit on you like straight guys would, and I wouldn't be ill at ease like I would among lesbians where I had no one to talk to. Because with women you are constantly waiting for a miracle, thinking, "Oh, will I see a sign of encouragement?" But of course you don't and then the whole thing is ruined. There have been tiny miracles here and there, though, I had a girlfriend for a year, but that relationship was almost exclusively about sex.

R: But would you say that the number of relationships you had grew significantly?

IG: I wouldn't say significantly, but there are more people in my life than before. There are more programs, too, and that's really good. However, there are very few of us who are older, I think that I'm the oldest within *Labrisz* circles. My age group isn't too visible. There may be plenty of reasons why. I don't think that there were fewer of us scattered around the country then, but it is possible that there were a lot of people who moved abroad and a lot who ended up safely married. I met a lot of people through advertisements who were about my age or not much younger, and who were married and finally wanted to start having a real life. There are quite a lot of people like that who you could find if you really started looking, but if they're from the countryside, it's really hard to develop a real relationship. And also, it may not be the best idea to get involved with someone who's married. That might be an option only if you want a purely sexual relationship.

R: Are you in a relationship right now?

IG: No, but it would feel great to belong to someone. At this age, your sexual desire isn't as intense as when you're young, but you can still fall in love. Friendship doesn't give you that kind of intimacy, even when you're older. But the older you are, the more difficult it is to make it happen, because of the little quirks we develop – she has her quirks, and I have mine, and then we have a problem.

R: When do you think it was easier to be a lesbian – then or now?

IG: It's probably better and freer today, and it's definitely easier to find a partner. Of course, that doesn't matter so much to me any more... But it does mean one thing: I don't have to think of myself as some kind of a rare wild species there's only one left of, the only one in the world. Now I can do and say whatever I want – I don't have anything to be afraid of any more. Old age had better have at least that benefit!



Érettségi tablókép, 1958



1962



1958



Lányával és unokájával, 1987

“My identity has followed two separate paths”

Sarolta Gábor (1929-2013)²⁰

R: When and what kind of a family were you born into?

SG: I was born in a country town in 1929, to a middle-class (bourgeois) family. Both of my parents were teachers. I earned a university degree in humanities and worked in that area at a cultural institution in Budapest. I went to a co-ed denominational grade school for the first four years. But the eight-grade secondary schools used to be single-sex, so it was just boys or just girls. In those days it was out of the question for boys and girls to attend school together.

R: Did your family ever talk about sexuality?

SG: No, we never talked about it. It wasn't something that would ever be discussed in a bourgeois family. It was a big surprise when I got my first period. But my teenage years were about war, siege, fleeing, so that was another reason we didn't talk about such things.

R: Was your family living in Budapest during the war?

SG: Yes, in Buda, unfortunately, on Gellért Hill. So the Russians arrived at our door on the last day. I lost ten kilos, which is a lot for a body that's still developing. We got bombed out of the basement of the building we were living in before, right on New Year's Eve, so we had to move to the basement of Eötvös Collegium.²¹ Professors, students, foreigners, Hungarians – it was a very interesting assortment of people gathered there. We sat around the table, an oil lamp was burning, and the professors gave lectures. I wasn't old enough to attend university yet, but I asked for permission and they let me in, so I spent time with older girls and boys there. In those days our priority was staying alive. We experienced starvation, total uncertainty about how we would survive, and the fear of death. When you get thrown to the ground by a blast, you feel lucky when you are able to get up and move your body. Sex is the last thing you'd be thinking of! During the siege, our nutrition was so poor and there was such little light, since we were constantly living underground, that all the women, younger and older, stopped menstruating. Women didn't menstruate in Auschwitz, either. A worn-out body can't produce ova. So no, we didn't really talk about it, it wasn't really a priority at the time. Only later, when things got back to normal.

R: When you were in high school, did you already know that you were a lesbian? Did you know that this was a feeling you had to hide?

SG: It developed slowly. I had to look it up in the dictionary to figure out what it was.

R: And what did the dictionary say?

SG: Horrible things! Those were all old dictionaries, so they described it not only as a sin, but as a perversion, something terrible.

R: Was there a separate entry on female homosexuality?

SG: The old dictionaries had an entry on 'homosexuality'. It primarily discussed male homosexuality, but female homosexuality was mentioned, too. Even then

²⁰ The interview was conducted in 2005. Sarolta Gábor is a pen name chosen by the subject.

²¹ One of the dormitories of Eötvös Loránd University, which, besides hosting students, has been prestigious for its academic activities.

it was noted that female homosexuality – the word ‘lesbian’ wasn’t used yet – was more tolerated by society. As far as I know, in Hungary you could get sentenced to jail for male homosexuality, but not for female homosexuality.²² If you were a woman, you would face social exclusion, persecution, and rejection from your family, but there wasn’t any legal punishment.

R: Maybe it was easier for homosexual women to be invisible than homosexual men.

SG: Maybe. And I think a lot of women don’t even realize they’re lesbians. It’s still hard, even today.

R: When did you reach the point when you first identified as ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’?

SG: It didn’t happen consciously. Today’s concepts of self-definition and identity didn’t exist then. That’s not how we experienced it. We felt that we had these attractions, but we constantly tried to direct them to the other sex. Today we know about homosexuality, and psychology deals with these concepts, but for us it was just acting on our instincts. Or I don’t know whether we did it, I can only speak about myself, I didn’t know anyone else who had attractions like me, but I also tried to be heterosexual. I idealized a certain boy. And then at age eighteen I had a boyfriend, but he died in 1956.

R: Was it really love?

SG: Definitely. And the boy was very handsome. We went as far as kissing. In those days that was all a young lady and a gentleman were allowed to do.

R: To what degree did you identify with the definitions you found in the dictionary? To what degree did you feel they referred to you?

SG: I felt that the definition referred to me, that I had the same preference. But it was a feeling I repressed.

R: How did you choose this way of life despite everything?

SG: It was not like that at all! Coming out and self-identification – these terms were completely meaningless in those days. They were unheard of. We suffered such a lack of information that I had no clue about what two women could actually do with each other. I was twenty already, but I couldn’t imagine how to reach sexual satisfaction besides kissing and a little bit of caressing.

R: Did you know anyone whom you suspected that she was also attracted to women?

SG: Nobody. Oh, and another important thing I want to add – I’m going to jump ahead a little to when I was in my twenties and thirties – about why I couldn’t find a partner and have a relationship then. There were two social groups where I could have found someone similar to me. One was artists. This has always been more accepted there. But a professional didn’t really have any contacts with the world of artists. The other option would have been to move down the social ladder a bit and go to bars and join the nightlife. There weren’t many bars at the time, but I could have found a partner there. But for someone of my upbringing and social standing, that wasn’t an option. I’ve never been to such places in my life.

R: So your different identities intersected in such a way that you couldn’t find a partner.

SG: Exactly! Later I talked to people of my age. They all moved down the social

²² Homosexuality as a subset of “perversion against nature” was removed from the penal code in 1961. Until then, those sentenced could face a year in prison. The law did not apply to women.

ladder and that's how they found each other. Not me. There must have been people like me in my circles too, but they too had to keep hidden. They either led secret lives, or they repressed it and lived alone or got married, like me. So they tried to get integrated.

R: You would think that in the lower classes such norm-breaking behaviour would be sanctioned more, but from what you're saying, it seems that such border-crossing was more allowed.

SG: Yes, in some ways. You really put your finger on it: On the one hand, it was more sanctioned. But mainly in the countryside, in village life. Religion and tradition were always stronger there. If someone in the village was gay, there was no way out, unless they moved away. But it was different for the working class and the lower-middle class. For example, a shop assistant isn't working class, but also not a professional and not a bourgeois. They found each other more easily. In my experience, people who are less educated are better at acting on their instincts. Education gets in the way of natural instincts. Either it suppresses it or it sublimates it. In any case, social norms were much stronger when I was young. The atmosphere in Hungary wasn't liberal or tolerant. I wouldn't call it intolerant either, just puritanical, with very strict moral norms, be one Catholic or Protestant. Everyone was religious then. Whether it was real faith or just a formality depended on the family. In my family, it was more of a formality. We were Protestants, and we attended Bible class and had to go to church every Sunday. My mother and I were Lutheran, while my brother and father were Calvinists. And since we had two denominations in the same family, I was tolerant of differences, because the people I was closest to had different religions. But it never caused any conflicts, since there are hardly any differences between the two. My mother also went to church regularly, but mostly because the other women in her social class did so, and they would chat and go for walks afterwards. It was a social activity as well. My father didn't go to church very often, only on the main holidays. But it was taken for granted that everyone believed in God.

R: But this situation changed after the war.

SG: It was completely different after the war! We were young, so were more influenced by materialist ideology. There was a time in my life when I leaned that way too, and then another period when I said that although I didn't follow any religion I still believed something transcendental existed. For me, otherness²³ and religiousness has never been a conflict. Because I was never that strongly religious, and I wasn't a Catholic. In the Catholic Church, otherness means total excommunication. So I wasn't conflicted but, for example, it was a huge problem for my French girlfriend, who is a Catholic and deeply religious that she was pretty much excluded from the church.

R: How long were you married?

SG: For a year. Not even a year, actually, just half a year. It was an attempt. Of course, the biggest obstacle was sex, which didn't work at all. My husband was a very nice man, he had good people in his family, and he was a kind, modest, decent boy. He initiated the divorce, which was a huge relief for me. During the divorce proceedings, his suspicion that I was other did come up, but two of my female friends testified against it as witnesses. Of course, I was a little in love

²³ She uses 'other'/'different' and 'otherness' to refer to being a lesbian.

with both of them at the time, and they even knew, but they still stood loyally by me at court. This happened in Budapest, after I graduated from university. First I lived in a rented room, then in a small loft which was practically mine, although I didn't own it. But after the divorce I felt free: I worked, I liked my job, and I was a divorced woman. Before, it was terrible, people kept asking, "How come you aren't married yet?" It was much better to be a divorced woman; it was a totally different social status. And afterwards I was glad that things had turned out the way they had, because from then on I could always say I had been married. Of course, I didn't mention that it only lasted half a year. I would say, "My marriage was so bad, I could never marry again!" It sounded completely different than "You old maid, no one ever wanted to marry you?" Being single wasn't a fashionable lifestyle at the time.

R: Who was the first woman you had a relationship with?

SG: She was ten years older than me. She wasn't a lesbian but a bisexual. She was already with her second husband, and she had two teenage children from her first marriage. When I was young, I used to get sick very often, and I went through several sanatoriums, including Mátraháza. It was like the Hungarian version of Magic Mountain [in the Thomas Mann novel]. There were love stories and it was very, very interesting. I met her in the sanatorium, too, where she was my roommate. But at the time I wasn't in love with her. But when the divorce proceedings started I needed one more witness to testify in my defence, and since we had been roommates, I went to look for her. And it was really a bit of a search, because I didn't know where she lived. After that we became friends, and she initiated things. Her nickname was Feri.²⁴ But she was a woman. In every way.

R: Did anyone besides the two of you know about the relationship?

SG: No one. Only another roommate of mine, who I had been in love with before. She is one of my confidantes in life. I tell her everything. She usually knew about everything in my life, and she always really enjoyed my stories. She used to clap her hands together and say, "Wow, the things that happen to you!" But we were just friends. She married three times. She was very beautiful and such a cool woman.

R: Was your relationship with Feri serious?

SG: Yes. But we had to be terribly secretive, because she had two teenage kids. 'Lucky', her husband at the time ended up in prison not much later. But he wasn't a criminal. In Hungary in the fifties, you could go to jail for anything. It was enough to have a spiteful neighbour. But that wasn't the case with him. He was working as an architect, a project supervisor, and they blamed him for some economic crime. Anyone could be blamed for this sort of thing then. All they needed to say was that you were sabotaging socialist production, and you were done for.

R: And the husband didn't know what was going on?

SG: No. At that time I lived alone in that little hole in the attic, and Feri used to come over. It lasted for two years. And I'm sure it would have lasted longer if she hadn't died so suddenly.

R: What kind of experience was your first real lesbian relationship?

SG: It was a great experience. Amazing! My first happy relationship. When she

²⁴ A male name.

passed away, I hit a really low point. I didn't have another relationship for years and years – more than a decade, in fact. I buried myself in my work. On one hand, I was overwhelmed by grief for a while, and on the other hand, as I've mentioned, I didn't have opportunities to meet other women. So life continued pretty much as it had in my schooldays. I had admirations and crushes, friendships that couldn't really be called relationships.

R: And did the women you had crushes on know?

SG: One did it, the other didn't. They were my colleagues. Professionals. One of them knew how I felt about her. She and I also have had a very close friendship for decades.

R: So effectively in this period of time did you settle yourself for living for work? Didn't you feel like you wanted to be in a relationship, whether with a man or a woman? Did you try at all?

SG: I did try with a man. It was an old friendship; we had been classmates at university. I really did love that boy. And, as they say, everything happened between us except 'that one thing'. And he insisted on it, so we broke up. This was during university. He got married and divorced several times, but we always had this heart-to-heart, almost intimate relationship. Then we had a sexual relationship too, during those ten years. To him I was somehow physically attracted, too. Relatively. Then our relationship stopped. I didn't want to continue. He told me, "You owed me this much." Meaning that if not in our youth, at least ten-fifteen years later.

R: Did he know about your attraction to women?

SG: No, he didn't.

R: Were your parents still alive then?

SG: My father died very early, in the fifties, leaving my mother by herself, so she moved in with me. So I lived in this apartment with my mother from 1960 on. It was good in that she did everything for me, but it also meant my freedom of movement got significantly limited.

R: How much did she see of your private life? How much did you let her see?

SG: When Feri and I were still together, once my mother and I got into such a fight that she started yelling at me: "Why do you go there? What are you doing? Why don't you come home?" and in my anger I blurted it out. "That can't be true!" she said. "You'll grow out of it." That was the only one time we ever talked about it, never again. So she actually knew, and she always kept trying to steer me towards the other direction. She was always happy when I was friends with a man, or if he walked me home, or we went to the theatre together. And from then on, she hated all my female friends, even if there was nothing between us, and she tried to keep them away from me. As much as I loved my mother, and she adored me and did everything for me, this subject was an endless source of tension for us. My mother was completely stuck in the olden days. The generation gap was pretty wide. Except this one time, we never talked about it. Interestingly, she did talk to one of my female friends, the colleague I had been in love with. My mother liked her very much, and sometimes asked her about me. And then my friend would tell me how upset my mother was and how she thought it was a horrible thing. So there wasn't really much to say to her.

R: When did your next relationship come about?

SG: That was really interesting. One day, Feri's daughter, who had been living

in Australia, just showed up. We had stayed in touch to some degree and corresponded for a long time. As I loved Feri so much, I was interested in her children's lives. Her daughter was also a lesbian, or considering her history, bisexual rather. She came home to visit for the first time in 1972. She looked a lot like her mother, and she was very beautiful and young. I fell in love with her immediately, and she also felt attracted to me. The chemistry between us sprang up within a few days. One day we were dining in a restaurant, and after a couple glasses of wine she asked me directly, "Saci, did you have an affair with my mum?" The question caught me off guard, but I said yes. And then it was like an avalanche came crashing down. She asked about her mother and me. And that was when she also told me, "Well, see, it's not just my mum; it's also me." And then our affair began. But it lasted only a few weeks, because she was on break from work and had to go back. She was a teacher and came to Hungary during the summer break. And she was shocked at how awfully hard it was to find relationships here, how there wasn't anything here. I told her that I was preparing for a trip to Paris, and she wrote down the address of a Parisian gay and lesbian bar for me. It turned out to be really useful later. The last time she came to Hungary was in 1996, and by then she was completely lesbian. She said she had totally given up on men. By then she had been with her girlfriend for a long time.

R: When were you in Paris, and how did you like it?

SG: I was there for three months in 1973. Oh, it was marvellous! It was there that I felt free for the first time in my life: that this exists, it's natural, there are communities, groups, bars, you can go dancing, it was a huge thing for me. A new world opened before my eyes. There I saw, oh my God, what a life you could live! In Paris there were couples living together, going out together, vacationing together. Like now the younger generation here.

R: Did it affect your life in Hungary?

SG: Of course. By that time, I started becoming more assertive and identifying as a lesbian. That was the first time in my life when I saw a lesbian newspaper. That such a thing existed, and in an organized form. There weren't any pride marches yet. In Paris I got to know two women, and because I felt I had a lot to make up for, I played around a bit, and I went out with both of them at the same time. Then I was found out, and one told me to choose between her and the other. And then I chose Camille, and we were involved for decades. But the other woman and I still stayed in touch. Before I travelled back to Budapest, she met up with me again to say goodbye, then she wrote me a letter, and even came to Budapest once. Well, I'm not made of stone, and if she was willing to come all the way to Budapest... Of course, Camille didn't know about it. Later Camille also found someone in Paris. As much as we loved each other, a long-distance relationship is always hard to maintain.

R: How did you manage to maintain the relationship?

SG: Whether I visited her or she visited me, we were always together for at least a month. Sometimes I visited her and then she came back with me. What we would do sometimes in order to have more time together was that she would work for two weeks when I was visiting her, take two weeks off, and then she could come to Budapest for another two weeks.

R: When you came back home from Paris, didn't you think about looking for some community? Or could you not imagine it existed here in Hungary?

SG: No, I couldn't! And I was so overwhelmed. Phone calls, correspondence, preparing for visits. So I wasn't looking for it. The Parisian experience was enough; it was enough that I had somebody.

R: How long did that relationship last?

SG: We're actually friends to this day and we still stay in touch. These days it's only phone calls or letters and memories. Our romantic relationship lasted until the beginning of the nineties. In the meantime we had a ten-year break, which was a very long time. During that time she was in a relationship with someone else, and I had a new girlfriend, Margit.

R: How did you meet Margit?

SG: I met her not long before my mother died. I talked a lot to the colleague of mine who was also my friend about how lonely I was. When Camille started to grow distant from me, and after promising to visit she suddenly cancelled, I felt like I should also look for someone else. Then my friend told me, "You know, there's someone at my workplace they say is...!" It was awfully awkward for her to ask the woman whether it was true, but she did it for me. The woman was shocked at first but she was pleased, because even though she was in a relationship at the time, they were in the process of breaking up. She was exactly in the same situation as me, so she was open to meeting up with me. So we met and we liked each other. Margit was a very good-natured, kind person. She realized how much my work meant to me, that I'm not the type to just drop work at 5 and go home. Because I was always working on something, researching too, publishing a lot. I published over a hundred articles, some of them major studies. She sort of took the place of my mother in a way. She was also older than me and a good housewife: she did all the cooking, and we lived together almost like husband and wife. The way we divided labour was that I would go to work and earn money, we would go out and travel together, and she would take care of the household. She owned a small flat, but after my mother died she more or less moved in with me. We were together for eight years. She had a husband and three children. Of her three children, only her son knows about our relationship. He is a very loving person, and he just smiles, "Oh, my mother? Yeah." As for her two daughters, one of them never realized, and the other didn't really care about her mother's life. But the other one likes me a lot, and we have a good relationship up to this day. And she always says, "The best years of my mother's life were these eight years she spent with you." But she doesn't know what "spent with you" really meant. She only saw her mother being happy, blossoming. I always travelled a lot, one of my hobbies was academic work and the other was traveling. And when I travelled, I took Margit with me. She hadn't really gone abroad before. Going on vacation to the Yugoslavian seaside or taking a trip to Vienna or to the Tatra Mountains was a big thing for her.

R: Did anyone else around you know about this relationship?

SG: I think they started to suspect. When I was young, my colleague and I tried to be discreet, because after all there wasn't anything between us. But there were rumours all over the workplace. Then they died down. It was a different generation, now I'm old and retired. The current generation has no idea about the kind of rumours that flew around in a workplace twenty or thirty years ago. My colleague told me she was once asked, "Hey, isn't Saci in love with you? Because she doesn't have a husband." Of course, she replied, "Of

course not!"

R: How did your relationship with Margit end?

SG: She died of cancer. That was a really hard year, because accompanying someone who is dying is not easy.

R: Did a long break follow again?

SG: Of course, a break followed. But I went to Paris afterwards and renewed the love with my ex-girlfriend. Interestingly enough, Camille had once come to see me when I was already with Margit, and during that time Margit moved back home. Of course, she knew what was going on, and it hurt her a lot. But she loved me so much and she knew it was an old relationship that was important to me. She acquiesced, and then I introduced them to each other, and they were nice to each other. But the situation was still awkward. Camille was sad to go home, while Margit was pleased to see Camille leave. And there was still the long distance between us.

R: Your work has always been very important to you, hasn't it? Did it also serve as a refuge?

SG: Writing has always been important for me, ever since I was a child. And in two contrasting ways. A researcher is supposed to be exact and objective by all means. But I write poems too, and poetry is something completely different. You could say that one kind of writing is a woman, and the other is a man. In writing I can express both sides of myself. The intellectual sphere is the male side of me. Nowadays these seem to be equal, and it may be right this way. But, as they say, there's female sensitivity, and there's male logic and female logic, there's some sort of a difference. Yin and Yang aren't exactly the same. I think we lesbians have both sides.

R: Because we're lesbians?

SG: Yeah. I used to describe myself as both. One half of me is a woman, the other is a man, and the man in me is attracted to women. My female side emerges when I'm with a woman and I play the female role. It's a question often asked: "Which one of you is the woman, and which one is the man?" A lesbian couple can also be asked this question. Who plays the male role and who plays the female role? I don't think of myself as a woman who loves women. I'm more of a man in my attitudes, way of thinking, lifestyle and creativity. When it comes to love, I'm more of the actively courting type, the initiator, but when it comes to intimacy I can also be a woman. That means that in an intimate relationship if someone is the 'girl', she has to 'submit' herself to her partner. Right?

R: Well, I don't know. Not necessarily.

SG: Not necessarily? Do you always feel that your female partner is completely equal to you?

R: Not always. There are some situations in which we're not equal, but on the whole it all balances out somehow. And the differences aren't necessarily on a male-female axis.

SG: That's true in general, but I'm just thinking of sex.

R: Does that mean you're the initiator?

SG: Sometimes. It depends. When it comes to intimacy, generally one person is giving pleasure, and the other is receiving.

R: And is this a fixed division of roles?

SG: No! It changes. The roles aren't set forever. That's why you can take both

roles in love. That is, we can.

R: Isn't this possible in a male-female relationship?

SG: It's possible in a male-female relationship, too, but there you have physical differences, so generally one person is active and the initiator, the one giving pleasure, while the other one just experiences the processes.

R: In today's society these roles aren't so strictly divided, and there isn't such a strict binary.

SG: Probably. Young lesbians today might see things differently, and they don't feel this strict duality in themselves. Because how do they define themselves nowadays? Lesbian woman. They say: I'm a woman, but a lesbian woman who loves women. When I talk with a straight person who knows I'm living in another world, they always ask the stereotypical question: "Who's the woman and who's the man?" And it's hard to answer. Straight people project these two roles on lesbian couples. As I said, to some degree I think the same way, but then I try to explain that it's about taking turns, especially when it comes to intimacy. And the advantage we have is that we can experience both roles. And when my friend says, "Oh, there must be a lot of masculine women at *Labrisz*," I answer, "Not true, there are very few who are very masculine." If I look around in *Labrisz*, I see mostly feminine women! The majority are feminine in the way that society expects. And if we go outside, nobody on the street would guess that those pretty, nice young ladies love women! Loving women doesn't necessarily mean having a male identity and appearance.

I always felt during my professional career, especially when I was younger, that if I said something at a meeting – even if it had a professional weight – people wouldn't take it as seriously as if a man had said it. A woman always has to work more and perform better to get the same recognition. It's like a minority fate. Things are starting to balance out today. A female manager is in fact better than a male one. And it's not as uncommon as it was twenty or thirty years ago.

R: What you're saying sounds a lot like feminist social critique. What is your opinion of feminism?

SG: I've never liked feminists. Why not? I haven't thought much about it, but maybe because feminists emphasize their womanhood far too much. That they are women first of all. I've never emphasized that I'm a woman and that I demand, say, voting rights because I'm a woman. After all, I totally rejected a lot of things related to womanhood, like motherhood, for example. I still can't imagine it even now; it's strange to me when a lesbian says she wants to give birth. I could picture myself in the role of father, my lesbian partner giving birth, and then I would have made a great father. But I couldn't have pictured having another human being growing inside my body, and having to give birth and be a mother. So I refused womanhood not only with regard to heterosexual relationships but also motherhood.

R: What was it like being a lesbian with a professional career? Did it cause any conflicts? How difficult was it to reconcile your professional life with being a lesbian?

SG: It was terribly hard to lead a double life. It never really caused any big conflicts though, since I've always tried to clearly separate work from personal life. In Hungary I was a respectable professional, and when I went to Paris I became a different person and lived a different life. My two lives were spatially

separated, too. Yes, of course, it was hard. Sure, it would have been easier if I'd been able to live more openly. After leaving the parental home everyone has the desire to lead an independent life with someone who is a partner, who belongs to her. But for that to happen, you need both people to be open about their relationship in front of the whole world, not just in a closed community. To a certain extent lesbians lead a double life even today. Even if there are a lot of places where they are out, they still choose who to tell, who should know about them, who should see this part of their life, right? In my life and the lives of the older generation this secrecy was much stronger. And you had to be terribly careful.

R: How did you find *Labrisz*?

SG: There was a circle connected to *Háttér* which organized meetings for women. They were in Zichy Jenő Street, in the office of *Óvegylet*²⁵. I don't remember any more how I got there. The feminist newspaper *Nőszemély* [Woman] was also produced there. And we got our hands on *Mások* magazine for the first time then. Maybe there was an advertisement in it. In any case, there was a dark courtyard room in Zichy Jenő Street, where we met each other occasionally. It also happened that the guys used it for gatherings.

R: Yes, later the first *Labrisz* Evening also took place there.

SG: Yes. A few times the guys also held meetings there. The women's groups were led by Andrea, we had a couple of meetings like that, and then the whole thing grew from there. That was the first time in my life when I went to a few gay bars. But just for kicks, to see what it was like. It wasn't really my cup of tea. Not the sort of place where I'd want to meet someone.

R: So later you attended the *Labrisz* Evenings?

SG: Of course, I used to attend, over at Gutenberg Square.²⁶ Most of my acquaintances are from *Labrisz*. Once there was a game, everybody had to pull a name and had to sit next to the person whose name she pulled. So that people wouldn't be sitting next to their partners or friends. And I pulled and I had to sit next to B...

R: The hand of fate...

SG: Indeed. This ended up in a year-and-a-half long relationship. Actually, I have experienced the hand of fate many times in my life. That's how I met my girlfriend in Paris, as well. Okay, I went to that bar with a purpose, but that we found each other, that's fate.

R: Were you at the Pride festivals too, from the very beginning?

SG: Yes, I was, I have participated in every festival so far. In the very first one, too, in 1997, which ended at Vörösmarty Square. Balázs Pálfi²⁷ was one of the people who gave a speech, it was the first time I ever saw him. I participated in the marches too, but I was always very careful not to appear on TV. A lot of people know me in professional circles.

R: And what would happen if the news got out?

²⁵*Óvegylet Foundation*: The first AIDS prevention organisation, existed between 1994 and 2001.

²⁶ For a while the Gutenberg Square office of the women's rights organization *NANE* hosted *Labrisz* evenings.

²⁷ Balázs Pálfi is a journalist and gay rights activist. He hosted the gay radio show *Őnazonos* [Self-Identical] on Petőfi Rádió (one of the national radio channels) between 1994 and 2006, and since 1998 has been the host of the radio show *Szappanopera helyett* [Instead of Soap Opera] on *Tilos Rádió* (an alternative non-profit community radio channel).

SG: It wouldn't be too pleasant. I'm considered an expert in my field, among the best of the older crowd. I've long gone into retirement, and a lot of people have forgotten me. The younger generation doesn't even know me, or if they read my articles and studies they don't associate them with a specific person. Even so, it wouldn't be a good idea.

R: Do you think gay rights activism in Hungary is important?

SG: I think it's very important, and I'm very glad to see people getting involved. The publication of *Developed Self-Portraits* was a huge achievement, for example, or even just keeping *Labrisz* alive, and the publications, the events, monthly meetings, festivals. I did a lot of social work and organizing in my field, and I know how much behind-the-scenes work goes into organizing an event. My highest respect to you and many of you, because it's a great thing that you do it and it's very much needed. You are working for the future, and you give help to a lot of people who are connecting now, waking now up, young now. This future must be made by you. For us to be more accepted by society. And it takes a lot of work.

R: Has your circle of friends changed since you started to get to know gay people?

SG: Of course it has, but I still have my old circle of friends, too, usually colleagues who are close to me and similar in age. Unfortunately, *Labrisz* only has young people. At least far younger than me. Sometimes I ask myself, 'where are the older lesbians?' Because they have to exist. How could they be reached? They are sorely missing. Because I'm the only one of my age, and of course, I have always been extremely open. I don't believe that someone should be respected just for their age. What on earth for? At first one should achieve something, and then we can respect them. And if a young person achieves something, they deserve to be respected just the same.

R: It's difficult to reach the older generations, and it may be also hard for them to come out, even in these circles.

SG: Sure. But it isn't completely true, either, because there are some older people who have had the chance to try this life, but they have found their partner who they live with, or maybe three or four of them meet but they don't feel the need to meet other people. There was one woman I invited to a *Labrisz* Evening, and she went once and then never again. She said that there was nobody there but spring chickens! Sorry. So she was bothered by the generation gap, and she felt that her problems were different, so she never went again.

R: Perhaps there should be a special group, a different environment, where they would be more willing to go.

SG: That's sure. There were some attempts though. Ágota²⁸ tried a couple times to organize something at Kultiplex,²⁹ and then Anna Lovas Nagy³⁰ tried. Mostly it was a small group, but occasionally eight or ten people came together. That was the most. We met at Limo, on Belgrád Embankment. Then that ended too. Once I met someone that way at *Labrisz* – she's also in the older generation – and she invited me to join her own circle of friends. It was someone's birthday, and there were five or six of us, all lesbians. If I remember well, there were

²⁸ Agáta Gordon, see: Chapters 12A and 13.

²⁹ An alternative cultural centre in Budapest.

³⁰See: Chapter 14.

two couples, me, and the other woman, without a partner. It was a small circle of friends who used to spend time together. We stayed at a very pretty small flat in Óbuda³¹. There was music, dance, food, booze – all you need at a party. So it was an older lesbian group of friends. Since I've been to one such gathering, they have to exist. And at *Labrisz's* fifth birthday party there was also that small, short woman with the backpack – grey-haired, already in the age of a grandmother, and with a grandchild, too.³²

R: If you think back to your lesbian life, how has your relation with yourself changed? At first you learned about lesbians from the dictionary, which said it was a perversion, then you tried being with men, then you had relationships with women, and later you went to Paris... How did this whole process play out?

SG: More or less the way you said. Ever since my eyes were opened in Paris and I saw people like me, and I saw that this could and should be a completely natural thing, I also started to see it more and more as something completely natural.

R: What kind of feelings did you have towards yourself during this process? Did you ever feel ashamed or guilty, for example?

SG: I have never felt guilty. Why would I? It was a slow process of self-realization that finally reached full awareness. I wouldn't call it 'pride', and that word isn't even used any more. Now they call it 'dignity' on the radio too, not 'gay pride',³³ since you can't be proud of your sexual orientation; it's something you're given. It's like how no one is proud of blond hair – it's a given, too. Pride is perhaps about being out. You can be proud of being brave. But it's better to start coming out early, at the beginning of your adult life, and to shape your life in a way that you have a lifestyle, have a friends' circle where you are accepted as a lesbian. But at that age I hadn't reached that stage, and I developed all kinds of relationships in which it wouldn't make any sense, it wouldn't be right to come out – when you are over fifty or sixty. It's too late to change that. It's like if you want to change your home country or your native language, you shouldn't do it at age forty or fifty, because it's too late. Do it in your twenties. Because then you're still young enough to assimilate into a new cultural and linguistic community. For me, being a lesbian was never integrated into my life, so my identity has followed two separate paths; it has always been two separate, parallel things that rarely met. But the time you live in makes a huge difference. Look at all the changes that happened in just the last few decades! What an earth-shattering change! In the past, the rules of social contact were very strict, and you had to live and behave according to the prescribed rules. Today's thirty- and forty-year-olds have no idea about the kinds of conventions we had to follow. In some ways it's not good that everything has been forgotten, and all social rules have been trespassed. On the other hand, the freedom of the choice has opened up, and the possibility of human self-fulfilment.

R: What do you think is the reason that lesbian women are more easily accepted by straight society than gay men?

³¹Óbuda (lit. 'old Buda'): a district of Budapest on the Buda side of the Danube.

³²The woman referred to is Ilona Gál, see: Chapter 1.

³³After internal debates within the LGBT activist community, the Gay Pride march was called Gay Dignity March in 2008; from 2009 on, it has been called Budapest Pride. See: <http://budapestpride.com/about-us/local-traditions>

SG: What may explain this? Tenderness, warmth, cuddling, caresses fit a woman much more – according to popular thinking, I mean. These are somehow feminine. This is a stereotype. But because of this, if two girlfriends link arms, give each other kisses, it doesn't mean anything. Like when two kittens cuddle. It's more natural. And I'm not talking about reality, but the stereotype. According to this stereotype, if two men hold hands, cuddle, or kiss, it's somehow unnatural and repulsive, even in the mildest form. It's such a strong rejection or transgression of the masculine role that that it's offensive in the eyes of a 'real' man or a 'real' woman. And one more thing: the man – this is also a stereotype – likes to court, conquer, rule and take possession. That's more or less how people think even today. Now imagining a man in a role where he is being courted, pampered, and letting himself be possessed by another man is again so offensive, that this is where I think the greater tolerance towards female homosexuality than male homosexuality is rooted.

R: And what do *you* think of male homosexuality?

SG: If I accepted myself, obviously I had to accept homosexuality between men too. My girlfriend in Paris took me maybe twice to a place where men would meet up and dance every Friday and Saturday night. There were eighty to a hundred men in a room, all gay, and since they were among other gay men, there was dancing, hugging, and passionate kissing, or hugs and kisses at the very least. And I have to admit that it was a strange feeling for me. I don't know why, maybe all those guys together, the crowd, for example a big-moustached sailor kissing a young man, and all this in the middle of the crowd – for me, it was a bit of a shocking experience. To face this after arriving in Paris from here, from behind the Iron Curtain! And if it was a shocking experience for me, what might it be like for someone who is totally straight? And to top it all, the leader of that community was a Catholic priest, André Baudry, who had an extremely good reputation in Paris. I suppose he was also gay. He was deeply engaged, he organized this gay community in Paris, called 'Arcadie', and he even wrote a book about it, which he autographed for me.

R: Was it a religious community?

SG: It wasn't particularly religious. Maybe there were some religious activities too in private. But those were dance nights with a buffet, consumption, music, and dance.

R: And what did the Catholic Church say about this?

SG: I don't know. At that time, I didn't speak French well enough to be able to inquire. My girlfriend knew this Catholic priest, she introduced me to him, and we talked some. He organized these events so that the men wouldn't go to bars and other sinful places. Here people could freely, normally be together, in a, so to say, civilized environment.

R: And this was in the seventies?

SG: Yes, Paris in the seventies. And it was interesting, because when I looked around, it was hard to tell whether someone was gay. Not just because of their clothes but also because of their whole appearance, since all kinds of social classes were represented there. From blue-collar workers to high-level professionals, all sorts of people mingled there. And they had only one thing in common. It was a very interesting experience.

R: How has public discourse about gay people changed over time?

SG: The Galgóczi film *Another Way* in the early eighties was a huge

breakthrough. To be more precise, the film was based on Erzsébet Galgóczi's novel and directed by Károly Makk.³⁴ I know that a lot of people saw it, and it became a topic for discussion. The film was very good; it was brave not just in its content but also politically brave. It was appreciated mainly for its political bravery. The lesbian aspect was treated as incidental, but it was accepted. And it was pretty well known that Galgóczi was a lesbian. In those days it was mainly artists, actors, and writers you knew about: everybody knew about Ferencsik, Imre Antal, and Hilda Gobbi.³⁵ Interestingly enough, it was somehow accepted for people who made a great impact otherwise, through their intellectual or artistic performance. The general view was "Well, for goodness' sake, everyone has some flaws". And an artist can always take more liberties. That's how it worked.

R: You have a memorable story about meeting Erzsébet Galgóczi. Would you like to tell us?

SG: I met Erzsébet Galgóczi in February 1982. It happened when I saw the film *Another Way*, which had a huge impact on me, and on a whim I wrote her a letter thanking her very much for having had the courage to write the novel *Another Love*, instead of all of us. She did a great thing for people like us. A few days later I got a call in my workplace during working hours. It was Erzsébet Galgóczi. "Hello, Sarolta" – she called me by my first name immediately, which I appreciated a lot – and she said right away that she wanted to get to know me. We agreed on a date to visit her. She lived near Hűvösvölgy, in an apartment building, in an apartment furnished in very good taste, in a surprisingly bourgeois style. She was an open, very honest, open-minded person, but very determined, strong-willed, self-confident and tough at the same time. I could imagine her as the leader in any kind of relationship, her will dominating. This was how our conversation went, too: she led the conversation, she asked the questions. I realized she was actually curious about me as a person. She asked me about my relationships, we talked about coming out – not using that term, of course.

R: Do you remember what term she used?

SG: Well, she talked about who you could tell. I complained how hard it was to live closeted, and she replied that yes, yes, she knew that, too. Her friends and the people around her knew about her, of course, but "I wouldn't climb onto the rooftop to scream it out loud" – I remember this rooftop metaphor exactly. She was especially intrigued by my story about having a relationship with the daughter of my first girlfriend years later. Then she asked me about my current partner. I told her the problem was that we weren't on the same level intellectually. Her reply, word for word: "And is she good in bed?" I said, "Well, yeah, she is." "Well, what more do you want? That's the main point, and you can find your intellectual partner among your friends."

³⁴Erzsébet Galgóczi (1930-1989): Hungarian writer, living openly as a lesbian from the 1970s. She published her novel *Another Love* (Hungarian title: *Törvényen belül* [Inside the Law]) about the love between two women, set in the dictatorial 1950s in Hungary, in 1980. The book was filmed by Károly Makk in 1982. The film's English title is *Another Way*, the Hungarian title is *Egymásra nézve* [Looking at Each Other].

³⁵János Ferencsik (1907-1984), conductor; Imre Antal (1935-2008), television presenter and comedian; Hilda Gobbi (1913-1988), actress. Gobbi and Galgóczi were long-time partners in the 1980s.

R: That's an interesting answer. Did she talk about herself at all? Like how she used to make friends, whether she kept in touch with other lesbians?

SG: No, she didn't say anything about herself. Well, to tell the truth, I didn't dare to ask her, either, her self-confidence was overwhelming. Our conversation lasted an hour and a half or two hours. I would have liked it to continue, but it didn't happen. Obviously, she didn't consider me a potential friend but someone whose life she wanted to hear about, especially the lesbian part of her life, and that was all.

R: When did you first feel that lesbianness had become part of public discourse?

SG: Nowadays public's awareness of homosexuality has grown, mainly thanks to the festivals, to literature, newspapers and radio shows. In my opinion, the younger generation, who aren't that limited by social, religious, etc. conventions, are much more likely to see it as normal and accept it. I'm a regular listener of Balázs Pálfi's radio show, and there are a lot of people who call in to say that they're not gay but they accept it. But there are horrible callers, too. A lot! On the one hand, a huge amount of progress has been made, but on the other hand, there's still an incredibly long way to go. Most of society still condemns homosexuality – even today the subject is still taboo. And the problem is – and this comes up a lot at the festivals, the Pride Marches – that transvestites and drag queens are interesting at a parade, but this is how gay people get identified. And this is a big problem. Because people think that gay men are like those shaking their bottoms in a small tutu. But that isn't true. Laci Láner³⁶ or Balázs Pálfi would never wear a tutu.

R: Perhaps there are more diverse representations of gays now.

SG: There are. But what do the media show? That's what they always show. And that's what's always on TV. Because it's a spectacle. And so the public identifies us with that. I didn't watch *Big Brother* and *Kismocsok*³⁷ and all that stuff. Whether that has helped, I don't know. I can't measure it, because I don't watch those lousy commercial channels. At any rate, it's good if the subject comes up in the media, on TV, on the radio, but it should be talked about the way Balázs does it, for example, instead of offering a one-sided picture. And when Mocsonaki³⁸ or some of us gives a speech or appears in the media, that's also something we need. And I have to say, we need more of it. A lot more of it.

³⁶ László Láner, editor-in-chief of the monthly magazine *Mások*, published by *Lambda Budapest Meleg Baráti Társaság* [Lambda Budapest Society of Gays] between 1991 and 2008.

³⁷ A lesbian participant in the Hungarian version of the show.

³⁸ László Mocsonaki is the founder of *Háttér Support Society for LGBT People*.



“To experience it fully, you have to step outside of your comfort zone a bit”

Mária Kristófy (b. 1950)

R: When and how did you first realize you were attracted to women?

MK: I was about thirty years old when I was first able to say that I was a lesbian. I had already felt as a child that I was a bit different from my classmates. I went to an all-girls' school, so my classmates were always girls, but I mostly played with my younger brother's friends and classmates. In fact, I best remember my senior years in primary school in this respect. At the time I was very upset that I wasn't a boy. I wanted to be a boy, I liked wearing pants, and I found great pleasure in dressing in a way that people couldn't tell – especially in winter – whether I was a boy or a girl. It also had the benefit that by the time boys realized I was a girl – and thus a target for snowballs – I was already out of shooting range. I liked this ambiguity. And I wanted to become a soldier, which was absolutely out of the question at the time. Maybe partly because my father was a soldier, too, and I resemble him in many ways, and I think he was a very good officer. I felt I would be well-suited for this profession; I enjoyed these types of things. At the place we went on holiday I also had boy playmates, and we played archery together, climbed trees, played with slingshots – all boyish games, when I was 10 to 13 years old. It had a special significance for me because I grew up on the fourth floor of an old tenement with a small paved inner courtyard, where you weren't supposed to go out, because the caretaker would yell if a kid appeared outside wanting to play. Then later in my adolescence, I fell in love with a boy; that was my first true love with all the expected joys and hardships.

I think I was about 16 years old when I first had a dream that would recur many times for long years after that: I was courting a girl, and we were walking hand-in-hand. I had another recurring dream too, in which we were going up the stairs; sometimes I was alone in the dream, other times I was with the girl I was courting. And all went as expected until the point when I was supposed to do something. And then I always woke up all of a sudden. I think it was because I had no clue what was supposed to happen when I reached that point. I knew hardly anything at all about sexuality, since it's a taboo subject even today. What I found confusing was being with a girl in the dream, despite the fact that I was a girl, not a boy. It simply didn't make sense to me. Then later, in my adulthood, the pieces began to fit together, despite the fact that I didn't know anything about gay people. Being gay was a subject that never came up in any conversation at all. Well, it's not quite true, because it did get mentioned that the fags did it in the public toilets nearby Hotel Emke...³⁹ The idea of two women together, that you can experience it, that you can love, that a woman can love another woman, was absolutely out of the picture. But later, when the subject so intensively occupied my mind, I did try and look it up here and there: from fiction to psychology books. And I was about thirty years old when the puzzle pieces all fell into place and I realized that this meant I was a lesbian. But when that happened, I was already a mother of three.

³⁹ The public toilets near Hotel Emke in downtown Budapest were one of the meeting places for gay men during state-socialist times.

R: How did you meet your husband?

MK: Through friends. When I joined that group of friends, he was serving in the army. So I only met him after he finished his term. Then we were just hanging around with these friends, went to concerts together, there was a small choir where we used to sing, and in summer we spent time together, and eventually it turned into a relationship.

R: How did you come to have three children?

MK: I've always loved kids. In my family I'm the oldest of four kids, and the youngest is ten years younger than me. So I was able to play mother to my two youngest siblings, helping my mum take care of them. For me, it was always a given that I would have a lot of kids – that children should have siblings. At age twenty I met the man who would be my husband two years later; he was also one of four children. I thought four children would be too many, but two weren't enough, that's how I had three children. I saw how much work it was for my mother to take care of four children all the time. And my dad worked a lot to be able to provide for us. This wasn't an easy job in the fifties. But we always had everything we needed. They did their best for us, and we really didn't feel that we would ever be short of anything.

R: When you realized you were a lesbian, was that the word you used to describe it?

MK: Yes, I did, because by then I already knew the word.

R: Did you tell anyone about it?

MK: I sorted it out pretty much myself. It has always had a great importance for me to be able to define things. I can handle a situation only if I manage to define it. And I had already three children at the time. It was also an important issue for me because I felt less and less comfortable in my marriage. Even though my husband was a very kind, very handsome, decent person with a good sense of humour, I grew less and less happy in the relationship and in living together. And I couldn't really explain why. Or rather, at some point I suddenly realized that this must be the reason. And then I just got to face the decision of what to do, how to go on. For me, my children are very important, and it's also important to bring them up preferably in a complete family surrounding them. So I just repressed this fond dream of mine to get a divorce and not be obliged to live together any more, and I went on living my life that way.

R: Did you tell your husband?

MK: I didn't tell anyone. Well, actually, after it was obvious our marriage wasn't working, we went to a psychologist, for family counselling. The psychologist was a woman not much older than me, in her mid-thirties, and she talked to each of us separately at first. We only had one session together. The reason why we only had one session was that from a comment my husband made at home I realized she had passed on what I told her about being interested in women. So I decided not to go and see such a psychologist again – someone I trusted with my secrets, only to have them no longer be secrets. I resolved the situation – this was a sort of cover-up solution – by denying everything to my husband. He asked me about it directly, and I immediately denied it.

R: So the psychologist was the first person you told?

MK: Who I tried to tell! I didn't just tell her, I tried to talk about it! I told her about the recurring dreams I had, and that I didn't feel comfortable in this

situation, but that I didn't think the problem was with my husband. But I have to say that I never thought that something was wrong with me because of this. My fundamental problem with feeling different was only how to reconcile it with being a mother. How to reconcile wanting to have children with being attracted to women. Since I didn't have anybody to talk to about this, I had to work out the answers myself.

R: When did you end up telling someone, and who was it?

MK: Much, much later. When I was about 45. I was married to a man, and more and more it felt like we were simply coexisting, in all respects. And in the meantime I would sometimes fall for someone. But those were like teenage crushes. For example, I had a crush on one of my children's kindergarten teacher – I would always be waiting for the kids to come home, sneaking peeks at the kindergarten bus to see if she was there. Or later, when my younger son started elementary school, it turned out that one of his classmates lived right nearby our place, and his mum was single with two sons. I became very good friends with her, and I gradually fell in love with her. I kept my feelings to myself for a long time. And one day I thought, I don't care, I'll tell her! We'll see what happens. I actually knew that it was hopeless, since she was so very straight. But I felt I had to tell her. She said she thought I had wanted to say something like that and that we should keep things the way they were before. So that's what we agreed to do. We continued hanging out like before, talking a lot, watching films, knitting together, we did a lot of stuff together, like friends do. But it took me at least two more years to slowly, gradually kill the feeling in myself, so to say, to talk myself out of it.

R: Who was the next person you told?

MK: The next was one of my friends. But that was a strange situation, because there wasn't actually much to talk about. My husband and I were still living together, and I really didn't want to live with him anymore. But there didn't seem to be any other choice. And when an opportunity came for me to move out, I grabbed it. So I've been in my own flat for ten years now, where I live alone. I think this was what I'd wanted all my life. Not being alone but being independent. At the beginning my younger son also stayed with me, since it was closer to his school. But no matter that I finally lived alone, I didn't know anybody who could help me get in touch with lesbian women. I came out to one of my close female friends that I talk a lot with and she took it all perfectly normally, she wasn't bothered by it at all. So, encouraged by that experience, I told a few more of my close friends, but there wasn't really much to talk about – just that this was the reason why I lived like this and I was who I was. And when I finally got in touch with the gay community, it happened by coincidence. Once I happened to come across a free program flier that had the *Háttér* hotline listed. And just like that, I immediately grabbed the phone and dialled the number! That was actually the first time in my life when I was able to talk about being gay and my own problems feeling that the person I was talking to really understood what I meant. So not only they have already heard of it, acknowledged it, accepted it, and weren't troubled by it, but they really knew what I was talking about. And we could have a good talk! I had several talks with this helper, I repeatedly contacted the helpline. She suggested websites, recommended *Labrisz* as a women's association, and informed me about the monthly *Labrisz Evenings*. And the last one had been just the day before. So I

had to wait a whole month to enter this circle, not only in spirit but physically, too. Then I attended a *Labrisz Evening*, where – fate has a twisted sense of humour – the topic was sexual prevention in lesbian relationships. I secretly laughed my head off, because it was just my luck to walk into a discussion on something I had absolutely no experience with. In fact, they didn't pay any attention to me. Not in the slightest. I arrived, said hello, and everyone introduced themselves. And that was it. But I'm not the type who lets nothing happen. I went the next time, and the time after that, and after two or three times I finally managed to get into a conversation with the women, and that's when my lesbian life began.

R: Was it basically in that group that you first met other lesbians?

MK: Yeah. Well, not quite, because two years before that there was someone I got attracted to, she worked at the same place as me. We weren't co-workers, but sometimes we were in touch because of work. And at some point I realized that this woman must be a lesbian. But I didn't manage to start a relationship with her. Maybe I wasn't her type? Or she wasn't out at all? I don't know. I did my best to get her attention, but she didn't seem to care about me. But she was the very first lesbian I met who I knew was a lesbian. But it was in fact the *Labrisz Evenings* where I first really met lesbians.

R: At that point, when you discovered *Labrisz*, did you start to consciously look for a partner, or did relationships just come your way?

MK: No. Relationships never just come your way, especially not when you're 55! I found myself in a group where most of the people were in their late twenties: mostly university students, plus a few people who were older, but they were still in their thirties. So that was the age group of my children. But I got the names of some websites to browse and meet people. I actually met my first girlfriend online. My son was still living with me at the time. We had only one computer at home. He was good with computers, and I didn't want him to see what sites I was visiting, and the girls gave me some good advice about what to do.

R: Was *Labrisz* a strange environment when you first got involved with them?

MK: It wasn't strange, I'm very adaptable. I'm used to being around people. The place I used to work always had lots of people. But I didn't get the 'this is where I belong' feeling. Because that group wasn't really for me. Especially in terms of age. Then later when I went not only to those evenings but to other events too, I began to get that feeling more and more. I got to know more and more women through *Labrisz*. They're not university student-aged but a bit older, in their thirties, and I was able to get along with them very well.

R: And the woman you met online – was she your first relationship?

MK: Yes. I met a lot of people online, and I went on a few dates, but none of them were really attractive. We corresponded first, of course. With my first girlfriend, we also started off corresponding, and after a few messages we met in person. And I suddenly fell in love with her. And then we moved in together.

R: And how did you act in public together?

MK: It wasn't a problem for me; it was more of a problem for my family. Because I just went my own way again and suddenly decided to tell them, at age 48. I told each of my kids separately. I also told my siblings. The person I didn't tell was my husband. By that time I had felt that he didn't belong to me, so it was none of his business, either. Of course, I see it differently now. He

found it out in due course, and he met my girlfriends, they would say hello to each other when they met. But this wasn't something I talked to him about. I thought if he wanted to know about it, he should ask. But this hasn't happened yet.

R: How did your children take it?

MK: Not too well. I don't know what I was expecting. Obviously, I didn't expect them to be happy about it, but I guess I expected them to accept that this is how things are. That this wouldn't change the fact that I loved them, and I would be there for them just the same. But it's not that simple. My older son just gave me a hug and a kiss, and that was it. We haven't talked about it since. I thought it would be easier to talk about it with my daughter, but that wasn't the case. She's a polite child, so whenever I managed to bring up the subject, she would be willing to say a few sentences, but as soon as we strayed away from the subject for some reason, it would be impossible to go back to it. She avoided the subject and she still does. My younger son responded by sulking. For about a year – and we were living together at the time – he didn't say a word to me beyond the bare minimum. He was still going to school, so every day when he came home, he would go straight to his room, sit down in front of the monitor and close the door, so all I saw of him was his back. If I asked a question, he replied, but any real communication with him was impossible. That was very very hard for me. I felt guilty for imposing this whole subject on my children – even though they weren't kids any more. If we could have talked about it, we could have addressed their discomfort, or I could have answered their questions – but there weren't any questions. I just felt rejected and pushed away. It took me about a year to muster up the courage – because I hoped that my son's attitude towards me would pass with time, but it didn't. Then I asked him to tell me what his problem really was. And he said I had only left his father because of money issues. I was shocked! Oh my god, what does he think of me? Then we talked about it. It wasn't too successful, but the worst of his behaviour stopped. After we clarified the situation, I felt that his anger faded. And now he is living with his father, and now he can experience for himself all the problems that I told him I had had with his father. But basically there were many problems between his father and me – on the one hand, the relationship didn't work because it was not him I desired. And then as the years went by, a number of personality differences emerged, which made it even harder to for us to get along, and the relationship worked less and less on the everyday level.

R: Going back to the subject of lesbian groups, when you first got involved in *Labrisz*, which was your first lesbian social circle, did it feel open or closed to you? And later, if you found other lesbian groups, what were they like?

MK: What was strange for me first was that you show up as a total stranger, and they don't pay any attention. I didn't expect everyone to crowd around me and want to know everything about me, but I did expect the sort of atmosphere that would inspire me to come again. But I didn't really experience that. And now, as a member of *Labrisz*, I often find myself in the same situation where a newcomer enters and I know from my own experience how important it is to welcome them. Because it's a big deal when one takes the first step to enter such a place! Because she hasn't done it up to that point: either because she didn't know about it, or because she didn't dare to do it. In most cases she

didn't dare. In my case, I didn't know about it. I didn't hesitate even for a moment in the front of the door, wondering whether to enter or not. But I hear often things like someone has come around twice already but hasn't dared to enter. Then this changed as I started to make contacts with the people attending. Other sorts of spaces? When I had a girlfriend, we went to parties sometimes. The first of these parties was an interesting one: a formal gay ball. I think that was the first gay ball where you were supposed to follow a formal dress code, having to wear a long evening gown or a dinner-jacket. It was fun, the dancers gave a show. It was interesting: there was a live show, live music, I liked it. Then I went to different parties, too, but I never felt it was really my cup of tea. For multiple reasons. One is that basically only people in their twenties were there. Who I don't have any problems with, sure, there are all sorts of age groups, but that one is very far from me. The kind of music they prefer doesn't even meet my definition of music. Frankly, it irritates me. I don't like this repetitive noise of dutz-dutz-tutz-tutz, the excessive loudness; I can't hear anything but hammering, and no music along. I don't like drunken women and I hate being stuck in thick smoke. I sometimes went to these sorts of places when I felt like dancing, but I didn't actually have a good time. I chose to come to *Labrisz* instead, to other kinds of programs, where I began to have a better and better time.

R: Since you only got involved in the lesbian community recently, you can't really make a comparison between how it was in the old times and how it is now...

MK: Well, I can't. I have nothing to compare it to. I don't like saying "If only...", but sometimes I think that if I hadn't gotten involved at the age of 55 but 35, I would have saved twenty years of my life! Twenty years of life spent as not really being myself. Where I locked myself up completely in some space, since I didn't have any chance to live my life as I wanted to. Or rather I didn't have a clue of what life I could lead. But I did know I wanted to live differently. And I've heard from lesbians of my age group that those who were included in this circle knew where to find the only one dance club where they could go. If I had known about that at the time, I sure would have gone there. At night, when family members were watching TV at home or they went to sleep, why couldn't I have gone? But I didn't know where to go. When I started to attend such get-togethers, those parties and places, it was quite surprising for me to see how many young people were there. It was a good feeling to see that they knew where they wanted to go. Obviously, everyone has their own story, their own problems related to this matter, how to accept themselves, how to make their family, friends, acquaintances or anybody else accept them. Everyone has their own story about this, but young people are out there, trying to live their lives the way they want to.

R: In the 1970s or 1980s, did you ever consider posting a personal ad?

MK: No, I didn't even cross my mind. The truth is I believe in personal relationships, so I would only use these dating sites to get the opportunity to contact people, and after that we should talk and meet in person.

R: To what extent were other parts of your life and work affected by finding a lesbian community?

MK: It hasn't affected my job at all. The only difference it has made is that I finally know where to go when I have some extra energy to get rid of or some

free time to spend. So that I don't sit in front of the TV at home alone. I used to be a complete TV addict. I couldn't do anything but watch TV. In the old days I used to read a lot. But after a while, I became simply unable to read serious books, only light novels: crime stories, science fiction, that sort. I was almost incapable of finishing a real book. I tried, but I would start the book and give up after four or five pages. I couldn't do it. I don't know why. Well, it was probably a state of mind that just didn't let me. And since reading, which had been my favourite leisure activity, stopped being an option, I took to watching TV shows, and I watched TV until two in the morning every day. But it was something I did almost maniacally, mechanically – I didn't care what was on, I was just sitting and watching. To do something! But that wasn't actually *doing* anything! And when I got to know the lesbian community, I finally started having things to do in my free time. I went to places, to events where I could meet people with whom we understood each other better and better, people I could talk to, people I enjoyed myself with. I got involved in activism relatively quickly, so it wasn't just going out to have fun but also actively participating in things.

R: When you first came to *Labrisz*, did you feel it was a real community? Did you find friends here?

MK: It depends on what we call friendship. In general I can say that it was a friendly environment for me. But at the age of 55, people don't make new friends so easily, in the traditional sense of 'friend'. The friend I fell in love with was thirty-something when we met. A real friendship formed between us relatively quickly, and she said that she didn't think she would be able to make new friends, because this sort of traditional, real friendship develops when you're younger. Generally in high school or university, or when you start working. This type of friendship is rare to develop later. The kind of very deep friendship, when you not only know everything about each other but also feel each other and can talk to each other about anything.

R: Was there any ideology present in the group? Did issues of gender, women's rights, feminism come up, for example, and are these related to lesbianism for you?

MK: It was here that I first heard of the concept of gender, and it's still not quite clear for me what it means exactly, or I think I understand only a very small part of it, and I'm interested in it, but I don't like extremes in anything. Not in feminism, not in genderism, not in anything. I suppose it's because of my age. I used to think of myself as a quite radical type of person – so if I didn't like something, I did take steps against it. I'm more relaxed now. I don't fight in the frontline by all means. But I don't stand at the back, either. I leave some room for others, too.

R: What are your relationships with men like now?

MK: Now I have a friendly relationship with my husband. He still gets on my nerves when it comes to certain things – the same ones as before, because there aren't any new ones, just the old ones. But we do talk. Obviously, we attend family events together. Sometimes I go over to their place and do the ironing, the dishes, things like that. But only rarely, after all, this was one of the things I ran away from, the role of the household appliance. Generally, I don't have any problems with men. I'm not a man-hater. I'm not interested in them as partners. Apart from this, if a man's handsome, I do find him attractive,

but the desire doesn't rise in me for having him as a partner. I have had very close friendships with boys and men, too, all my life. At my workplace I think my male colleagues considered me more as a work partner than a woman. I wasn't in danger for being the target of anybody's conquering attempts. Somehow they accepted me for what I am, and they knew they could count on me in everything, and I have had such collegial and friendly relationships with a lot of my colleagues. Even today. And with men in general. I don't have any problems with them.

R: Do you have any idea, or have you heard anything about how it is to be a lesbian in other countries?

MK: When I got involved in this group, I got to know a few non-Hungarian girls too, and through them I met Austrian and German lesbians, and it was completely obvious to me that they are ahead of us in many ways. If I want to be very pessimistic, I would say that they're ahead of us by at least twenty years. I liked their assertiveness the most. And they showed us that this is a liveable lifestyle. Of course, things aren't perfect there, either, and they surely have their own problems, too, but they're already one or two steps ahead of us in this respect.

R: Do you have any contacts with gay men in the movement? You mentioned that the first thing you did was call the *Háttér* helpline.

MK: It was actually a woman I talked to. When I first called them, they asked me if I wanted to talk to a man or a woman. I hadn't thought about it before, but at the time I thought I could better to talk to a woman. I mean, I can talk to anybody about it, and I could then, too, but I thought a woman would be able to answer my questions better than a man. For a while now, I've been participating in the "Getting to Know LGBT People" school program with gay men.⁴⁰ Well, I guess the guys can answer questions about women, even if in an indirect way, obviously. But it's different when you can talk and answer questions based on your own experience.

R: Why is activism important to you?

MK: It's absolutely because of my own experience, because I think it would have been great if I hadn't had to spend half of my life not being myself. And not because it was forbidden, but simply because I didn't even know what I could be like, what life could be like, that this was a possibility at all. So if I had learned about this earlier, I think I would have been a brave enough person to have taken it upon myself to live like this. But the way it actually happened, I got stuck at the age of thirty and stayed there like a parked car for the next twenty, twenty-five years. And that caused all kinds of frustrations, which appeared as psychosomatic disorders. First I had a period of strong headaches. So much so that I couldn't work anymore; I became totally useless. And then I went to a headache clinic where their diagnosis said that I didn't have any physical problems, but they stopped there and didn't search for any psychological causes, which would have been, in my opinion, the obvious solution. This happened in the early eighties. Then I became depressed. I was aware of it, too, so I went to a psychiatrist who gave me medication and went to therapy sessions and tried my best. I was already around fifty when I finally

⁴⁰ "Getting to Know LGBT People" is a school program run by *Labrisz* since 2000, in collaboration with *Szimpozium Association* since 2004.

changed my life. Until then I had never paid attention to myself. Now I know the reason, because obviously if I had paid attention to myself, it might have been even worse that I didn't know who I was, what I was. So I rather just didn't pay attention to myself. And then I started working out. And I really enjoyed having two whole hours to focus only on myself, nothing else. To see how different muscles moved and what effects different movements had on me. I enjoyed it a lot! Mentally too, I think, not just physically. I should add that it was only thanks to my profession that I only got depressed and didn't go crazy. I'm a singer, a classical singer. It was through music, actively making music that I got the emotional fulfilment that I should have had in my whole life. That's what kept me alive. And eventually I recovered more or less from the depression. So I joined the movement because I find it very important that young people, when they don't really understand what they're going through, realize that there are people to talk to. I want them to be able to find people who can help. It would have been good if I had also met someone who could have helped me when I was, say, 35. I mean, to give me information. So that I know that there is such a thing, and people like this exist. I figured that lesbians existed, but I never saw any.

R: So you feel that because you joined the movement late, it wasn't so helpful for you? Not as helpful as it could have been, had you come out when you were younger?

MK: That's not the fault of the movement, that's not how I saw it. It was the consequence of my life situation. Ever since I was a child, I've always felt that if I wanted something, I should do it. If I do it, it will be done. That's it. So I don't look to blame others. This is just how my life turned out. If 55 is the age I first got involved, then it's 55! At most you can wonder what would have happened if things had turned out differently. There's no certainty that anything would have been different. The reason why I don't think it could have turned out differently, why I couldn't have known about these groups was that no one talked about them. If I had heard of it, I would have sought it out.

R: How does it feel here and now to be a lesbian?

MK: It feels totally natural. That's all. It's always been natural. I've never had a problem with that. I've never thought I was somehow defected or there was something wrong with me. This is who I am, period. I don't want to be someone else. But there are interesting things. My first lesbian love... well, I was as stupid as you can be when you're, say, sixteen years old. I went through my first actual lesbian relationship like a teenager. But I was forty years older, with all the disadvantages that brings. I let all my guard down, whatever comes, will come – finally something is happening! I'm usually not like that at all, but the situation brought this out in me. And one more interesting thing: somehow I had always tended to avoid the issue of femininity, so the issue of how much I am a woman, how feminine I am. I couldn't handle it. After all, I never wanted to be a man – apart from when I wanted to be a boy as a child. So that wasn't what I longed for. But for thirty years I lived as if I didn't have any gender. Since it wasn't men I was interested in, I tried to live my life in a way that I wouldn't stand out. So I actually hid my feminine side as much as I could, so that no one would be interested in me or want anything from me. And when I was finally in my first lesbian love relationship, I felt like I could finally act on my feminine side and show that yes, I am a woman, and I love being a woman.

And I'm happy to be a woman! It's more about the feeling than about physical appearance or clothing. That was a great experience. That's when I felt that I had finally found home, that I was where I was supposed to be.

I have tried to learn from all of my relationships. When a relationship wasn't working any more, I tried to figure out why it wasn't working and what I was doing wrong. In my very first relationship I was incredibly open, completely 'anything is OK, everything can happen', but not in my second relationship, and even less so in the one after that, I got more and more closed up each time. And my partners took it badly. But I just tried to protect myself, not to let what happened happen again, because what happened was bad. But this strategy didn't really work out. As far as everyday things go, I incredibly enjoyed when I could hold my partner's hand, even walking down the street. Once it happened that we were walking along Margaret Bridge from Buda to Pest on a summer afternoon. There weren't many people around, and we held hands, and two girls walking in the other direction saw us and smiled at us! That was such a good feeling! I didn't really look to see whether they were also a lesbian couple or just friends, but it was simply a good feeling! It felt like they appreciated our courage to do it. Then it also happened that one of our friends told us that someone had mentioned seeing a lesbian couple in the neighbourhood. Who, it turned out, was us. In other words, they realized we were a couple. And that was such a good feeling!

R: How has your family received your partners?

MK: They didn't like my first partner at all. For multiple reasons. Obviously, one of them was that they had to face that this thing has actually come true. Another thing is that she's the kind of person who can only be either deeply loved or deeply hated. My family obviously chose the latter. Especially my children. It hurt me a lot, but I decided not to care about it too much. They knew my second partner better, they met her several times. Like, it would happen that we would run into each other at a concert or somewhere. Once I tried to get them to have lunch together, but it was a horrible experience. The atmosphere was extremely tense, and it was very hard for her. For me too, which is why I never tried it again. But I had to listen to her telling me that while her family has welcomed me, mine just wasn't willing to. But our situations were different. My family just isn't at the point where they could take it easy, smooth and natural. Unfortunately. And then, partly for this reason, I decided to not force it on them. We'll see how things go. Of course, I know that I should do something, since nothing just works out magically by itself. This is the kind of change that's not just going to happen on its own, so I should do something to help, but I'm trying to be very careful, and if I sense a lot of resistance, then I let it go. Well, the problem is that it's not just up to me, and that it doesn't just affect me but also the person I'm with. And she may not take it so well.

R: Why do you think your daughter didn't respond well to your coming out?

MK: I don't know. I would really like to talk about it with her, because I'd like to find out. But I have no idea. My children have very different personalities than me. All three of them are more like their father. They're much more emotional, I'm more rational. We're very different in a lot of aspects. And I suppose emotionally they went through a hard time because of this. It was hard for them to see their family, once complete, fall apart. Even though they're

adults and know the reasons, and even though finding a scapegoat was never something we did. I know that it's obviously my fault too – why wouldn't it be? And their father is also at fault because our relationship didn't work out. But that's why I had to tell them, to make them understand that this was a path I was forced to follow, in some ways.

R: How do you meet women?

MK: I can't be dragged into things any more. I'm too old to let myself be dragged into things. The problem is that if I'm honest – and I tend to be rather honest – and I tell people that I'm sixty years old in my introduction message, they don't even want to talk to me. At the same time, everyone tells me that I don't look like a sixty-year-old. Most people would guess that I'm fifty. So if I meet someone in person that is a different situation. But we don't get even that far. And even though I've recently registered for two dating sites, I don't feel emotionally ready to seriously look for a partner. Whenever I get a message, I reply, and once I had a date with someone too, but nothing more happened. I'm not open enough to it right now. Even though I really long to be with someone and not be alone. But right now there are a number of reasons why it doesn't work. So I try to keep myself busy instead. In the meantime, my life has changed a lot. I have lost my job, which was a very important part of my life.

R: Why did you lose your job?

It was completely due to economic reasons. Until that point I had been in a very lucky situation, since as a musician I could go into early retirement but also continue working, like many of my colleagues did. And when a management-oriented leadership took over the company, they just terminated the employment contracts of everyone they could afford to get rid of. That was really hard for me to deal with. Emotionally, too. And financially, most of all. So I'm definitely not living a life of luxury. It's really hard when you can't afford anything. And I mean anything. I have desires, of course. Nothing too big, since I learned as a child that you can only have small desires in this world. Big desires aren't real desires, they're daydreams. But now I can't even have small desires. It's really hard to deal with. It's less of a money issue than a psychological one with a money-related background. These days I'm often in a mental state that's close to depression. But I try really hard not to let it take over, and that's why I spend all my free time volunteering now. Because it's something I can do to occupy myself and do something meaningful. And that's all great, so I don't have any problems with that. The only thing is that the question always pops up: "And where are the young people?" You throw yourself into these things with all your heart and soul, but it's often really tiring. So I need it emotionally more than I do physically.

But to say something about physical activities, too: one of my great wishes in life, which means such a joy for me, is ballroom dance. Four months ago I started going dancing, once a week, and I really enjoy it! I need to drag myself sometimes to go there, but as soon as I arrive I have a great time. After all, it's also about music. The moving. In the Gemini dance club, where I go regularly, there are both straight and same-sex couples. At the beginning I just followed, but after two or three lessons I decided I wanted to learn to lead. Because my entire career as a musician was about adapting to others. We always had to adapt to each other. And I thought that if I had a good lead, I

would be able to follow, but there's no way I'm going to miss out on dancing just because there isn't a good lead. So instead, I'm learning how to be a lead.

R: What else do you do in your leisure time?

MK: There are things I like doing. For one thing, music is still a very important part of my life, although I rarely do it actively now, unfortunately. But I've started doing a couple of new things. Among other things, I've always loved playing games, ever since I can remember, and in a big family I always had the opportunity. We played cards and board games a lot. And in *Labrisz* we had an idea one day: Why not start a game club? Surely there still are some women who like playing. And there are, thank god. So we host a game night called *Queen of Spades Game Club* every two weeks in Café Vis Major. It makes me happy to see there are always newcomers. There are people who don't attend Labrisz Evenings, but they do come to Queen of Spades. There are always a few who first just sit down in the corner, and we ask them if they feel like playing something. And some people just come to watch but join in when they feel like it. We have good conversations while playing, and it's always a lot of fun. The people who show up are of every age group, young and old, and in between. I'm a very social person, so I don't handle being single too well. But I also don't want to have a partner for no reason other than just to be with someone. I've been single long enough to get used to it, but I don't like it. I especially don't like it when I know I could be with someone instead.

R: Who knows that you're a lesbian?

MK: A couple of my friends. Whom I have told. Obviously, I told people I expected would accept it, and I didn't tell anyone I thought would react badly. For example I have friends, a married couple, where the husband got a divorce because his former wife had got into a lesbian relationship. So he is particularly 'sensitive' about this subject, so to say. Since I'm in a very good relationship with both of them, I told the wife about it, and then she asked me not to tell her husband. After all, I live in a way where I don't hide the fact I'm a lesbian, but I'm not particularly drawing attention to it, either. I think that in the same way that a straight relationship isn't necessarily everyone's business, a lesbian relationship isn't, either. And not because it's a lesbian relationship, but because it's two people's relationship – it might concern their friends to some degree, but it's not the whole world's business, they don't have a say in it.

R: What do you think about the gay and lesbian movement?

MK: I think it's unfortunate that very few people find it important enough to support. Most people just enjoy the fruits of activism. And there's nothing wrong with that, but still, it's like turning a blind eye. All my life I've been the sort of person who tries to stand up against things I don't like and support the things I like. Because nothing happens by itself. How much can we really call it a movement? Right now the movement is the luxury of a few. Sure, it's true in every area of life that if there are one or two people who get together to do something, others like to stand by and watch and receive the benefits without doing anything... Hungarians do only one thing: complain. And that they do with all their might! They'll tell you that the way others do something isn't good, but when it comes to actually lifting a finger, oh no. Sadly, it's a mentality.

R: How visible are lesbians of your age?

MK: Women in their fifties aren't too visible most of the time, because they simply don't come out, and you can't get in touch with people who don't come

out. OK, it's a private matter, of course. Everyone has their private life. But to experience it fully, you have to step outside of your comfort zone a bit. If you don't, that's the end of it. You can't meet anybody, you can't make acquaintances. And I don't just mean romantic partners – I mean anyone. I think I'm quite ageless in terms of being able to make new relationships, so I can have meaningful conversations with anyone of any age, and in fact, from this point of view I find it easier to get along with people a bit younger than me. In our age group, around sixty, most people have got pretty set in their ways, they don't want to change. We've been through a lot, we've formed habits, and that isn't really an advantage in a relationship, because if both people have habits they're not prepared to change, it's quite a challenge to strike a balance to make the relationship work. And the other thing is that just because someone is in a similar situation that doesn't necessarily mean I'm interested in her. And I enjoy the fact that I really get along with people in their twenties or thirties and forties; we have meaningful conversations and everything. But I know they aren't the generation I should have romantic relationships with. And it's not even the fact that they're my children's generation that holds me back, since if I met someone I got along with well, age wouldn't matter.

And then, when you've already given up on finding your true love, and you don't stress over it any more, then you might find her by mere chance, even at the age of sixty. Then age difference will matter least of all, because love doesn't depend on age, and it brings back the feeling of 'what a beautiful life'.



**“Back then we hadn’t yet reached the tipping point, so we could happily dash to Vörösmarty Square”
Judit Szabó (b. 1949)**

R: You know what we are interested in? A while ago you wrote a beautiful short story⁴¹ about why you chose this apartment, how the trolleybus depot...

JSZ: The depot. Of course, I didn’t choose it because of the depot nearby but because of the sunshine in the afternoon. The person who sold it to me was a good salesperson, because he first showed it to me around this time of day. Later I thought about it and figured out why I had chosen it. One reason is that when I was in high school, my family lived in this neighbourhood, and the other is that the trolleybus depot is across the street. But now it’s not a depot any more. When I was a small child, I used to visit my grandmother all the time, and every time I had to take the tram which passed the tram depot of Újpest, which really caught my imagination. My dad always told me that that was where the trams slept. Recently someone came to visit me, and when I said that this was the depot, she asked, “Did the trams use to sleep here?” I said, “No, trolleybuses.” It reminds me of my grandmother and gives me a sense of security.

R: So are you from Budapest after all?

JSZ: Well, the question of where I’m from is an interesting one, because I was born in Békéscsaba, but my family was not originally from there. They’d been part of the forced post-war resettlement officially called the “Slovak - Hungarian population exchange.” So in 1947 my father got transferred to Békéscsaba, because he identified as a Hungarian in Slovakia, and he was a teacher at the local high school there. I was a year and a half old when we moved to Budapest. My mother wasn’t born in Budapest, either; she was from Cegléd, but she was living in Budapest as an adult.

R: And how did you manage to get relocated to Budapest in those days? It wasn’t so easy back then.

JSZ: Well, my dad was actually a cadre,⁴² maybe that’s how. I’m not sure; he was already a party member in 1947 or 1948. He was among the first to be resettled, because he was a cadre and before that he was a refugee. He showed me that he had a refugee certificate and a resettlement warrant, too, and when compensation is offered, I should pick whichever of the two is better.⁴³

R: Is it possible that this is where your inclination towards political activism comes from?

JSZ: A kind of faith in the community certainly comes from there, yes.

R: And as a child did you feel that your dad introduced community activism to the family?

JSZ: He wasn’t what you think of when you picture a political activist – he wasn’t even an activist, really. Being a cadre doesn’t mean being a functionary of the Communist or the Socialist or whatever Party. That’s a party functionary.

⁴¹ Judit Szabó: Portré, lakással. [Portrait with apartment.] 2000, May 1994.

⁴² Cadre (káder) is a political label for those who were loyal members of the Socialist party.

⁴³ All privately owned agricultural land was collectivised by the Communist Party after the war. After 1989 the government started a ‘compensation’ programme to return land to its original owners and/or give them a sum of money for what had been taken from them.

A cadre is someone who is knowledgeable in certain areas, so he can be counted on by the Party as an expert. My dad was the nationality editor and later the editor-in-chief of the State Textbook Publisher. So he had a politically confidential position requiring professional expertise. And the... who knows what it was called at the time – let's say the Ministry of Education – transferred him from the Békéscsaba high school to Budapest. And there are some family rumours – my father originally studied mathematics at the University of Szeged – that when he was already working as a cadre, and he ran into his former professor, Béla Szőkefalvi-Nagy, he allegedly spat on my father, or spat on the floor in front of him.

R: Because Szeged wasn't a particularly communist town...

JSZ: Yeah, because: "Son, why did you have to get involved in the dirty world of politics? Why didn't you stay a mathematician?" I guess. My dad, if I remember correctly, never told me about this. No, I don't even know... my mother told me.

R: But participation in the movement and the tendency to go where you're needed describe you as well, don't they?

JSZ: Yes. But... well, how to say it – a significant number of people who lived under socialism believed in this. And my close family believed it was really possible to create a community-based society. Apart from some vague sense and general pressure, I never felt like we were locked up here, oppressed, the country occupied... That wasn't how I experienced it, especially not on my own skin, but in fact the very opposite: like we had the great opportunity to build a community-based society.

R: And what was it like being a lesbian in this great community-based society?

JSZ: It was hard for me to realize that I was a lesbian. I was different from my classmates, but I was lucky: they accepted me in high school. I was the best at math, so they respected me.

R: You mean they respected the fact that you were different?

JSZ: Yeah. Not as a lesbian, but as someone who wasn't good at being a woman – always with bad hair, clothes hanging awkwardly, flat shoes – but my classmates excused me for that. Because I was also smart and they could count on me.

R: Was this a sort of asexuality?

JSZ: Yes, it was. I wasn't too involved with my peers, outside school. So when they invited me I wouldn't go out to partying with them or stuff like that.

R: Neither with guys, nor girls.

JSZ: Neither with guys, nor girls. Nope.

R: But did you know by then what was up?

JSZ: No, no, I didn't! All I knew was that I really wanted to be a boy. I felt like it was a lot easier for them: they didn't have to care about their hair, or how their clothes hung or whether their shoes got a little dirty. Plus, being smart wasn't such a big deal for boys, so... I felt my life would be much easier if I was a boy. And I wanted to be a boy. That's all. That was all that I could figure out.

R: But they accepted you as you were? Did that make things easier for you?

JSZ: I was seventeen when I started to lose my self-confidence... and that was a problem. So those were hard times for me. At the time what happened to me was that I would do relatively well in high school math competitions, and when there was a national math tournament, the Dániel Arany, in elementary school,

I got a honourable mention there. In my third year of high school I got into the second round of the competition, looked on the worksheet, and got overcome with rage. I felt like no, no, I couldn't do it. We actually had four hours to complete it, but I needed only five minutes to decide that I couldn't do those four or five math problems, and I just walked out of the room. That marked the point when I started losing faith in myself. I didn't become a mathematician – I became an economist. Exactly for that reason. So from then on I began not to be able to find my place in the world.

R: Because of what you said about rage... is that something that's in you?

JSZ: Yes, yes, yes.

R: And how did you gradually realize that you were attracted to women?

JSZ: Very slowly. But I was in love with women. That's how. This wasn't part of public discourse back then. Homophobic slurs were part of public discourse, of course, but that hadn't affected me yet. I didn't turn up too often in public spaces. So I was thirty-something when I learned that there was such thing as homosexuality. I saw a front cover of *Time* Magazine, where there was a skinny boy depicted at some kind of a pride march, and the words "I'm a gay American" were written on his skinny chest. And that was roughly when the penny dropped that I must be a gay Hungarian.

R: And how did you put it to yourself, if I'm in love with women, what am I in relation to women?

JSZ: I didn't really identify myself as anything. I declared that part of my life hopeless. For quite a long time.

R: So you didn't tell women, or approach them in any way?

JSZ: I did tell them, but it was in the category 'hopeless'.

R: Did you tell them?

JSZ: I wrote them poems, and I even told one woman.

R: And what did she say?

JSZ: Well... she steered it in the direction of friendship.

R: And did that work out?

JSZ: Not for long. For about a year. My short story "Búcsú" [Farewell]⁴⁴ put an end to it. She got very offended by it.

R: So the cover of *Time* magazine helped you?

JSZ: Yes, it did.

R: But how exactly? Did it empower you??

JSZ: No, no. It helped me to define myself. This was at the beginning of the eighties. But what effects did events in America have on Hungary? None. In Hungary things had already started to change in 1978. So when the never-seen-before inflation and poverty began to spread over on Hungary following the oil price hike, people started to realize that this political system wasn't so great after all. Plus, as you know, there was an economic reform in 1968, which was stopped after two or three years. At that point too, you could suddenly see things weren't going so well any more. So when I saw that photo on the cover of *Time* magazine at the beginning of the eighties, I was already feeling a little disenchanted by the political system.

R: But only for economic reasons?

JSZ: Yes, economic reasons.

⁴⁴ Judit Szabó: Búcsú [Farewell].2000, October 1993.

R: And did you ever question the social aspect?

JSZ: The way I saw the social structure was that we were almost equal then – poor, but equal. There was a small segment of people, the functionaries, who enjoyed a higher standard of living and were in power. No one else had any power, and no one else did too well. That's all.

R: In terms of gender roles, would it have been easier for you to be a man? What questions did you have in this area? I'm thinking of the image you had in high school...

JSZ: That image worked well for me for a good while: the smart woman who isn't too pretty and is a bit of a klutz, but everyone likes her. It works. Punctual and trustworthy. The woman who doesn't do 100 percent but 1000 percent.

R: Did you get any positive feedback from women?

JSZ: Well, yes, from secretaries and cleaning ladies. Secretaries liked me! What could I do with that?

R: But that means something, too. It's still a kind of attention.

JSZ: OK, but I didn't really register it like that. So I just continued being my clumsy self.

R: So do you always initiate?

JSZ: Yes, with women I'm always the one to initiate.

R: Have ever been with men at all?

JSZ: Yes, two. But then it was them who initiated.

R: And what were they attracted to?

JSZ: I don't know. You should ask them.

R: The smart woman?

JSZ: No. Not in their case, I don't think so. Well, maybe for one of them. But I do have a male friend who's into that. That's the reason we get along so well.

R: Is he straight?

JSZ: Yes.

R: A colleague?

JSZ: He's a photographer. So he's a colleague in that sense.

R: Did the men know about your situation?

JSZ: No, they didn't. Hold on... One of them did, yeah. I had two guys in my life. They were good guys.

R: And how did you resolve your interest in women?

JSZ: I didn't try to resolve anything at all. "My sexual life is a barren desert of hopelessness" – that was my motto until age 44. That's it.

R: Why?

JSZ: Just because.

R: Didn't you try to find a suitable partner?

JSZ: Well, what is a 'suitable' partner like? It's not like I was surrounded by masses of women who I could have slept with. Well, no... There wasn't anywhere to find them. I had no clue where to find women.

R: And you didn't go looking for them? Some people went looking.

JSZ: They're different types of people. I solved math problems. Well, what do monks do? What do Catholic priests do? Except that they, on some lofty spiritual level, decide that that aspect of life is not of interest to them. Me, I made my decision rather desperately and unspiritually. In that respect, talking about who was or wasn't gay wasn't even a subject of conversation. No one ever told me that I was homosexual or gay. Not even the women I tried to approach.

R: And did you tell them?

JSZ: Well, I don't know. In a roundabout way. What I used to do was write them love poems. I would send them in the mail and I never got a reply.

R: And what happened when you were 44?

JSZ: I got tuberculosis. And then I decided that okay, I was going to start a new life. Which didn't really succeed, but still... I made a decision, at least. To start visiting gay groups. Something like that.

R: When did this happen?

JSZ: In the summer of 1993.

R: How did you find your way to gay groups?

JSZ: I wrote a letter to Romsauer. To Lajos Romsauer, the president of Homeros Association.⁴⁵ I wrote him that I wanted to meet homosexuals. And then I met him, and that's how I got to know gay people. And Lajos was a nice guy. But I wasn't a very active member of Homeros. I used to do a little bit of this and that, but not too much of anything.

R: Were there women, too?

JSZ: There was a sort of hour for women, so if women wanted to come they had to show up on Wednesday afternoons. I was there 'on duty' on Wednesday afternoons, but women never showed up. Imagine that. But the whole organization was very very male-centred. They were sweet and friendly, but I didn't meet too many women there. I met a few though. One later became my girlfriend. We met in 1993-94, but we only started dating in 1997.

R: And how did that start?

JSZ: Well, nothing special. We met in the swimming pool and she started talking to me. Saying that she knew me from somewhere. Then the love between us sprang up... What else can I say...? There's not much I can really say about it.

R: And was it good?

JSZ: I don't know. It lasted more than three years. Amazing, isn't it?

R: What was it like to be openly gay at the end of the nineties?

JSZ: Well, I really came out in front of the TV cameras. And voilà, once and for all, I was out. I wouldn't do the same today.

R: What was the forum where you came out?

JSZ: When other organizations were founded, or tried to be founded, following Homeros, that's when I became a sort of gay rights activist.

R: And where did you get the strength to do it? Because it definitely requires strength.

JSZ: No. It's more like a form of compensating. To tell the truth, if I reflect on my life with the benefit of hindsight, I would have rather been an everyday gay person. There's a lot of truth in the saying that if things work out for you, you just live happily being gay and hide away, and if things don't work out for you, you become a gay rights activist. It's true at least in my case. But I don't think it's just a gay problem. If you look around in the activist world and the organizations, obviously a lot of people are working diligently for the community only because they don't have a loving little family they could work for. Or if they do, it's a mess and full of problems, so they escape into non-profit work.

R: OK, but I think it's easier to live a gay lifestyle when you're involved in gay or lesbian groups.

⁴⁵ Founded in May 1988, Homeros Association was the first registered gay organization in Hungary.

JSZ: Gay lifestyle? Not for women. I think for women in relationships it's often like a kind enslavement – they're chained together, and they don't want to go anywhere without the other person, but they don't go anywhere together, either. So I think for women this kind of 'loneliness in couples' thing is pretty common. I may not be right, of course. It's freer because they don't have kids. That's a big thing in terms of independence. But saying that it's freer in other aspects, too? It might be different for men. They have more of these open marriage arrangements, so they can cheat and sleep around as much as they want, but I rarely see this kind of lifestyle in relationships between women.

R: Did you use to go to any gay places?

JSZ: I went once to *Rózsaszín Csokornyakkendő* [Pink Bowtie]⁴⁶ to participate in some activist events, and there were gay women or lesbians sitting there. And one of them snarled at me loudly, "So where have you been till now?" And I almost hid under the table in embarrassment... what could I say...? So my past counted as nothing in their eyes. Later when I had a girlfriend, then... or I don't know even who I went to these places with... but I can't say I really enjoyed myself.

R: Why not?

JSZ: Just because. I don't know... I've always preferred the company of gay men over women. For a lesbian, being friends with a gay guy is heaven. Because there isn't any danger. There isn't a temptation. You don't have to wonder whether you fancy him or not, or what to do with him. It's not even a question. And I don't look at him as a man, he also doesn't have to wonder whether I like him or not, because it's out of the question for him, as well. So being with gay guys is just fine for me. I feel a lot more comfortable than with straight men or lesbian women or any women, really.

R: Did you feel under pressure?

JSZ: Yeah. That I should, as a gay rights activist, fulfil some requirements. Like having had ten girlfriends, or having been at the *Ipoly Cinema* when the movement was born. And I wasn't there then, and I didn't have ten girlfriends, so I felt stupid about it.

R: And how do you feel about it now?

JSZ: Now? Well, a bit better, but only because my own circle of friends got better, so I enjoy myself more. Now I have some kind of a past. I have had girlfriends, and with them I didn't live in this 'lonely couple' thing, so over time I got to know other lesbians and made friends, and when *Labrisz* was founded I used to go there too.

R: Has your work as an activist taken a backseat in the meantime?

JSZ: In *Labrisz* I stepped back a little, just watching from outside how others were doing activism. Since 1997 I pretty much haven't worked anywhere as an activist. I'm here and there though... I'm a bit ashamed that I just shout from the side-lines that they shouldn't be doing it this way or that way. It only happens rarely, either in the men's groups or the women's groups or the mixed ones that I get myself to organize something. In 2007, I was the main organizer when it came to gay participation in the antifascist picnic. But, as I said, this has been a rare occasion in my life since 1997. So I had a very eventful activist past from 1993 to 1997, when I would be interviewed sometimes on TV, or be

⁴⁶*Rózsaszín Csokornyakkendő* [Pink Bowtie]: A bar frequented by lesbians in the early 1990s.

interviewed along with other people. And then it all stopped cold turkey. But I've stayed in touch with everyone. I go to the offices and participate in the events, and I'm a supporting member of *Háttér*. I'm a supporting member everywhere.

R: What drew you away?

JSZ: I got ill. I got angry. I had organized a press conference for *Háttér's* first anniversary, and it was a big success. It's just that nobody said thanks to me afterwards, or "You're great". So I got really upset. Like, so this is how it goes? You put yourself out there, in front of the cameras, and all the young people lurk behind the door, and then nobody even pats you on shoulder and says, "Wow, that was great!" And so I just exploded in a fit of rage.

R: It's baffling to me how you see your illness as a sign.

JSZ: Uh-huh... The tuberculosis – I don't know what actually caused it. It's pretty hard to get tuberculosis these days; even if it's spreading by air you need a very infected person to cough on you from a relatively close distance to catch it. They say that I belong to the generation where people might still have the bacteria incubating in their bodies. At the time I had lost some weight after coming down with a severe case of flu, sometime around spring... And I was also somehow nervous – I felt out of place, I had a stomach ache, so I got sent to have my stomach X-rayed, and the lady radiologist did her job exceptionally thoroughly for some reason. Or maybe the type of equipment she used didn't just show my stomach but my lungs, too. So she said something was wrong with my lungs, and I should see a pulmonologist immediately. And it turned out that I had tuberculosis, which they cured in a year. But ever since I was a child, I've always had health issues. So I wasn't just the smart kid, but also the weak one: the one always getting ear infections that had to be treated, and coming down with the flu every year, not just once but twice. So when all this happened, in 1993, I was 44 years old, and that was when the pieces started to fall into place. That something wasn't right with me being sick all the time, and then I even caught tuberculosis. And I went to a psychiatrist, because it was obvious that there had to be some emotional reasons, and at the first session I told the psychiatrist, "Okay, whatever, but don't ask anything about my sexual life – there's nothing to say about that, because it's just hopeless." Those very words out of my own mouth. And then I went home, and I started thinking... If it's me calling it hopeless, that's just terrible. Maybe the situation isn't actually that horrible. So when I went back after a week, I said, "Okay, let's talk about it, because I've thought about it, and nobody should describe this part of their life as 'hopeless.'" So that's the process that tuberculosis started in me.

R: Did you have good experiences with the psychiatrist?

JSZ: Yes, I did. All the psychiatrists I've known have had positive attitudes towards gay people. So I don't really understand the gay people who hate psychiatrists.

R: Did your literary activity have any effect on your lesbian relationships?

JSZ: Yes, actually part of the way I got to know lesbians was when they read what I'd written.

R: Where did they find your work?

JSZ: In the journal *2000*, and in the gay magazine *Mások*, too, and later they also got republished in the Labrisz Books.

R: So, if I'm not mistaken, you had a kind of desire for self-expression.

JSZ: Yes. But I've always had it. I have quite a split personality: I'm either this huge klutz who hides away, or standing self-confidently in the centre of attention, like the time I taught math to the class the day the teacher was sick. So I'm very shy but I also have this strong exhibitionist streak.

R: In your activist work, you missed getting feedback. What kind of feedback have you gotten about your literary work?

JSZ: Well, not much, but still... First, the editors of *2000* were very very fond of me. So I received a lot of positive feedback from the editorial staff itself. When my first piece got published, I stressed for a long time over what pen name to use. I didn't want to get published under the fabulous name Judit Szabó – which would be a perfect pen name, actually.⁴⁷ I wanted to find a pen name. I remember I was at an editorial meeting, and I was just sitting there staring at one of the editors, then the editor Margócsi glanced at me and asked, "What are you looking at, Judit?" And I replied, "I'm just looking at my buddy." And he said, "But all of us here are your buddies!" And it felt really good to hear that. So I did get that from them, what I would have expected to get from gay activism. I absolutely got it from the journal, from all the editors. And then whether the readers liked my work or not was not so crucial any more. Actually, it happened in my work in gay activism that random strangers would come up to me. One of them was the doorkeeper at my workplace. One day when I forgot to bring the key, the doorkeeper came up to open the door of my office, and he asked me in the elevator if I was still working at the Rainbow Association. By the way, he didn't at all look like your typical gay man. I told him, "Sort of." "Keep on doing what you're doing," he told me, "because it's very important work!" And then we ran into each other a couple times on the metro, and he always said hello and we'd talk a bit. And once a guy came up to me on tram 59, and he congratulated me on my work. Those moments meant a lot to me.

But in the movement itself I felt... maybe I'm mistaken, but I felt like I got a lot less of that kind of positive feedback. Now I get it, and I have for the last few years. But at the start I didn't feel there was anything behind me, no support. There were one or two other crazy people who did as much as me, and all the rest were totally passive. I guess this was too hard to handle, and it's only understandable that I flipped out after three years. I couldn't just stand the burden that this 'outpost' position meant. Last year I received great recognition, though, under a kind of funny name: the LIFT Award. *Labrisz Association* presented it for the first time in 2005 at the Lesbian Identities Festival. This year they handed out two awards, and I was one of the recipients. So I'm one of the first recipients of the LIFT Award. I was incredibly happy to receive it, and I'm very, very proud of it. Its inscription is quite distinctive too; it says: "To Judit Szabó, for her work in laying the foundations for the Hungarian lesbian movement." The people who gave it to me knew very well that it wasn't a matter of 'establishing' it or 'making it blossom'. That's what people this year or next year should be awarded for. I was a board member of *Háttér Society*, which has both men and women.

R: Going back to writing, did you end up having a pen name?

⁴⁷ Both Judit as a first name and Szabó [Tailor] as a family name are very common in Hungary.

JSZ: I couldn't find one in the end. We finally settled on Judit Szabó. Later sociologist László Tóth edited an anthology of articles about homosexuality, which I wrote a long review of in the literary journal *Buksz*.⁴⁸ And then the librarian who catalogued it came to me asking if it was me who had written it. I said, yes, I had. "But it's not your topic, Judit," she said. Which was very funny, but I guess I got catalogued...

R: Do you remember what public opinion there was about gay people during socialism, be it stories people told?

JSZ: Oh, what things I heard about two men or two women being together... This is going to sound really weird, but... nothing! Nothing at all. In the environment where I was living – which was a pretty limited one – I hardly learned what the word 'faggot' meant. But whether this actually existed, or who was gay... that I didn't know. I didn't have a gay uncle or gay neighbour. So I never encountered it through gossip and pointing fingers, or in a play or in literature. I'm telling you, I first encountered the word 'gay' on the front page of *Time* magazine when I was 32. I went to look up what it meant and then I found it. I knew, on a lexicon level, that there was such a thing as a 'homosexual'. But I thought they were stored in formaldehyde at the Medical University. That was a joke and a bit of an exaggeration, but the subject was about as far from me as a frog in formaldehyde. Unfortunately.

R: But when you read that article, didn't you start to think about it?

JSZ: Yes, I did. But... I don't really remember it any more. It was around 1982 or 1983. I started working at a new place at the time, I started doing photography, my sister had just given birth... It sounds rather stupid, but I couldn't care less about bothering to investigate things in my own personal life. This was obviously an act of repression, but the case was that it was more important for me to buy a new Zenit camera and take photos like crazy, or change the baby's diapers, and I didn't give any serious thought to the moment of realization. When I dared to give it a thought, I would immediately switch to the 'monk mode'. So yeah...

R: And it wasn't something you'd hear about in public scandals either, like about someone getting arrested or whatever?

JSZ: No. It wasn't. Or the news didn't reach me, in any case. The topic is still a big social taboo today, but in those days it was completely taboo, a rock-solid untouchable taboo.

R: Do you sense any change?

JSZ: Yes, I do. This is why I said that in those days it was a rock-solid taboo. At the time it didn't even get reported in the brief news, at least I never saw it. Nowadays, it's treated like some story about exotic animals at the zoo. I think this summer was a big break-through.⁴⁹ When I saw the police barriers, I got really desperate, I even cried. Was this how the public would hear about us? And yes, that's how you raise public awareness in Hungary. By having stones thrown at you. Apparently we'd reached the tipping point. Today you can't give a speech against racism and discrimination any more without mentioning homophobia. That's not what it was like before July 5, 2008. So we broke

⁴⁸ Hungarian social science review journal.

⁴⁹ She refers to the Budapest Pride March of 2008.

through a major barrier that day, but the taboo isn't completely gone. The rock is starting to show cracks, but it hasn't crumbled yet.

R: What do you expect for the future?

JSZ: I don't know, because the situation could go either way. On one hand, after July 5, aesthetics professor Péter György wrote to a good many of his friends, "On your feet now, Hungary is calling you!"⁵⁰ So now is the time to stand up. On the other hand, we, a few gay people, got a letter from the Humanist Movement, from Viktor D'Elia, in which he said he felt ashamed and that we should do something, at least organize an antifascist picnic like the year before, when *Magyar Gárda* [Hungarian Guard]⁵¹ was founded. Then me and some other people who joined in right away brought these two groups together, and organized a series of discussions in eleven days, which was continued weekly, and was attended by a lot of NGOs. And now we have approximately 35 NGOs and a few individuals who are trying to found a movement called *Összefogás az Erőszak Ellen* [Joining Forces against Violence]. And they might wind up having a demonstration in the autumn.⁵² Right now I'm not really sure whether it will succeed, since we have to compete with Ferenc Gyurcsány,⁵³ who is diligently mobilizing people behind the scenes to attend his mass demonstration.

R: Would you say you received the kind of acknowledgement from these organizations that you didn't get in gay activism?

JSZ: No, no. I'd say it's the same feeling in some ways. The activist sphere seems to lack this for some reason. The NGOs. Offering someone praise when they do something well. It's an unknown thing. Or maybe it's just me.

R: What was it like when people could freely travel abroad and you could hear about what things were like in the West?

JSZ: Honestly, I have no experience with what's going on in other countries. I'm not the kind of activist who's managed to or tried at least to take advantages of the opportunities in her position. So no, I haven't travelled anywhere as an activist. I'm the stay-at-home type. If I did travel anywhere, I'd go to see Paris. I've never been to Paris. I actually haven't been to Italy, either. I don't really feel I'd have any role to play when it comes to gay activism abroad.

R: I was thinking more of how you felt about it on a personal level.

JSZ: Oh, yeah, like many people feel liberated when they go abroad... So how did I feel about the world outside Hungary seeming to be much more open, tolerant and decent? I don't know; it doesn't really affect me any more. I've reached a point where if I go to Vienna and look around, I say, "Wow! Almost like Budapest! Much better though." But that's where I stop for some reason. For me, the world isn't as open as it is for the youth. The other thing is that we have had Pride Marches here in Hungary, too, where we were able to experience

⁵⁰ This is the first line of Sándor Petőfi's poem "National Song", which is a classic nationalist text written during the 1848 revolution and war of independence from Austria.

⁵¹ *Magyar Gárda* [Hungarian Guard]: a neo-fascist paramilitary group founded in 2007 for the "self-defence" of Hungary, originally connected to the extreme right-wing party *Jobbik*. They dressed in black and paraded through Hungarian villages intimidating Roma families. It was banned in 2009, after which they renamed themselves "New Hungarian Guard" and went on with the same goals and activities.

⁵² The demonstration ran successfully on October 4, 2008.

⁵³ Prime Minister of Hungary at the time of the interview.

how powerful it could be. The March of 2001, wow! So many supporters! Roughly 2000 marchers! That was a really powerful and fun experience. There was an upward trend; it started in 1997 and reached its highest point in 2001. Since then, sadly, we've been continuously going down... but anyway, you could experience it here in Hungary, too, that we had a breakthrough, or that we could!

R: How did the first march go in 1997?

JSZ: That year the march was in autumn, on September 17. We painted some banners and signs, these funny ones, like for example: "Gays are already in the pantry!"⁵⁴ and "It's good to be a fag!" We departed from Capella,⁵⁵ and walked to Vörösmarty Square, sort of running, because we were worried about getting stones thrown at us. That was something we had to wait a little more for – until 2007. It took until 2007 for society – or at least a certain part of it – to catch onto the idea of throwing stones at us. Back then we hadn't reached the tipping point, so we could happily dash to Vörösmarty Square without any incidents.

R: If you had to briefly summarize the reason, what would you say?

JSZ: Why things changed in 2007-2008? Well... I can only offer a hypothesis. As we know, the transition of 1989-90 has its victims. Quite many. There are people living in poverty in Hungary. There are undereducated people in Hungary. These groups clung to the hope for a while that their lives would get better, but as the years passed – decades now – nothing has gotten better. It's this part of the population, I think, that has created the extreme right, and it's also possible that the process got some support from upper political circles. I don't know. Many people suspect that the far-right groups running wild and rampaging through the streets are definitely supported by certain political forces. I don't know the truth. As an economist, I think that this is the produce of the Hungarian economic, social and sociological realities. There were some seeds: those who were in the Arrow Cross Party⁵⁶ have children, and now grandchildren, and they've kept their attitudes alive in their family traditions. And there were some old Arrow Cross supporters who helped stir things up, printing books, newspapers, leaflets and organizing events. And now they have reached the critical mass with which they can go straight out to the street, and Ferenc Gyurcsány's speech of Ószöd⁵⁷ gave them a reason to go out on the street. And since then, all I can do is wonder what's happening here. But sociologists can probably explain exactly what's going on. It's not simply a matter of creating pandemonium on the street, or about the mistakes made by the police or politicians. One of the manifestations of what's going on was what happened at the Pride March in 2007. Practically, there was a far-right counter-protest alongside the Pride March, where they were insulting us continuously, and at the height of it they were shouting, "Fags into Danube and the Jews after

⁵⁴ A reference to a Hungarian cult film, it means: gays are already inside the doors.

⁵⁵ *Capella*: One of the oldest gay bars in Budapest, founded in 1995.

⁵⁶ The Arrow Cross Party was the Hungarian fascist party in power in 1944-1945. The party shared roots with the Nazi party of Germany and despite its short rule, it was involved in the deportation and murder of thousands in the Hungarian Holocaust.

⁵⁷ Ószöd speech: An infamous speech given by prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány in May 2006, one month after the Hungarian Socialist Party won the elections, at the closed session of party fraction in Balatonószöd, arguing for reforms and criticising the party in a very open and informal style ("We have screwed it up", "We have lied" etc.) The speech was leaked and in 2006 autumn large demonstrations started demanding his resignation.

them!"⁵⁸ This was on the banks of the river at the Liberty Bridge. I didn't participate in the march of 2008. But my friends told me horror stories about it, and everybody could see clearly in the videos taken there what actually happened. So we are playing the role of the scapegoat that this cornered, impoverished, stupid crowd can release its anger onto. That's how I would explain it.

R: Why didn't you participate in the march?

JSZ: My shoulder was dislocated.

R: How different do you think the world of young lesbians is today?

JSZ: The world of all young people is totally different. It's much more open, free, flexible and adaptable, than we are or ever were. We were practically locked up here in the Soviet bloc. Well, hackneyed comments come to mind, like how happy I am to see this. I can't stand it when people lead a big-time gay life abroad but then go straight into the closet when they come home to Hungary. There are definitely people like that. I find it anomalous to lead an out life abroad, but it has its own explanation. Maybe I should be more sympathetic towards the girls who have a blast at a Pride Parade in Canada, and write enthusiastic letters from there but wouldn't stand up to get pelted at here at home. But I don't have too much contact with these young people anyway. Now that I think about it, almost everyone I'm friends with is over thirty, or 25 or 26 at least. I've been to parties once or twice, mostly to *Labrisz* Carnivals. It's good to see how girls today can freely enjoy themselves and how much they don't have any problems with being lesbian. And that this subject is part of public discourse now. So if there's a girl who wants to be a boy, or falls in love with other girls, these days she doesn't have to wait until she's 33 to recognize what she is but can do it much earlier. At least I really really hope so. Can she, after that, follow the path of being a lesbian? I think it's much easier than in the old days, but it's still very hard.

⁵⁸ In the autumn of 1944, during the Arrow Cross regime, Budapest Jews were regularly rounded up, lined up along the banks of the Danube, and shot into the river.



Igazolványkép a hatvanas évekből



Meleg büszkeség menete, 1997



1994, fotó: Szilágyi Lenke



A Szivárvány Társulás a Melegek Jogaiért Vörösmarty téri demonstrációja, 1995



“I have always lived between silent stones and complex humans”

Márta Kis (b. 1950)

R: How did you become a stone-sculptor and restorer of old buildings?

MK: I attended the stonework and stone sculpting specialization at István Tömörkény Secondary School of Applied Arts in Szeged. After I married my husband we moved to Visegrád⁵⁹ together. We started working in the stone sculpting studio at the construction management of the Department of Monument Protection in Visegrád in 1973, together with some friends and former classmates. We learned the renovation skills themselves in practice and got a lot of professional help from renowned experts. Just at the time a full-time course on stone renovation started at the college but in those days you couldn't study and work at the same time. The Visegrád construction management of the Department of Monument Protection was closed down in 1983, and after going through a few jobs I started working as a freelance stone sculptor in 1988, for example in the royal palace of Visegrád, among others. In 2000-2001, when the country celebrated the turn of the millennium, I had a lot of work here, and I had a big share in making the palace look the way it does now.

R: Tell us about your marriage. How did you meet your husband?

MK: I met Misa in secondary school, we were classmates and he also studied stone sculpting. The whole class formed a really good community, and we learned a lot from our artist teachers. I dare say we received guidance for a lifetime from them. I became good friends with Misa, and we did many things together, we practically lived our lives together. I liked him very much since first grade, but for some reason we didn't get together until a year after graduation. I was going to a window dresser school at the time, he had only half a year left of his mandatory military service, and we started dating when he was discharged and I went back to my employer in Szeged to work as a window dresser. We spent another half year there before deciding to marry and move to Visegrád. We were married for 15 years and had two daughters, Márti and Eszter. Márti is a painter and Eszter has two adorable little sons, she has just started working again after maternity leave. She also became a stone sculptor, or rather an ornamental sculptor, but her work was the same as ours, we were a team. Looking back, I think that Misa and I had to get together to have these two children, and then follow our separate paths. My path turned towards a lesbian lifestyle, and he, after multiple attempts, finally settled down with a former primary school classmate. We are on very good terms; we keep in touch and see each other regularly.

R: Why did your marriage come to an end?

MK: Misa developed a drinking problem, which destroyed our relationship after a while. It flattened out as a relationship, and after a certain point it just didn't work any more. The separation was very hard, and he was in such a state that he wasn't able to cope with it alone and needed medical help. I could help him in this, or rather, he accepted my help so we still had a lot to do with each other.

⁵⁹ A small town, former royal residency in the Danube Bend, famous for its medieval historical heritage.

I would have gotten a divorce earlier but Misa wasn't able to exist on his own at the time and I didn't like the thought of throwing him out. Then fate brought an old love back into his life and he finally felt that he could leave. But it took me two more hard years before I was able to let him go completely on an emotional level.

R: Was it hard for you or for him?

MK: For me. Every break-up is hard for me, even if the relationship isn't going well any more. And I had such a heavy burden on my shoulders with everything: raising the children, managing the household, my profession and Misa's problems, that I starved for some emotional fuel to carry on with this heavy burden. Fate had it that I met a woman and slowly we realized that we fell in love with each other. At the time Misa didn't know about my being a lesbian yet, but he found out later and, as it turned out, he accepted it completely. Everybody knows it in my family now, but it wasn't easy to get there.

R: And what was your marriage like before the alcohol problems?

MK: It was very good as long as it worked well. I was deeply in love with Misa; I experienced the classic true love when you feel that you could touch the sky. And it worked beautifully for years. And we weren't merely partners as a man and a woman, but we also cooperated intellectually, in work, and in all sorts of activities. Having the same circle of friends was also very good, and we used to volunteer quite a lot – during socialism people were regularly summoned to do overtime under the name of 'volunteering', but we did it willingly. I remember that right after I had moved to Visegrád I made the design plans of a huge decoration for the front of the present community centre – which is a double storied villa – for a high priority celebration of 4th April.⁶⁰ I'm still amazed by the large-scale events that used to be held in those days, what efforts were put into celebrating this day in appearance and style. My friends were also into it, our so-called 'socialist brigade' did a lot of volunteer work for these sorts of events. What led to some problems in our life with Misa was that I was very mobile, I loved going to places, cycling, hiking, and Misa was more of a couch potato, so our paths sort of parted a bit. I didn't like this too much, I wanted us to share things that were important for both of us, but that's what life had in store for us.

R: Were there any signs earlier that you were attracted to women?

MK: I'd never thought of it until I met my first girlfriend. Although, looking back, I can recall some incidents in my life that had the potential for this. But I didn't think about it because I was brought up to believe that if you were born a woman you had to live as one. My parents were expecting a boy, and I wanted to be a boy when I was a small child, but in adolescence I had completely accepted that I was a woman, and I was socialized as a woman, no problem there. But I always had small crushes on girls. I could totally handle it that sometimes I took fancy to one girl or another and was happy to see them on the school corridors or I was content looking at their tableau pictures on the wall. Or I loved to muck about around them in the summer school camps, and I was happy if we had the opportunity to do something together. But I never

⁶⁰ 4th April was the day to celebrate the liberation of Hungary from Nazi Germany by the Soviet Army in 1945.

got further, I experienced that I was attracted but that's it, it never went any further. But once in 8th grade, when we visited the Parliament at Christmas as child representatives from Békés County, I met this girl from Gyula with whom I became good friends. When we were crossing Erzsébet Bridge I grabbed her hand and we smiled at each other and crossed the bridge holding hands. That was it, nothing more. Or I remember one time when I was in nursery school and a girl visited us and we were playing blind man's bluff and it was her turn to be blindfolded. They said she wasn't really beautiful, but I liked her in her little summer dress, as she was turning round and round searching for us. She was just nearing puberty and somehow I found her femininity very attractive. I remember stuff like this; these emotional attractions have stayed with me.

R: At the time of your divorce, had you already known the woman you fell in love with?

MK: Yeah, I was already in a relationship with her. We hadn't officially divorced with Misa yet, but we hadn't been together by that time. We had discussed it several times that things weren't working out. In that situation, I had already considered Misa my third child.

R: How did you meet your first girlfriend?

MK: It happened on my 35th birthday in 1985. I was working as an event manager in a holiday centre at the time. It was an easy-going, flexible job – I organized programs for the guests coming to the resort, guided tours, hiking tours, table tennis championships, barbecues, swimming or whatever they felt like doing. There was a small studio in the hotel, a tiny hole, where I couldn't squeeze in more than a desk, a chair, and a shelf, but this was the place where I could be by myself and recharge. I was there when I came across an *Expressz* advertising newspaper, and I saw in the "seeking penfriends" column that a "Young woman was looking for a nice, intelligent young woman for a penfriend." I thought I'd write her and that's how our relationship started. Neither of us had had a relationship with a woman before.

R: So was this advertisement meant to be a lesbian one?

MK: Well, technically it was on her part. I didn't know about myself at the time; most importantly, I wanted an emotional relationship with someone I could talk to, with whom I could share things, and then whatever may come around. I didn't really think about this, but it was a possibility. Fate brought it along and I just did what felt right from my soul or my guts. A month passed between my answering her advertisement and our first meeting. She got me interested, but I didn't try to define for myself what this feeling exactly was, I just wrote her again, and she replied, then we met again, then again, so practically one thing followed the other, and one day we just realized that we had fallen in love with each other. Until that point, she didn't even know anything about the kind of love that books are written about, because she had never experienced this feeling.

R: While you were still married, did you search for other acquaintances, friends?

MK: I was open to meet people, I didn't completely close men out, but I was a hundred percent certain that I would never fall in love with a man again. I didn't turn towards women because I was disappointed in men. I just knew that no other man could ever touch my heart the way Misa did, that level was just impossible to surpass. I was given this one and only love with a man, and if Misa and I could live the rest of our lives together in harmony, I may never

have met a woman. While we were together I didn't consider anybody else. Towards the end he had a short-lived flame for a woman I also knew and that broke my heart quite a bit. To tell the truth, our relationship never recovered from that. And when I felt that our relationship was really over, I realized that I had to do something, because my emotional reserves had been exhausted and I couldn't go on any more. I had sexual relations with other men afterwards, the sex worked very well with them, but as I could not bond with them emotionally, I could not stay in a relationship with them. They used to stick to me like glue, mostly the delicate, alcoholic types, but I didn't want another alcoholic. For me it was very important that my partner should have an independent personality and that their happiness shouldn't come from sitting on my skirt. I'd rather be alone. And another thing: for example if a man spoke ill of women or looked down on them – "Not you, I adore you, you're an exception, but I think quite poorly of women in general" – well, I had quite a poor opinion of such men, they stood no chance with me!

There was another thing going on in my life while I was still married to Misa. There was a woman paediatrician in Visegrád with whom I got on very well. I already started having problems with Misa because of his drinking by that time, and I struggled a lot with this and he all but stopped being the soul mate he once used to be. I can bear quite a lot but I always needed some kind of emotional contact, contact with people from which I could replenish my reserves. And this doctor touched my soul with her personality, her way of thinking was attractive and the things she said and taught as a doctor found fertile soil in me. A longing grew in me to learn more from her, to talk more with her, and I desperately sought opportunities for that. Then it became a problem that I felt that she was much more important for me than I was for her and it felt like a sort of addiction. And I tried to weed her out of my life. It was very hard emotional work which lasted for years, and it was going on roughly at the same period when my relationship with Misa reached an absolute end. This also added to my emotional breakdown, which led me to write that letter in the resort. I think I was looking for a soul mate of sorts. I was never sexually attracted to the doctor, it never crossed my mind to be with her as a female partner, but she was awfully important to me emotionally. Looking back I see that I experienced this relationship as a platonic love interest but since it was not mutual it didn't work any longer, so I had to end it and sort it out in myself.

R: How did you realize that you are a lesbian?

MK: I didn't realize it for a very-very long time. It simply started with hugging each other which felt amazingly good. And then I experienced all the colours and shades and all the different chords one can play beyond a male-female relationship, which I thought I had fully experienced as much as it was possible. It wasn't on the first day that we realized this. When we hugged each other for the first time we didn't immediately end up in bed, but I could get to accept that this was completely okay within a few days. And she accepted herself, as well. I think this was what she ultimately desired.

R: Wasn't it strange for you to be with a woman?

MK: It wasn't strange at all. It was around that time that I read a quote from György Faludy,⁶¹ which says that it doesn't matter whether you fall in love with a man or a woman, the point is that you love him or her, period. And somehow I felt that this is how it works in my life, as well. I didn't have any problems with myself. My problem was that I had to keep it a secret. Well, actually, even that wasn't a problem because it couldn't work otherwise at the time, except by keeping it an absolute secret. I took great care not to let anyone see it on us, which obviously didn't work out because even my kids found out. And once, as we were going up the escalator, my girlfriend looked at me and a guy crooned to us, "You're head over heels, aren't you?" I thought I'd die of embarrassment because I didn't want others to figure out how I felt or what was going on between us.

R: How long did this relationship last for?

MK: We were in love for five years and we spent another two trying to keep it alive with more or less success, but this part was hard. One of the reasons why the relationship didn't work after the passion faded – mostly on her part – because our personalities are so different, different things make us tick, we are like fire and water. It was hard for her, sometimes she thought she would fall to pieces. At the beginning the feelings just came, you couldn't stop them. By the end of the fifth year, however, she felt that she is falling to pieces and she thought that it would be better for her if she ended this relationship.

R: How long did you live closeted?

MK: Until the end. We met once a week. She worked at the TV station at the time, she was an editor. I had Wednesdays off and she asked her free creative day to be on Wednesday and we spent these days together. Usually I was the one who went to her place and I was there by 8 in the morning. Once we were caught red-handed by her husband because he came home from work a bit earlier and everything was quite evident so I was banned from their place. It was hard. But we went away for weekends pretty often or she came to us with her children so we did have a lot of programs together. We always had an open house, a lot of our friends, relatives and acquaintances came to visit us and stayed overnight, so it was perfectly fine for her to sleep at our place. But it was very very hard because we always had to hide. It was a very different world; my life with my girlfriend was wrapped up and kept apart from society. We had to keep it a complete secret because we just couldn't come out at the time. We spent five years together without meeting anyone; we didn't know gay men or lesbian women. No one. It was only the two of us. And neither of us was independent. I didn't have a husband but I did have children and I had my so-called straight civilian life, which was in a totally different world.

R: And what did your family, your children say? When did they find out?

MK: I told my older daughter first, after ten years. I had had several relationships with women by that time. Márta was 21 years old. The topic itself was already natural in the family as we were having conversations about homosexuality. Come to think of it, our life with my first girlfriend started opening up – in 1990, I think – when she was freelancing for newspapers and heard that a gay Jewish group was being formed (under the name *Szidra*⁶²) and

⁶¹ György Faludy, Hungarian bisexual poet (1910-2006).

⁶² The group *Szidra* was founded in 1991 and later worked under the name *Keshergay Magyar Zsidó*

she did an interview with the founding members, to which she invited me too. We met the boys in the bar called Pink Bowtie which was Ildi Juhász's place in Üllői Road. We were invited to join the founding meeting, so we got involved in the life of the group. The meetings were in the homes of members, with free socializing at the beginning, and then one of the boys gave Jewish lectures. One time we went to visit a gay Jewish group in Vienna. I really enjoyed these meetings and it was fantastic that were other people besides my girlfriend with whom I could talk to about my feelings about being gay. I couldn't talk to anyone until then, although I didn't really need it while we were in a close-knit relationship with my girlfriend.

When we started meeting other gay people the topic entered our family lives as well. Up until then my kids had known that I had Jewish friends but I didn't tell them that they were gay, too. Then I told them that we were invited to visit a gay couple and that it was amazing to see that two people of the same sex could live in such harmony and that they are so open about it. Or, for example, Márta had seen *Querelle*, the Fassbinder film, and we talked about it. And then on a beautiful sunny February morning I visited her and told her that I wanted to share something with her about my private life that's very important for me – and I told her I was gay. And she replied, "I know, mum" and we hugged and she asked if she can tell her friends. I told her that of course, she could tell whomever she wanted. We talked about it a lot later and I was very relieved that I had told someone.

R: Where did the desire to come out come from?

MK: Being closeted puts a great amount of stress on people. Since I already had people I could talk to I felt that sooner or later I would like to tell my family, as well. I really wanted to because I always had to be secretive and I could only show a part of myself to the people who were the closest to me. I felt that it was time to tell Márta. Two years passed before I was able to tell Eszter one Sunday over an afternoon coffee. By that time we had had the first Pride March and I was interviewed with my name disclosed by Civil Radio. Laci Láner and Balázs Pálfi were also invited and it was announced more than once that "My guests are Márta Kis, Balázs Pálfi and László Láner, who are openly gay." This was the incentive I needed; I wanted Eszter to hear it from me rather than from the radio. I took a deep breath and told her. And she also answered, "Yes, I know, mum."

R: Was this the reaction you were expecting?

MK: The technical part, when she met my girlfriend, was a bit harder for Eszter. But then four years passed and one Christmas I got a little clay statue from her that she modelled herself – two women sitting next to each other hugging the other's shoulder and holding hands. So she came to terms with it. Then I told my older sister and my younger sister too, the younger one immediately told her family and kids and everyone was okay with it. I only dared to tell my parents after 17 years and that was very hard. I had told my parents about my girlfriend who had been living with me in Visegrád at the time – I was always telling them Nórika was doing this, doing that – and when we went to visit on Easter I took a photo of her along with the others. When I got to her photo I told my father, "This is Nórika, my sweetheart." And he was happy and he said,

"She looks sweet, I'm glad you chose such a nice woman." My mother's eyes went wide and she asked, "When did you meet and how did you meet?" and then we talked about her a bit and I asked her how she felt about all this. "Oh come on, Márti, we had known since your first girlfriend and we don't have any problems with this, you're our child and we love you as you are and that's it."

R: How do you think your children figured out that you're a lesbian?

MK: Those who are closest to us figure out and children have especially strong skills for that. Until the age of two children see the world through their parents which means that instead of reacting to the world they react to how the parents take things. Kids connect through the meta-communicative signals of the parents and this sensitivity sticks with the child, they remain open and sensitive to their parents' stuff. But this goes both ways, because if the parents keep their eyes open they can be just as sensitive to their child's things.

R: When and how did you tell your ex-husband?

MK: I didn't really tell him, to be honest, he found out somehow. I don't know how he found out or when the penny dropped. Since we had already been divorced I didn't find it important to tell him. A couple of years ago when I was interviewed for the TV program *Strucc* on TV2 I told Misa that an interview had been made with me that was partially related to my being gay and suggested him watch it if he was interested. He watched it and then he called me and congratulated me and praised me endlessly on how fantastic it was that I had the guts to come out like this and that this was very important, and he completely supported me emotionally. It was after this film that we talked about these things in a bit more detail. He happened to be organizing a class reunion at the time at his place and he told me to bring my girlfriend, as well, and if one of our classmates had a problem with it, "We would knock the male chauvinist down a peg or two."

R: What was the hardest thing to harmonize with all this while you were closeted? I mean workplace, friends or family.

MK: A coming-out process always has its course; everybody takes as many steps at a time as they can. My first step was meeting the Jewish gay group and there I could talk about my feelings with another gay person and I could ask them how they experienced it in their family. Then I got involved in the gay movement and I could give a bit more of myself each time, I could be more out. I'm not one of the founders of *Háttér* but I finished in the second round of the hotline operator course, which helped me a great deal in becoming more open. It was around this time that I told my kids. My family was the most important for me. After I had come out to my family I thought nothing bad could happen. My mother asked me once if people in Visegrád knew and I told her that I had no idea, they might know but no one had said anything so far. And she said, "My dear Márti, don't bother with whatever they might say, the most important thing is that you are happy." I haven't heard anything back in Visegrád. I didn't really care about these things; I have told my family and the new people I meet. When my new neighbour moved in we talked, she told me about her past life, about her ex-husband, and I told her that I was also divorced and that I had a girlfriend. Now I can freely say this out loud. I don't boast about it, but if anyone asks I reply openly and honestly.

R: Have you ever had any trouble coming from this?

MK: Once, sometime around the early nineties, when I was working in the *Feminista Hálózat* [Feminist Network]⁶³ and I was learning about feminist ways of thinking. There was a woman with whom I used to have great chats, I visited her home, we liked each other and we instinctively understood each other. I felt that it was important that she should know about my being gay. I didn't dare to tell her to her face back then, but I wrote a letter in which I explained about myself. I heard from other people that she had a fit. She hasn't spoken to me since, but I heard from others that she said I'd 'made a pass' at her. That was her way of dealing with it. I think she had problems with the very idea of homosexuality, and it wasn't me who she was rejecting but her own feelings. I didn't have any problems elsewhere. I didn't tell anyone on my own but if someone was curious I told them. But it wasn't easy to come out in *Strucc* because when you're on TV people whom you wouldn't want to tell might see you, as well. Old acquaintances, for example, who know me from the heterosexual world. It's not the same if I can tell someone face-to-face or if they find out like this. For example, telling my father was very hard because I thought that he would have difficulties with his colleagues and acquaintances about his daughter being gay. He was a teacher, he's retired now but he was always in a leading position, chief of the Educational Department, the director of the record office and he also taught in high school before retiring.

R: Have you ever had trouble getting a contract or a job if you came out to your contractor?

MK: Oh gosh, of course I have! I even got fired! Now I remember, something like this really did happen to me once! I went to work in the Community Centre of the Army as a cultural manager in 1987. The workload was huge and complex and I was like a sort of jolly joker but I liked it, it was quite like freelance work. I was in and out, organizing, going to programs, performances, so it was pretty free and I was the apple of the lieutenant-colonel comrade's eye, he really liked me. The Military resort centre had a campsite at Balatonkenese, I was the caretaker there all summer, my kids were with me, too, and the management said I could bring along a helper whom they would pay. I brought my girlfriend but this was not a good idea because she was horribly jealous for not being the only one I spent time with. I had my daily duties at the campsite, I couldn't spend all my time with her and she couldn't bear it, because of which we were fighting all the time, and someone must have noticed it. The tents didn't have thick walls and our conversations were probably overheard. And she also came to see me in the Community Centre quite often, so it wasn't that hard to figure out what kind of relationship we had. And suddenly after the summer camp was over I was summoned to the department to meet the lieutenant-colonel comrade. The deputy head of department informed me that the lieutenant-colonel comrade had sent me the word that I would get another month's salary and that I had to quit. I asked why but I got no response. So I also asked the deputy head of department comrade what the problem was and she said that allegedly I said something degrading about the lieutenant-colonel comrade, and that's why I was sacked. That was completely abnormal, I had never said anything bad, it wasn't my style to badmouth people. And then I figured it out.

⁶³ *Feminista Hálózat* [Feminist Network]: the first expressly feminist organization in Hungary, founded in 1989.

It made me feel so bad that I didn't talk about this with anyone for a long time, for years. Recently there was a discussion on legal cases when people were discriminated against and that was the first time I could speak about it in front of other people.

And they never said it out loud that they were firing me because of this. It took some time before someone was finalized and could become a civil employee, which suggested a certain level of trust that my work was good enough and that I could work at such a place as the Community Centre of the Army. It was obvious that my sacking was not about the quality of my work, I know that I didn't do anything wrong. If they had had a problem with the quality of my work they would have told me that and I could have defended myself. But this way I couldn't defend myself, I just stood there in confusion. It was a grand gesture at the time that they offered me another month's salary and told me that I'd better leave 'by mutual consent'. That wasn't the usual way at the time. And I couldn't bring this up, I couldn't talk about it back then. I was even grateful that they weren't proclaiming it from the rooftop that they were firing me because I was gay because then everyone would have found out like that and that would have been very embarrassing. Then I didn't use to have the assertiveness I have now. Now I could easily stand up for myself and I would know where to go because there are forums and places and now *Háttér* has a legal assistance program.

Another thing happened, but much later. My house has another entrance where there used to be a common garden and there is a so-called 'dry gate' entrance there. You can access my attic from there and that's where I keep the coal in a little pen. I have some neighbours whose door opens to this dry gate entrance, and one day someone started decorating the plank walls of the pen with "fag fa...", but they probably got disturbed by someone. Someone must have suspected or known something. Whether it was one of the neighbours or someone else, I have no idea, but I think it's still there, I don't remember cleaning it.

R: How did this make you feel?

MK: It didn't. I wasn't upset. If someone has something to say they should come up to me and say it and then I can reply or we can talk about it but I can't do much if they just write it down like that. If I had started stressing over it thinking, "Oh gosh, oh gosh, I hope people don't see it, I'll clean it off quickly", I think it would have been all the more embarrassing. This way nobody ever wrote it there again. I'm sure it would have been decorated much more if I bothered with it if they saw that this upset me, but they saw that there was no point doing it.

R: You wear quite a lot of accessories – like jewellery, etc. – that suggest you're a lesbian. Have you ever had any problems because of this?

MK: I often wear a rainbow coloured bracelet, a labrys axe earring, the sign of two interlocking women's symbols, and I wear them quite naturally now. I remember the greatest deed of my life in 1997: I got a T-shirt from an English activist who worked in AIDS prevention and had given us a training at *Háttér*. There are two women on the shirt, one of them with a small child and something like "Protect yourself against homophobia" written on it. I never dared to wear this T-shirt in places where I was not out yet. And after I watched a few documentaries at the 1997 gay festival I thought that I was going to perform a

heroic deed by wearing that T-shirt on the tram. I thought people would look; I was even prepared for remarks. But miraculously, no one noticed and no one reacted. By the way, I think a lot of people don't even know what these symbols mean. Some people say, oh how cute that axe is or how cute your earrings are. Some people have asked if I knew what they meant. For example once we were sculpting in the Visegrád palace and I was wearing a 2001 pride shirt which had a rainbow-coloured arrow on it and Gay Pride written above. A teacher came over to me and asked, "Do you know what's written on your T-shirt?" I said, "Yes, I know." "Are you sure you know?" "Yes, I do." She simply didn't want to believe that I knew and that I would willingly wear it so openly. There are people who know and they are surprised that I am wearing something like this and others don't even know what I'm wearing.

R: You have played quite a role in gay people having more and more possibilities to seek help, make acquaintances or go out to have fun now.

MK: When I started working at the *Háttér* telephone hotline, I practically found myself in the middle of the gay rights movement. This wasn't unfamiliar for me; as I said, we used to do a lot of so-called volunteer work in the old days. I joined the Feminist Network for a few years in the early 1990s, then we founded the *NANE*⁶⁴ hotline in 1994 – I'm one of the founding members and I used to volunteer there for a few years. Then I joined *Háttér* and the gay rights movement. While I was doing this I started to be more and more out in my private life. We tried reaffirming people through the hotline, as well, because a lot of people had problems with coming out and their identities, this was one of the big issues. The other issue was relationships and where to look for partners. Douglas⁶⁵ organized the second gay film festival in 1997, which was fantastic and it helped me a great deal. I watched nearly all the films. The documentaries helped me come out more and understand a bit more how this worked on the level of society, in families, what people were afraid of and what not. When the four-day long festival was over Douglas said that he was going to Heroes' Square with a rainbow-coloured flag and a bottle of champagne and if someone felt like it they should join him. A few of us joined him and we laid out a rainbow-coloured flag at the feet of our father Árpád,⁶⁶ there were a few bottles of wine and champagne and someone brought a cassette player from which we could play ballroom songs. There was a German girl who was in Hungary on scholarship and she taught ballroom dance to gay people, I took some classes, too. And we started dancing right there, that was a fantastic experience! We discussed that by 2000 Hungary might reach the point where we could organize an Eastern-European Pride. And in the same year, in 1997, we had the first Pride March on 6 September. We made a lot of banners with slogans and we thought that only a few dozen people were going to march because no one would want to be out. We started from Capella and we entered Vörösmarty square from the side of the Vigadó. Balázs Pálfi gave a speech there; he had

⁶⁴ *NANE: Nők a Nőkért Együtt az Erőszak Ellen* [Women Together for Women against Violence], a feminist organization against domestic violence and violence against women.

⁶⁵ Douglas Conrad: a gay activist and film-maker from San Francisco. He joined the Hungarian LGBT movement in the mid-1990s. He organized the 2nd GL Film Festival in 1997 and helped organize and documented the first Budapest Gay Pride March in 1997.

⁶⁶ The statue of the "great father" Árpád, who led the Hungarians from Central Asia to their homeland in the Carpathian Basin (present-day Hungary).

already come out in the radio, so he was a 'public fag', so to speak. Then we quickly went back to Capella on Váci Street, which earned the name "fastest quicksand".⁶⁷ There were maybe 300 of us. This march was an amazing experience, it was very colourful. For example a boy from *Háttér* had a banner that said "It's good to be a fag", and everyone was taking pictures of him, he was even in the newspapers, and this was his coming-out at his workplace. It was very important to become visible. One of the top priorities of the movement at the time was to give examples to closeted people.

R: What helped you move from the early closeted stage into such an activist lifestyle?

MK: Perhaps my open-mindedness helped me, meaning that part of the answer lies in my personality. I have a sort of openness and I like doing things that help others, so I'm totally into non-governmental organizations and initiatives. When I joined the *Háttér* team I had already had experience in hotline help but that was an entirely different area so I wouldn't have volunteered to start answering phone calls without having done the training first. One of the aims of the training was learning about ourselves, because we can't help others if we don't know how we ourselves relate to certain things. We discussed things and everyone had different problems that came up in the group, and it was very important that I got to understand how I felt about those problems. And then it all came together, I began to see where I was and then I could do more and more. After the 1997 film festival I could go to Balázs Pálfi's radio show and talk about the festival – he had a show on *Tilos Rádió* called *Instead of Soap Opera*. It was a big thing for me at the time. After the march I went to Civil Radio,⁶⁸ which gave me enough strength to come out to my younger daughter, and so on.

R: So far when you've talked about *Háttér* in the context of the gay-lesbian movement. How was *Labrisz* founded?

MK: Until that point, there was only one single gay rights movement in Hungary, but, like in other countries, sooner or later it had to become more diverse. Women were there in the gay movement but in much smaller numbers than men. In *Háttér* it was usually two thirds men one third women. This was pretty harmonious; I think we could work well with the boys. But there was a need to have a women's group that was only about women. That's when we launched the *Labrisz* Newsletter, we published four issues. This was a pretty simplistic samizdat-style publication completely based on volunteer work, everyone worked for free and we photocopied it wherever we could. There was a huge amount of interest in it so we thought that we should have a meeting, and there came an opportunity. *Óvegylet Association*, which worked on AIDS prevention, had a Swiss supporter, they had an office, and they could buy another apartment in the yard which gave gay groups an opportunity to meet. That's how we ended up there and that became the first *Labrisz* meeting. I don't remember which year it was but I know it was 28th November⁶⁹ and there were more than ten of us. It was great that we organized this and there was a

⁶⁷ A pun in Hungarian; the word *homokos*, which lit. means 'sandy', is a pejorative slang expression for homosexual.

⁶⁸ Civil Radio: The largest non-profit radio station in Hungary, existing since 1995.

⁶⁹ It was in 1996.

need for women to be able to meet among themselves, which was really important if you wanted to find a partner. That's how Labrisz Evenings came to be.

There were a few places that were for mixed groups: *Angyal Bár* [Angel Bar],⁷⁰ Capella and a few others. We went to these places in groups and they were very important but there was a need for a place which is for women only. The first few Labrisz Evenings didn't have a scheduled plan or theme, but later we planned them in advance. Sometimes there were fifty-sixty women and we saw that there was such a great need not only for having a place to talk but also for places to have fun. At the time *Eklektika*⁷¹ started to host women's parties every second Saturday; first it was more about having a beer and chatting in just one room, and then another room was added at the back where women could dance. As the need arose different opportunities opened up. Then we organized Pride every year from 1997. In the first year the film festival and the march were separate programs but then they merged. That's how it started. We founded *Labrisz Association* in 1999; I was one of the founding members.

R: Did you go to every gay club in the 1990s?

MK: Yes, I did, to each of them. Angel was the first one, back at its old place where the Tungsram shop used to be on Rákóczi Street, and then it moved to Szövetség Street. Then there was the Bad Boys Bar in Ráday Street, that was a very short-lived place but for example that's where I first saw a transvestite show. Capella was an important place on Belgrád Embankment. There was a place called Arizona in Nagymező Street in the early 1990s, and *Szexepil* in Szív Street. These places never lasted very long because it was hard to fill the place with lesbian women so that it would be profitable. I think *Szexepil* was only for women and Arizona was mixed. Then Desiré⁷² had a place at Ó Street called Desiré but he closed that and opened Alibi in Üllői Road. There were places that functioned as bars and others were only small internet cafés like Mystery Bar in Nagysándor József Street. Others were open only for men and were about having sex like Action in Magyar Street, which had a dark room, or Népliget⁷³. When I was in *Háttér* we went to all the gay clubs because it was important to know what was where. We needed to be able to answer women's questions too and we had to be able to talk to both men and women about all kinds of sexual problems and whatnot.

R: And what about Ipoly Cinema?

MK: I never went to Ipoly Cinema, but there were legends about the lesbian life there. That was in the 1980s. Homeros, the first homosexual association that worked officially was founded in 1988, and Ipoly Cinema was before that. It was rented and operated by Ildi Juhász and there were grand private parties after the film screenings. I only heard stories about them in various groups and Ildi told me what a great lesbian life was going on there. Sometimes as many as seventy-eighty women went to these parties even though – this was before the change of régime – it ran secretly.

⁷⁰ *Angyal Bár* [Angel Bar]: One of the first and most well-known gay bars in Budapest, existing between 1991 and 2006, changing its location five times.

⁷¹ *Café Eklektika*: A lesbian-friendly bar that gave place for the first regular lesbian parties from the late 1990s and the first same-sex ball-dancing classes from 2000. It moved and changed its profile in 2006.

⁷² Desiré Dubounet, transvestite singer, film director, the owner of Bohemian Alibi Club.

⁷³ Népliget is a large public park out of the centre of Budapest, a popular cruising area for gay men.

R: Did the Pride have some form of antecedent?

MK: Before we could organize marches we had Pink Picnics⁷⁴ in the Buda Hills in a clearing in the middle of the forest, far away from the world, that's where we gathered. Fifty-sixty-seventy gay men and lesbian women. And we celebrated ourselves, everyone brought something to share and we had very nice afternoons. Later we organized activities at the picnics, as well, like contests or concerts. The picnics only faded out when we had the first Pride March in September 1997. We organized one more picnic after that but it sort of became pointless.

R: How did you come to meet these people? I mean, you were living in Visegrád.

MK: Oh, I lived most of my life in Budapest. I had my private life, my job and my activist life. My family accepted that it was important for me to go to the Feminist Network, *NANE* and *Háttér*. I didn't tell them about everything in detail but these activist things were very important for me, partly because as we were organizing things I got the chance to meet women, as well. Of course, there were other lesbians in *NANE*, as well, we knew each other. So I had an activist life, then there were women and being gay, and then women again, and all of this got entwined through *Labrisz*.

I lived in Visegrád but I worked very little there and a lot more in the countryside, for example, in Ócsa, and also in Budapest. Márti went to secondary school in Budapest in the early 1990s; Eszter was at home but she had such an extensive circle of friends that she was never alone. And during the summer they came along to work with me, they got to know my job and they even earned some money, so it was interesting and exciting for them, too. I came and I went, that was a part of my life. When we divorced I bought the Trabant⁷⁵ from Misa because I could not have lived without a car, I wouldn't have been able to work so the car basically meant my life, my freedom, my independence. Stone sculpting is a very closed world. When I'm with the stone my thoughts are completely free, soaring to unbelievable heights. I like working a lot, I can take the strain, but I am very free spirited and somehow I have always lived between two endpoints: silent stones and complexly built people. Nowadays I have less stone-sculpting work but in the early 2000s I started doing shiatsu massage which sort of combines the two, sensitivity and intuition are important components.

R: Did you hope to find love through the movement?

MK: That's not why I did it, that was not my motivation. I have never felt lonely. I used to be very dependent on relationships but now I am a bit wiser; as time goes by things change. When my relationship with my first girlfriend ended I needed to find a new one immediately. That was when I tried advertising in *Expressz* magazine, sometimes it worked out, and sometimes it didn't. That's how I found my next girlfriend, I advertised, she answered, and we were together for a few years. At the time that was pretty much it, you could mostly meet people through advertisements, and then later there was an internet option, the *Melegrandi* [Gay Dating] dating site. Once I found a girlfriend there,

⁷⁴ Pink Picnics were organized by gay organizations for LGBT people in the Buda Hills in the 1990s (first in 1992); they can be considered the predecessors of Pride Marches.

⁷⁵ An East-German brand of car, small, cheap and popular in Hungary during state-socialism.

too. Of course, not all of my attempts ended in harmonious relationships but that's alright. Of course, I also met people in the community, at a party for example, that's how I found one or two partners.

The first lesbian party that I can remember going to was at Pink Bowtie in 1991, maybe. The owner knew a lot of lesbians and when she thought that she should freshen up her circle of friends she organized a party. We were invited, as well, and I went there with my first girlfriend. It was very interesting – I met quite a few people at this party with whom I am still in contact today, for example Antonia Burrows. She was a legend at the time: she is British and she taught at the English Department at ELTE,⁷⁶ and she played a great part in starting off the feminist movement in Hungary. Our friendship is as strong as ever, I've just come back from visiting her in San Francisco during the Pride, of course. And I met a lot of other people there, as well. It was a great party and it gave me a lot of encouragement to start doing things – I started going to the Feminist Network after that. I had an inner drive to meet people, to get to know women, and not only lesbians but women in general, and women's movements. For that the Feminist Network was the place to go to. I put things together for myself piece by piece, I learned about feminist thinking for two years. Because I created my little emancipation in my own life but I wanted to see how that works on a larger social level.

⁷⁶ Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), the largest university in Hungary.



Férjével, 1973



Lányaival, 1981



Esztergom, 1983



1984



Feminista Hálózat, 1993, Fotó: Bozzi Vera



“Being feminine doesn’t mean you’re a Barbie doll with an IQ of 16”

Magdolna Hidasi (b. 1951)

R: Tell me about the eighties. Where were there gay and lesbian parties and events, and what were they like?

MH: There weren’t too many opportunities in the eighties for gays and lesbians to be out, and there weren’t too many private parties. It was pretty much just the *Egyetem Presszó* [University Café], and somehow everyone managed to find their way there by word of mouth.

R: How did you hear about it?

MH: Oddly enough, every girl had a male friend who had known about it for a long time and recommended going there. The whole process is a lot easier for men. They’re much more open in this sense. If you went to the café, you’d barely see any women there. Still, it had a very interesting feeling to it, the whole atmosphere: a very relaxed, cool, friendly group of people. It was the only place, and that’s it. There were no others, at least as far as I know. Only the private parties, but those were no competition. If you wanted to get to know people and see more of what was going on, it was only through the University Café.

R: Why do you say it was easier for guys?

MH: I think it’s closely related to sexuality. Men can make contact much more quickly and easily than girls, who are – even today, I think – a bit more reserved. It’s not so much a matter of shyness, but more of an attitude. Guys have a stronger urge to initiate a rapid-fire relationship. The way I’ve seen it, girls are more restrained.

R: Did the University Café have parties with music and dancing?

MH: No, there wasn’t any dancing. People collided like atoms there – coming and going, carrying their glasses left and right, saying hello to each other, maybe if you recognized someone you’d say hello. So it wasn’t a party place; it was *the* Place. But that wasn’t its only attraction: it was open till three or four in the morning, which in itself was a rarity at the time. Because of this, some people who finished work very late would go down to the University Café to unwind and relax a bit. To get inside, you first had to pass this sweet and lovely guy – today he’d be called a bouncer, but then we just called him Misike⁷⁷. And Misike let in only those people who he thought ‘belonged’ there. Everyone knew someone or had a friend who’d told them about this very ‘special’ place. I was a friend of a friend and we went together: that’s how I was let in the first time. It’s very likely that if I’d gone there on my own, Misike would have simply said, “Sorry, it’s a private party.”

R: And how did you meet gay men?

MH: At private parties. Interestingly, not just one but three, five, seven, eight people with ‘special sexual interests’ who entered my circle of friends, and these people found a common language with each other. When you’re not sure about your own identity yet, and you’re struggling, having doubts, uncertainty, or consider it an ungodly, hideous thing that can’t be reconciled with you or your

⁷⁷ Misike is a nickname for Mihály (Michael).

surroundings, you easily find a common language with people in the same shoes.

R: Were there any police raids in the University Café?

MH: Yes. People were scared shitless, and the raids served that very purpose. But there was a huge difference between guys and girls. The girls were left alone. But guys made up 95 percent of the crowd and went down almost every night, as it was very significant and the only place to meet people. That was the point of the raids: to scare people.

R: How did you realize you were a lesbian?

MH: My attraction to women was greater than it should have been. I noticed women with much more intensity and pleasure, much more delight, and I considered them much more pleasant. Everything clearly pointed in this direction. I felt like no matter how 'perfect' my life was, something was missing. I had that tiny little feeling of lacking something, that there was something I needed. Of course, I knew exactly what it was that I just needed, but admitting it to myself, facing it was really hard. Because you simply can't afford to lie to yourself. And it was only yourself that you could count on. Except if you were in the kind of partying company where there were other gay people, too. Even still, first you have to deal with this on your own, you must be clear and open with yourself, and that allows no bullshitting. It took me quite long to allow myself to discuss this with myself. At some point when I was between twenty-five and thirty, around 1978-79. You have to articulate this: yes, I'm attracted to women. Or, yes, I'm attracted to women, as well. Each to her own inclination.

R: What is your inclination?

MH: For a long time I clung to the idea that I was, to put it bluntly, a 'fence-sitter' – that is I could find the pleasure I was looking for with either sex. After the divorce I got involved in superficial heterosexual relationships, and I had no problem with that. But when you look into your soul a little bit, then it becomes quite clear that it only points in one direction. That's why I always question it when someone says they're bisexual. Are you really? Okay, if you say so. But it's kind of lying to yourself. The attraction must be stronger towards one side or the other. It's possible that you try and soothe your conscience by telling to yourself, 'OK, I won't neglect my other half, either,' but I think that's rather self-deception. Maybe it's easier to accept yourself that way.

R: How did you come to terms with the realization that you were a lesbian?

MH: It was hard. I can only speak about my own experience, of course, though I do have some information about other women of my age. If you weren't that outgoing or involved in the party scene, then it was very difficult. Even today, there are many women who stay 'slightly closeted,' even though they're perfectly aware of what they want and what they don't – still, they're more reserved about it. For me it was extremely difficult. My workplace was great: everyone was young and laid-back. I tried to live my life normally like everyone else. I didn't have any problems with straight relationships, and I married a man. Not on paper, and not just to offer 'proof' to my family. Still, something wasn't right, and I had to deal with it all by myself – there wasn't anyone around to help me! When I think back, those were some of the darkest couple of months of my life. I'm not very high-strung, but during that period I got into such a state that whenever an ambulance or a police car passed with its sirens blaring, I almost burst into tears. I couldn't sort this thing out and it didn't help

to tell myself, 'I have two legs, I do my job, I'm perfectly normal.' But no, somehow it just didn't work. And this is what I had to sort out. There were various stages in this process, and I think it's different for everyone. Some people go to a psychotherapist to talk about it, and it helps them, and there are others who sort it out all by themselves. I was the latter type. It was totally different than today. Now you're two clicks away from a flood of information, and if you want to meet people the sky is pretty much the limit. I don't harbour any envy about life today; I just think, 'oh wow, it's so much better now. There's so much less of the bad stuff.' Maybe it's a little easier.

R: When you began to realize that you weren't straight, what words did you use to define yourself?

MH: I used a four-letter word to define myself: it starts with the letter 'b' and ends with 'uzi'.⁷⁸ It wasn't very heart-warming. I think the word 'lesbian' wasn't in use yet. The word 'lesbian' is a bonus for women, it distinguishes women: I'm a lesbian, not a homosexual. But I didn't use that word, even if I had known of its existence – I used the four-letter one, and it wasn't too pleasant! It was rather a burden on my shoulders. The most embarrassing thing was that you were on your own. And when you have no other option but to discuss something with yourself, there's no guarantee that it will lead anywhere, it will be a way out, towards the solution. Still, if I could do it all over again, I'd say, 'go ahead!' I'd do it again, probably with a bit more courage and less suffering.

R: When did you tell your family?

MH: I didn't want to beat about the bush. It took me around two or three or four months to get to the point of telling them. I was lucky, they took it as they should have. On top of that, it was at a Christmas dinner that I told them. A real Christmas surprise, isn't it? My mother, father, younger sister and me – huge dinner, everyone in a good mood, and then I said, "The thing is, I'm still me, but I live with a woman." That was it. My mother was really sweet; my father dropped his spoon and took deep long breaths. Then my mother, who was sitting at the other side of the table, slammed down her fork and knife, too, and said, "What, would it be better if someone left her after having three children?" I'm not saying it was easy, because I had to prepare myself to put it on the table without sugar-coating for the important people in my life: my family. But I thought I wouldn't want to spend days, months, even years lying.

R: It took you a few months to accept that you were a lesbian. So it went relatively quickly for you.

MH: Well, it wasn't that fast if you think about it, because if a day has 24 hours, then it's safe to say that you'd be agonizing over this for 28 hours a day. Because it's not sorted out, it's out of place, you have problems with it. It's not quite right. It's not like you deal with it for one and a half hours a day, but all the time. A few months? Well, those few months seemed like an eternity! The most difficult was the thought that you're deviating from what's expected, from what's normal – I have to use that word – from the straight line. And how you can accommodate it into your life. Or what can you say, when they ask you, "Do you mean I won't have grandchildren?" or "Is this what I raised you to be?" And so on. It must have been difficult for my parents, too, although they took

⁷⁸ The Hungarian word *buzi* ('fag') is widely used as a homophobic slur, although it has been reclaimed by some.

it in a very intelligent way. I had no problem with not having a family, children, and grandchildren. I think you can approach it rather selfishly, saying that this is my life, and I live it as I want to. I had no guilt over that. But I did have problems with reconciling the fact that I was attracted women with the world I lived in. And I really was attracted to them. This was something I could control, suppress, but I didn't want to. But all this didn't cripple me, neither physically, nor mentally. If completely straight people don't want to spend their life alone but don't want to have a family, either, they can still live a full and happy life, can't they? And why not?

R: Was there any particular point in your life to which you can connect the realization that you were a lesbian?

MH: Yes, and that one moment was terribly awkward. Next to our house there was a hairdresser shop. We were little kids, running in and out all the time, and there, among the hairdressers, beside the old ladies, there was this blond beauty. She was nice and sweet, and she loved children. She adored children, and I adored her. It was much later that I recalled this, and now I'd say that it was a signal. And I say this despite the fact that I was testing heterosexuality in long-term relationships because, obviously, I also tried to come up to social expectations. It wasn't the worst thing in the world, but something wasn't quite right.

R: Were you in love with that hairdresser?

MH: Falling in love with the hairdresser at the age of six? Don't be ridiculous! I just liked her. But I think it's easy to be smart when you have the benefit of hindsight. But when you're going through it, it's much more difficult to put things together. So instead I'd say that, in retrospect, I've been a 'four-letter word' from birth. So you could say that in a tiny corner of the twelfth chromosome there's this little defect. I don't know. But what contradicts this is the fact that I do have many female friends who have normal marriages, family, children, and still have same-sex relationships. And that's how they have a whole life. And no matter that it was stifled and buried and repressed so far, there is a point where, in spite of being married and having a family, they simply break out and look for the point where they can love a woman.

Ágnes Heller⁷⁹ once said that she was in love with one or two women until she was 13 or 14. But she said it so sweetly, "But it's completely natural. Until they reach 12, 13 or 14, girls are in love with each other!" And she said this as if she was just saying, "Yes, I'd like sugar with my coffee." The brilliant Ágnes Heller had absolutely no problem with this, and I adore her, because she's a wonderwoman. It was simply enthralling how naturally she said that. And she said it about herself that she had a classmate, a girl whom she was desperately in love with. That's the attitude everyone should take. And then most girls grow up and 'straighten out'. I wouldn't even say that they become serious and get married, just that they get themselves sorted out, perfectly naturally. Until that point, till the age of 12, 13, 14, things are messy, of course. Those who stay that way either stifle it back or carry it as a burden, they just don't want to open that floodgate and make it clear for themselves at last and realize that yes, this is how they are. That would be the first step: towards your own self. After that everything goes almost automatically, if you're clear about yourself,

⁷⁹Ágnes Heller (b. 1929): Hungarian philosopher.

and put it all in place as something perfectly natural. But those who don't do this will torment themselves till the end of their lives.

R: What was the impulse that ignited the whole process for you?

MH: There was a colleague of mine whom I liked way too much. By that time it was perfectly clear to me what I needed to have a full and happy life. But I lacked the courage and resolve – I think the two go hand in hand: first there's resolve, and then you can draw courage from it. But I didn't have any. And it was probably like when there's simply nothing else to do. When it comes like a tidal wave. And the time came when I simply had to express myself. In other words, I had to utter those five sentences, like "Look, the thing is, I love going out and having a beer with you, or browsing computer programs and looking for errors together, but there's something more than that." Luckily, she took it well. Apparently we were on the same wavelength, only I made the first step. It would probably have happened the other way round if I hadn't been the one to initiate it. Or I was the more impatient one. All right, here's the deal, and that's it! Big adventure! At worst she'd say, "Oh no, let's just have another beer and stay friends!" That's the worst that could happen.

That relationship was awfully interesting for me as a first experience, as well as for her as a first experience. And we didn't know what to do, which was an unpleasant realization. Despite that, it lasted for about two years. But it wasn't a well-lived, beautiful relationship; we were hiding all the time, just so that no one found out! We didn't even look at each other at work. In situations like that, you make all the awkward mistakes you can. Also, you hope that you can hide, but it's all in vain, because everybody sees everything: what you wouldn't even notice on yourself, one little motion or whatever. You think that everyone around you is stupid, blind and deaf, but no! It was pain and suffering, because we couldn't live it openly and freely. Although maybe we could have lived it much more freely. I can't know in retrospect. No matter how liberal the people around me were, I forbade myself that kind of openness or frankness, with which it could have been a beautifully and fully lived relationship. It was still quite exciting, but it went a bit under the radar. Maybe that's what made it exciting. Anyway, I don't count it among my bad experiences.

R: How and when did you come out at work?

MH: I did a quick test at work, too, because it was a great, friendly, young group, we all got along really well and would spend our free time together. And there I said, "OK, let's do a 'coming-out', to use the current term. At least I'd see who my real friends were – win some, lose some. Those who I would lose had not been important enough before, then. In other words, it was a watershed moment. And I was extremely lucky again. Oddly enough no one freaked out, there was no disgust, no gagging, nothing. There was, however, a hitch in the plan: after that, I became even more interesting to my male colleagues. Now I understand why, but back then it was a mystery for me.

R: Where did you work?

MH: It was a distinguished academic research institute full of smart, good-humoured, young, witty people, and we made a really great team. We had a very flexible schedule and an unbelievably good salary in a distinguished institute. I'm not saying that the people who worked there were anything special for some reason, but maybe they were to the extent that they were more open and tolerant, and never took anything too strictly or seriously. I had

great luck in that respect, as I was spared the kind of kick in the teeth I had been expecting. I was worried about my family, too. Not expecting a kick in the teeth but days of grief, like "Oh my god, this isn't how I raised you!" I was really lucky that that didn't happen, either. The biggest struggles were with myself, and I wasn't as kind to myself as my family and my colleagues were, who were simply surprised. I wish I'd known it would go so easily! I had been horribly anxious about what the important people in my life would say and think. But those who mattered to me almost just shrugged and said, "So what? I thought you had something important to say."

R: And your husband? How did he take it?

MH: His reaction, his endless tolerance, was also a complete surprise. We were very well suited during our marriage, and I never cheated on him. I'm not saying I had no desires, either, because I did. But basically we were perfectly fine together, we were young, we went to parties, it was good. He took the news incredibly well. The way he responded was, "And so what? It's not the end of the world. If this is the situation, you have to deal with it. I'm not going to be horrified; it's you who have to sort things out." The best, most wonderful part of all of this was the fact that he wasn't revolted, but took it in stride, in a very intelligent, civilized way. It's great help in itself if you can be open enough with someone of the same age and the opposite sex – and you're even married – to tell him. And he doesn't make it about his ego. He didn't respond like it was about him or posed a threat to his masculinity. Of course it didn't. Why would it do so? All I could tell him was, "Darling, you understand me, don't you? You like women, as well. So do I. See? It's really that damn simple." What can you say to a man?

R: But you ended up getting divorced.

MH: We got divorced, because we were young. If I had been able to handle myself and the relationship between us better, then maybe we could have lived together in a kind of practical arrangement. Which is still quite a bleak situation, if you think about it, because after a while you'll belong somewhere else emotionally. But we're on very good terms to this day, and if anything happens to me I can always rely on him. He is 7,000 kilometres away though – that's how far the poor thing had to go in order for us to maintain our distance. He's a wonderful man: smart and capable. He and I discussed it fully where this goes back. It's not like one day at 11:30 I get on the tram and suddenly realize: oh my god, I like girls. There's a period when it's within you latently, you don't deal with it but it's there. Then things will happen one after the other that will activate it. At that point you can still push it down, it's okay, I get it, but there's really no need to pay attention to this! But after a while you can't go on like that any more. It's happening, it surfaces more and more often, and your life will be wholesome only if you settle this with yourself.

R: Has coming out ever caused problems for you?

MH: No. Maybe it has to do with the fact that my approach was that I don't really care about it. If I messed up, then I lost a friend, acquaintance or whatever. If not, then fine. I didn't really make such a fuss about it. If I honoured someone by sharing such an intimate part of my life with them, then obviously it was because they were important to me and their opinion mattered. I've never experienced any atrocities or offences because of this. I lived in my previous apartment for 21–22 years. It was a nine-apartment tenement

building, full of people of varying ages and education levels, and it was a great community. Everybody knew about my identity. That didn't mean that I was pawing girls' asses in the garden, but after a while in such a tight-knit community, where people were on good terms with one another and shared almost everything, it was impossible to keep it under wraps that it was pretty much only women who came to my place to party in great numbers. I'm not saying that there weren't any guys, but they were that 'interesting' kind, too. And not only was I not rejected and alienated by this community, but after I moved away we stayed in touch for many years.

R: And in official places and at work?

MH: Later on I was in the lucky position of having my own workplace and launching my own business. I became a ceramicist, and I am also a horse breeder. When it comes to Arabian thoroughbreds, you don't talk about what they think of who's riding them. All that matters is how good a rider you are. In this case what matters is also your affinity, how you treat people, their first shock. How you can help them out of their awkwardness, that they're a bit shocked and ashamed of it, because they like you, therefore they can't really settle their feelings, wondering, 'Why am I shocked now? It's the same person sitting in front of me whom I've known for 103 years – still, she's told me some new information which is supposed to make me feel shocked.' It's not me that they have a problem with but this sudden new piece of information. They don't know what to say. Nothing has changed between us. This is what you have to help them get over. If you can communicate with people, then I think there's no problem with that. If you are not at peace with yourself, in any aspect of your life, then this won't work, either. I could have been kicked in the teeth many times; I could have had lots of negative experiences, which can make you more and more withdrawn, less brave, and make you feel that you really are a complete genetic waste. Because this is what your environment communicates. But you know, your environment is a mirror. If you stand up against it as you should, if you encourage them a little to accept you, if they can see that there's nothing wrong with this, they are actually damn quick to accept it. If you have a lot of uncertainty, theirs will be twice as great. If you don't have any, you can help them understand the unknown. After a while they'll realize that there's nothing to understand here. You don't need to be an astronomer to know that the sun rises, shines and sets.

R: Later, when your first relationship was over, how did you manage to meet new people? How did such things go in public spaces in the eighties?

MH: The next step was to give yourself the opportunity to get to know more people with similar feelings and struggles. You were bound to go to places, to various parties with the people you got to know in the University Café, so your circle of friends grew. That was it. So it was not only one or two or three people like you that you knew and you didn't feel like you were the only genetic waste on a planet with six billion people. Instead you said, "Come on, guys, it's not the end of the world!" Once I was casually sitting at the University Café, propping my legs on another chair across from me, when a girl of five-foot eight started talking to me, I responded, and it ended up being a six-year long relationship. And all this happened in a public place, and neither of us had planned to pick up anyone there. It's just that there was a little help, some beer drinking, a bit of this, a bit of that, some good music. Okay, so be it!

R: So you plunged into the gay and lesbian life of Budapest?

MH: There was no need to really plunge into it, because after that I had long-term relationships. I'm probably designed for five-year periods; that is, I get along really well with someone for five years, and then the momentum can carry me on for a sixth or a seventh year, but after that it's better to say goodbye. I have tended to have long-term relationships, if five or six years count as 'long'. These I spent with a circle of friends and having parties and not with serious dating. After a certain point the urge just wasn't there any more. This was at the beginning and at the end. If this thing has a beginning, then it has an end, as well. Now, at the end, I can afford myself to be independent before drawing the shutters. You really do some crazy stuff, almost like you did when you were young, though I hope I'm not that ridiculous, just a bit freer. I'd like to complete the arc with a cheerful, light-hearted, non-committed merrymaking and partying.

R: Besides the University Café, there were also private parties. Were these exclusively gay and lesbian parties?

MH: Not exclusively, I'd rather say it was fifty-fifty. But for us here it was still pretty hard to organize both of them together. I spent a lot of time in Germany, partly because I knew a lot of people there, but also because I encountered such an incredibly free spirit there, which couldn't be found here at home. And I'm not talking about the FKK⁸⁰ – that while here a woman didn't dare to take off her bikini top, in Germany half of the country was going to the beach totally naked. We simply went to various parties, at New Year's or whenever, and there in the building we met completely normal heterosexual couples who came over happily, and we had a great time together. The host was a well-known homosexual, as was his partner and friends; they loved one another. I kept gasping the first few times, because it was a miracle. Everyone knew everything about everybody, and the screw factory worker husband and his typist wife came along to that party, as well, and it didn't bother them for a single moment that they were at this special place. And vice versa. Our parties here in Hungary were more of the 'specialized' type. Here it would have never occurred to me to invite my upstairs neighbour, who I met every day and got along very well with. In Germany that was the thing – at clubs, too. In Germany you didn't have to go to a specialized place to meet special people. You could go to whichever 'the' place was at the time, and nobody was bothered if two girls or two boys danced together. It was unbelievable! There was such a huge void here in Hungary about this issue! That's why specialized places opened later on, 'private places' in other words. In Germany there was no need for that. You could find places like that, but there was no need.

R: Which Germany were you visiting?

MH: That was the eighties, when it was still East Germany. Back then it was really easy to get there: you just hopped over to the airport and whoosh, you were in Berlin, or in Leipzig or Dresden. I have really good memories about this period, and it really helped me a lot. I still have lots of close friends over there, even though it was quite a long time ago.

R: Why do you think the parties in Hungary were 'specialized'?

⁸⁰ FKK (Freie Körperkultur): nude sunbathing, a common custom in Germany.

MH: I think that Germans were much more open in every respect. For example, I remember seeing there both boys and girls wearing very cool hairstyles at the time, but here it would've been out of the question – at most, two crazy people would have the courage to appear like that, but then the whole town would freeze and stare at them. No matter that there was an East Germany and a West Germany, that thin little wall couldn't prevent certain things. It did prevent some things though, you couldn't jump over, for a start. But it couldn't really turn the mentality and the philosophy into an Eastern European one. I think that Hungarian mentality is still not that tolerant. It's more open, sure, but not tolerant. At best people just shrug, grumble less, and don't express their disgust as loudly. But only less! We're far from accepting homosexuality as completely natural. The way I see it, in Hungary the biggest problem is that if people get to know about your orientation, they immediately start seeing it through sexuality. The first thing people think of is the bedroom: "Oh my god, what might those two men do in bed?!" "What might these two women do in bed?!" If the topic is heterosexual relationships when one is having a coffee with her female colleague, they won't start discussing different positions and the number of orgasms, or what their husbands can or can't do. Why do people judge being gay or lesbian in such a way that no matter who you talk to, you can see on their faces that they shut the door and a film immediately starts rolling in their mind: "Geez, what might they do in bed?" If people wouldn't think like that, it may be much easier for them to understand. No, not to understand: what's there to understand? Some people like their tea with milk and sugar, while some prefer it plain. Which one is disgusting? Some like it this way, and others like it the other way. When I'm in a company where this topic comes up – I never bring it up – there's a certain point when I ask, "I'm sorry, but could you please explain to me what it is exactly that's disgusting and revolting and repulsive?" What is terrible? What you don't know. But if they don't know anything about it, why do they express an opinion? And not just a casual opinion, but a firm, unshakeable opinion, which has no grounds whatsoever.

R: So, there was the University Café, and you started getting to know more and more people...

MH: After a while the University Café stopped being the sole power in the market, because as we were marching out of the eighties, things became a little more relaxed, more and more places opened. But interestingly, even though there were two other venues – because we didn't start off with a hundred at once – the University Café still retained its magic. It maintained a sort of hegemony, which it probably kept for a long time. The University Café was a first-class venue. Your social status weighed in very heavily when it came to the question of where you could go. Because some places were more of meeting spots for the 'subculture', if we use that word pejoratively, while other places – again, it sounds really bad to say more 'elite' – were a better fit in terms of the people who went there, and you'd enjoy yourself a lot more there.

R: Were there such groups within the lesbian community?

MH: Of course, there were! To put it bluntly, the masses of uneducated, unwashed, stupid people went to clubs of the 'B' type and had a good time among their own kind. And the 'A'-type people never went to those places, because they didn't enjoy themselves there. But this has nothing to do with

gender identity. Nor does this mean that you think of yourself as being above others. If I'm irritated and frustrated by bad language, masculine behaviour, vulgarity and drunkenness, then I won't go there. Not because I consider myself better, but simply because I don't enjoy being there. This is not about segregation. Obviously, these groups split; it's just natural. I think that there are lesbians in all social strata and everyone feels at home in their own social strata. And they'll go and seek out places – be they private parties or public clubs – where they can find their own people.

R: Did you go to Ipoly Cinema?

MH: There were some really great parties at Ipoly Cinema. There were a lot of those. When no films were screened, the owners would take advantage of the facilities to have performances. There was a stage, an auditorium, the required technology. It was ideal, really, for those who had something to perform, like drag shows or something. Back then these were very very new and interesting, and that's how Ipoly Cinema pioneered the way. These events happened quite frequently, which, of course, predetermined a certain kind of audience. I think that the owner and operator of Ipoly Cinema and her large and wide circle of friends predetermined what kind of people would go there. There you never encountered anything like "Beg your pardon, this is a private event, please leave." Just the opposite: the news got around by phone: "C'mon kids, there's a party at Ipoly Cinema." It was quite a large, wide circle of people, but it was still the Ipoly circle. All circles meet somewhere, at least for a little bit, according to set theory. Oddly enough, it wasn't like that in this particular case, or rather just tangentially. These circles were quite separated. They weren't closed circles but circles of friends, and they didn't really mix with other circles.

R: Why was that?

MH: All I can say is that if I feel better in the company of horse people, where we talk about horses and everything related to that, then I won't seek out the company of cat lovers, where they will talk day and night about cats. This doesn't rule out the possibility of good conversation between people, but in general they won't seek out each other's company, because I feel more at home in the company of the horse lovers, where hobby and the field of interest is the determining factor.

R: So someone called and said there was going to be a party at Ipoly Cinema. That's how information got around?

MH: Precisely. Just like today, when you click on your email, and there are thirty-three new messages that are invitations to something. We didn't have computers back then, so it spread around by phone that there'll be a party at Ipoly Cinema on Saturday night, at this or that hour.

R: And what were the parties in Ipoly Cinema like? Was there anything different about them compared to other places, like clubs and bars?

MH: No. The parties at Ipoly were like a big private house party. Who would ever own an apartment where eighty people could comfortably squeeze in? There were several floors, a room with tables where people would come and go, chatting, music, dancing. The second part was the bar with barstools, where we could sit and drink and talk, and in the third part there were sofas, and you could sit down and talk, or just have a stroll around. You can't really have that in an apartment. The space of Ipoly Cinema – the floors, the stage, the

auditorium, and several halls – they were all suitable for various groups with different tastes to have fun. You could listen to music, dance or talk.

R: Did they show films, too?

MH: There never was anything like a special film screening and discussion. It was more like when the normal screening was over and the cinema closed for regular business, that's when 'the Party' started.

R: Were the parties mixed, or women-only? Were there any straight people there?

MH: No, not women-only. But there were no straight people. Why would they be there? The purpose was to enjoy ourselves in our own group. In Hungary in the eighties, a mixed gay and straight company was unimaginable. Today it's an everyday thing to see two girls dancing together. But back then it would have caught everyone's attention: "Why are those two girls dancing together? Girls shouldn't dance together!" And two boys? Now, that was even worse!

R: Was there ever any aggression?

MH: Oh, that's real ugly! There are few uglier things than a woman who's deliberately aggressive. Like she starts fighting. I was very lucky not to get involved in situations like that. So if a woman starts breaking glasses or displaying other kinds of aggression like that, then I immediately put her in the 'boor' category. And the two of us should never ever pair up!

R: Have you noticed a difference in how people behaved in the seventies and eighties and how they act today?

MH: There's no difference whatsoever. Anyone who was a stupid boor in 1653 will still be a stupid boor in 1983, and in 2009 they'll still be antisocial idiots with zero IQ who can't behave. I don't think there's any difference in that respect. Well, maybe the difference is that today people can afford to do lots of things because they know perfectly well that at worst they'll just go home if they don't like something. Back then they couldn't really do that, because they would have been kicked out within thirteen seconds. That may have been a factor to restrain some. Another issue is that if such things occurred at private parties, then it was up to you to never again invite people who might behave that way. Even alcohol consumption wouldn't justify such obnoxious behaviour. Maybe someone will get a little grumpy, but then she'll just go out to the balcony to smoke a cigarette and simmer down, all because of the way my girlfriend looked at her girlfriend. But that was the end of it. They'd sort it out at home, talk it over. But having a fight or hurling furniture – no way.

R: The gay movement came to life at the end of the eighties, when Homeros, for example, was founded. Did you know about these organizations?

MH: Of course. And I really didn't like it. I don't like it when they drag me along and tell me when and where to go, and not just to protest, but how to express myself. I express myself in my environment the way that I should. I just don't like this organized stuff. Of course I knew about Homeros and all the others, I just couldn't really identify with them. I'm of the same attitude even today: that I have an accepted identity, and there are people who are similar to me in this respect, but I'm not willing to row in the same boat with them, because I have really strong aversion to them, to put it mildly. Just because that lady likes ladies and so do I, that's not really a good enough a reason to drink from the same cup. We are worlds apart. I wouldn't like to have my self-expression grouped with anyone else's. I've always objected to that, and this has nothing

to do with age; I was twenty-something, thirtyish then. My views have obviously grown more refined and maybe less flexible since then, but I really don't like it when this thing is swept together under big movements, and just because you're one of us, let's get out together. For some reason I really object to that.

R: And you never felt lonely like that?

MH: No, I didn't feel lonely at all! I had wide and narrow circles of friends. If I'd ever felt the urge, I would surely have joined such communities, because there I would be able to mingle with similar people. But I don't always like mingling with similar people, because there are still huge differences in how we think. So, of course, I won't go! Why would I?

R: Then how were you able to meet people?

MH: I met my first girlfriend at work, and the second in a public place. All the rest I met through my circle of friends. Where else? It wasn't ever like I just hopped on the tram, saw the ticket inspector, and thought I had two options: either I tell her that 'I love you' and get away without a fine, or I have to pay. It doesn't go like that.

R: You mentioned that you are leading a more adventurous life nowadays.

MH: Currently I have no interest in relationships of the marriage type. I've had quite enough of that. There are some advantages to that, as well as some disadvantages – I've tried it all. I'd rather say that I'm leading a more relaxed life; I allow myself many things, in the sense that if the beginning was fun, then the ending should be the same. In other words, I'm not interested in any commitments, and any relationship I start is quite open. By openness I don't mean that I'm cheating left and right, but that she should be immensely tolerant so that I don't have to give account of everything. I never lie about anything, so nobody's deceived. But I don't want to run to the bathroom to make a call, and I don't want anyone to check my phone. That's what I can offer; if you want it, take it, if not, then don't. I accept that. I'm not nagging or leeching on anyone, and that's all I ask in return, nothing more.

R: Back then there weren't really any codes for how lesbians should behave or dress. What do you think about this, and how did you see it then?

MH: One of the most shocking things for me was that when I looked around, I saw that such women were incredibly masculine. In their behaviour, their dress, their manners, their movements, everything! You don't like women because you want a man grafted onto a woman. It was a big disappointment that in many cases you couldn't find any traces of femininity! It was unbelievable. It was unpleasant. Which, again, lead to a series of self-checks and soul-searching because it filled you with doubts even if you knew that you really didn't like that kind of behaviour. Obviously, if this is your orientation, you won't necessarily wear a ruffled blouse and a skirt. But it certainly had its extremes. It's when you tell yourself that okay, I'll just take a deep breath now, count till ten and go home. Because I'm just not interested, I'm actually repulsed! By all means, there were much fewer women who were feminine in their looks, dress and behaviour.

R: Why do you think women were like that?

MH: I don't know. Maybe the women who represented their identity in their external appearance, as well, were glad that it made it easier to be visible in public and meet women. If you look boyish, it's easier to get acquainted with

other lesbians, they're not alone; they recognize one another. But when there were already many of them, they still didn't manage to tame that appearance and behaviour which they represented. And – though this is obviously only my opinion – that had nothing to do with femininity! Not just their appearance, but their behaviour which emphasized their looks. Because if a really really feminine woman dresses in men's clothes, she'll still be a woman. Even more so, she will be interestingly piquant, but still absolutely a woman. But if a woman emphasizes her manly appearance, movement, gestures, behaviour and looks with a masculine dress; well I simply can't imagine anything worse than that. It's just terrible! And there's no difference today, either! Only that today it's around age 14-19 that you have these free-for-all parties, where a twenty-year-old girl is already an old hag. It's at a really young age, around 17, where you can see girls behaving and talking and dressing in that really unwomanly manner: it's just not feminine. Inside they're men, period. Now, if they feel masculine inside, they'll obviously express themselves in a manly way, as well.

R: Do you think that among lesbian women there are some who feel like a man inside and some who feel like a woman?

MH: Absolutely! And there are also women who look absolutely feminine but have masculine thinking and behaviour. Of course! And it's very pleasant, too. Women should be able to think independently and use a screwdriver. It's not like you just stand by and start shrieking in a high-pitched voice because your femininity predestines you to being incapable and helpless. Being feminine doesn't mean you're a Barbie doll with an IQ of 16. At least that's not the way I see it. I've never felt like being a man inside. Never. If assertivity or knowing your way around things instead of calling for help immediately means that you are not feminine, then I'd disagree with that, because I really don't think that this is the case. It's not being unconfident, needing constant protection or vigilance, needing help and escorting around that makes a woman a woman.

R: What do you think makes someone a woman then?

MH: That she's a woman! That it radiates from her every pore that she's a woman. She has the soul of a woman, the expression of a woman, and the thoughts of a woman. She can't help but think like a woman. She has this terrible, almost dangerous level of empathy. That the two of you are birds of a feather, to such a degree that it is sometimes astonishing, almost as if she could read your mind. What kind of a question is that, anyway? What makes a woman? XX chromosomes, of course.

R: Is it the same for everyone, what makes them a woman?

MH: Obviously not, because there are women – quite many, actually – who prefer women with a more masculine personality. Obviously there are reasons for this, but it's alien to me. I like women to be women and men to be men, and the half-man, half-woman cocktail is really not my thing! I don't mix the two. Not because my religion forbids it, but because I don't like it. If I like women, they should be unquestionably women. By my definition, of course. This doesn't mean that I whine, I'm hysterical, I make scenes, or that I only buy pink stuff. A woman should be a woman at six in the morning, and she should be a woman when she's damn tired, too. I'm really lucky for having had such lovely girlfriends! I'm very sensitive about masculine actions and movements; they repel me for some reason! I can't stand them. And I've always been in such a privileged position, that none of my girlfriends ever had

any of those! What do I mean by a masculine motion? Anything! For example the way she touches her ear, or reaches for her cup, or opens the fridge. It's my problem, not hers. If that's what you're like, then you can't really help it. You can easily lose yourself in the smallest of motions: in a position of the head, in a grimace, in basically anything, because it's so perfectly feminine. Beautiful. I think it's so beautiful.

R: And why do you like women?

MH: I adore women. I don't know what to say. It's not her body that matters! That's a really difficult question. It's always been enough for me that they're women. I swear to god, I've never thought about why I like women. They're sweet and lovely, a bit hysterical, very empathic, very very intuitive and very kind. I can't answer that, because I really don't have any negative experience with men which might have pushed me in this direction. Wanting to try and do something else, because here I get a hug and over there I don't, because men always want to fuck right away, and women don't. I've never had such problems. Genetics. My sister, who's really sweet and lovely, I really love her and we come from the same stock – well, if there's such a thing as a 4000% heterosexual, then she's just that. Now what can I do about that? I have no idea. Maybe it was my great-grandmother. Maybe they got tangled up with old mama Mancini, but they never had the chance to express themselves. And all this passed through the generations to me.

R: Have you felt good in your skin during your life?

MH: I haven't had any problems with it. Maybe that's what counts. And in my skin? Well, I might feel better if it were eight sizes smaller.



1975



1981



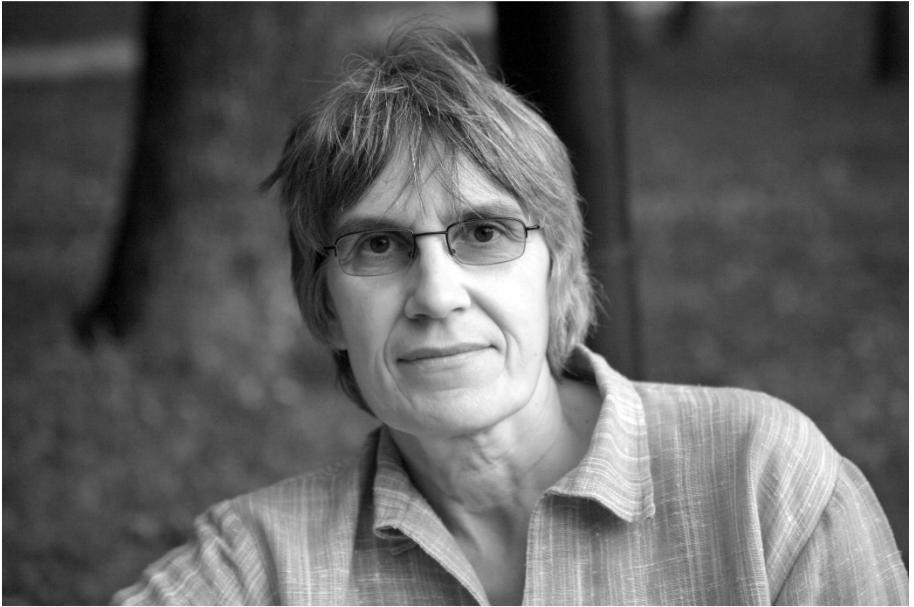
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1980-as évek eleje



“I am a woman the way I want to be” Györgyi Kövesi (b. 1957)

R: Where are we and why did you choose this place?

GYK: We are in the Orczy Garden, because this is a nice place where I often go out. I live near here. This is where I usually come out to have a walk or sunbathe, and sometimes I even come jogging here. There’s a small pond, a bit of water, which is very important.

R: Where did you get your bracelet?

GYK: I got this one just today. I had it made, rather. Somebody made it for me on order, weaved it by hand. It’s a rainbow bracelet. It’s got a nice little leather clasp, an adjustable one, it’s really great: if I gain or lose ten kilos, I’ll still be able to clasp it on. I have other rainbow stuff as well, but this is the only one I’m wearing right now.

R: What does the rainbow mean to you?

GYK: The rainbow means diversity. My room is full of rainbow-coloured this-and-that, all sorts of stuff: postcards, small flags, bracelets, scarves. I collect them. It’s an important symbol of the gay movement, if this is what you wanted me to say. But diversity is more important for me, I have always loved rainbows. If you allow me a moment to digress, the rainbow room is a very nice memory of mine. In Russian the rainbow room is *radujnaya komnata*, and it was a meeting hall in Camphill village, where the mentally disabled adults and their helpers gathered together couple of times a week and discussed whatever had to be discussed.⁸¹ We used to celebrate there, and there was a huge rainbow painted on the wall. Just so that we don’t talk about the many colours of the rainbow only in the context of the gay movement.

R: When and how did you first realize that you were a lesbian? Would you say ‘lesbian’ or would you use another word?

GYK: It wasn’t such a great discovery when I realized. I was wondering who and what I was, I called myself many things: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay and questioning. For the last eight or ten years I have said I live as a lesbian, that’s who I am. I have lived as a heterosexual, as well. My first great love interest was a girl. To put it simply, it was my first great emotional turmoil which was not about loss but about love. In retrospect I could call it lesbian love, but back then we didn’t call ourselves lesbians. This happened when I was around sixteen or seventeen. Back then we didn’t really give names to who and what we were. We were a bit frightened of it.

R: To whom and when did you first talk about your lesbianness?

GYK: During my university years I talked to my lover at the time about being different and functioning differently. We weren’t searching for our identities, nor were we looking for a group or companions, we were rather evasive about the topic. We considered it a problem. We talked about our emotions, that what we felt was love, but not a heterosexual kind. This was a problem which needed a solution. We did not consider it a solution to join other people or strengthen

⁸¹ Györgyi worked in a Camphill community in Russia for half a year in 2007. The Camphill Movement is an initiative for social change based on the principles of anthroposophy. Camphill communities are residential communities and schools that provide support for the education, employment, and daily lives of adults and children with developmental disabilities, mental health problems or other special needs.

ourselves; we wanted to solve the problem itself. By waiting, by hoping we would recover, we would get over it. We didn't really manage to get over it, but the thing passed more or less, as such things do. Then it did not seem like something we could live with. We distanced ourselves, we took different paths. But we did talk about it and we read a lot. We talked about others, we picked examples from literature, saying that this was what Shakespeare's poems were about, as well. We identified everyone: Sappho and company, actors, famous people. But we never wanted to regard ourselves as parallels, to address ourselves directly. We lived through it, it was good, we were a bit afraid and ashamed, we were hiding it as well as ourselves. We both searched for various other things. She was looking for men, too; at the time I had a boyfriend, whom I also married later on. He was a good guy, I loved him; he appeared to be a more natural, more liveable, freer solution. A more natural, more fearless, more relaxed solution for a relationship.

R: Did any of your friends or family members know about this university relationship?

GYK: My family didn't know anything, I wasn't living at home. I was living in a dorm, I rarely visited home and I didn't share these stories with my parents. I think the people in the dorm knew. If they didn't shut their eyes and ears they must have known about it, because we gave visible and audible signs about the two of us being together, even if we had to hide. We had lots of common space with others. But it was never verbalized! What I know for certain is that one of our roommates moved out of the four-bed room where the two of us lived. She gave a hint that she was bothered by this. Despite the fact that we didn't have sex in front of them, we had a degree of intimacy that was difficult to hide. There was only one time we were caught directly. Not in front of people we knew, but some young guys threw things at us and called us some ugly names. It was humiliating and upsetting, we had to run quickly to the nearest pub and wash the experience down with a series of shots. We were trembling, we were so scared that they'd beat us up. We had been kissing in each other's arms, down at the bank of the River Tisza, this was our big love scene. The guys came from above on bicycles, yelled at us, called us names and were coming down, and that's when we turned tail. That was all the publicity we had.

R: There were no other reactions like this?

GYK: I had none, not this humiliating. However, the Pride March is our present, where I've been called all kinds of names, not as a person but as a participant, for simply being there. Everyone can experience humiliation as a homosexual, but those who participate in the Pride can have the direct experience – with eggs and curses. The reason why I didn't have humiliating experiences in the past was that I lived a heterosexual life for a long time. Not because I was hiding, but because I made a choice. I had children, and for nearly twenty years I lived a publicly acceptable life. I was a respectable mother, living in a normal relationship. We had a balanced marriage and we loved our children; I was raising children and that engaged me for quite a long time. This part of my life was peaceful, calm and painless. The difficulties I encountered had nothing to do with gayness. I had problems with my family; there were financial difficulties to overcome.

R: Back to your first love: how did you meet her, how did the two of you appear in public, how much did you hide?

GYK: We were hiding a lot. It was a high-school dormitory: we hid in the ironing room, in the staircase at the back, in empty rooms, in the toilet, in small study rooms. We were seeking each other's company. Sometimes we even took some blankets and used them as barricades and made a hut for ourselves around the bed. It was typical hiding. Hiding, yes, though others were present, only we blanketed ourselves out of sight. We cuddled at night. She didn't live in my room, but at nights she came over to my bed and we snuggled together. Then she moved out of the dorm. She was removed to another one and she started dating guys. It was really hard for me at the time. She told me she had a boyfriend. It was a really deep entanglement with sweeping emotions, but it didn't include physicality beyond kissing. We didn't start having sex in the classic sense, because we didn't dare or didn't know how to. It was a great love experience for both of us. Later on she got married, had children, and moved to America at the age of twenty-eight; she still lives there. I was searching for her, just to know where she was and to discuss what had really happened between the two of us! This was our first great emotional adventure: what did she feel and why, what were we doing there, what happened to us back then? As an adult I could talk about it, and I really wanted to, felt the need to, but I could never find her. After thirty years she came home and sought me out. The story ended after thirty years. We met and it was a passionate rediscovery of each other. It was strange. I felt like having a complete emotional relapse, like returning to my seventeen-year-old self, while my brain was functioning on a forty-something-year-old level. I had an inner self which was watching what I was doing: I was watching myself, asking, 'what's happening to me?' I was split in two. And then our love affair was completed: we found each other sexually, and it lasted for a year or two in a way that she was either in America or here at home. Then we could talk it out; put everything straight, the whole story slid into place. What I found really surprising was that at the age of forty-six or forty-eight I could relapse to an emotional level of a seventeen-year-old. I caught sight of her, heard her voice, "Oh my god, she's here! There was nothing between us for the past thirty years!" It was very strange and very joyful. It is a gift. I thought it was impossible! This is not a gay specialty; it is a heterosexual custom that a teenage love can be fulfilled after thirty years. Now we are in a friendly correspondence. If she returned to my life, it's quite possible that the same thing would happen over and over again. I couldn't possibly live with her, I still don't think that she could be my partner, but something really strongly moved in me emotionally, and my brain is protesting, like 'Oh, come on!' She is very different from those who I usually enjoy being with, she is a completely insufferable woman, but she is the one! That's it.

R: How important is your homosexuality to you? Is it a primary identity, a partial identity?

GYK: Sometimes I think that it is very important, very determinant. Not just the fact that I want to live as a lesbian, but that I want to do something about it, for the whole cause. It was the same when I lived as a heterosexual: I always felt that something needs to be done for the cause of minorities, against social exclusion. Be they Gypsies or children or old people. For instance, it's really infuriating when an adult comes to stand before children in the line at the shop. How can he be such a jerk to do such a thing? Just because it's a child. Paying respect to adults just because you're a kid also made me furious when I

was young. Why the hell should I respect that adult just because he is an adult, when at the same time he is an unbearable jerk? I was the kid who liked Russian language when everybody else hated it. My parents were divorced: I was a kid who grew up in a village, in simple surroundings; a kid who loved reading and who had to fight just to get into the library, because it was closed and there were no books. Weird things like that.

It is important that as a gay I have to stand up for gays, as a woman I have to stand up for women, against how they are treated in society. I struggled with myself time and again, not wanting to be a woman like other women. It would be an interesting discussion to analyse how this is connected to being gay, but I don't want to engage in academic discussions. First I didn't want to identify with womanhood, but I really wanted to have children. I started to appreciate being a woman when I realized that it's a great gift, indeed, because I can give birth to children, which is very exciting. I can breastfeed, that's also great. There are so many interesting things in being a woman, so I came to terms with it. But my professional identity as a teacher is just as important. I regard it as a vocation. My green identity is just as important. When I am with gays, be they boys or girls, I always feel that this is my community. When I step out of this community – and I have experienced this a couple of times during gay events – I feel that out there on the streets they're calling us 'faggots', while in there it's 'our people'. It's a real harsh, sharp division. I get out there and I have to get rid of my rainbow-colored stuff, I can't continue in the same jargon, I can't embrace my beloved in the same relaxed manner, I cannot kiss her, like I could in that sheltering space or milieu that I was in before. To what extent I can be natural and honest, how much I have to control my words and expressions, these have a lot to do with how you experience your gayness. Over the years you can learn to lie a lot, learn to check every sentence before uttering it, all gay people know how to do that. In my experience, some people can get out of this. For some it takes less time, for some it takes years, and then some can't go on living a double life where they have a false life and another one, which takes place behind closed doors. I had a time like this, too.

R: How do you relate to men now?

GYK: Every year I see two men who are really very attractive, that's the proportion more or less. With whom I can imagine getting close to each other. Attractive in the sense that I can see that he's interesting and I want to get closer. Yes, about two. And I see twenty women. I am on good terms with my male colleagues, I discuss things with men. I had male friends during primary school and university, as well. I like male students, too, there are some great boys at school, and we get along really well. It's terrible how boys are raised: it's a complete failure and a disaster. What they will become is scary to see; nothing good will come out of this. I try to soften them up a bit, make them a little more sensitive, but they are in a real big trouble. "You have to make a lot of money; that's the only way to become a man" – these are the expectations they grow up with, "You have to prove that you can earn a lot of money." Another thing that I consider terrible is that "you must never cry, and you must not become a sissy!" These are the two things with which it's really easy to make people into stupid, aggressive beasts, and boys stand quite a good chance for that. It takes a lot of work to counter this, so that they don't become careerist, aggressive, violent, and sexist. To make them think in a way that 'this

is another human being', not just a chick or a woman. Personally, I don't have bad experiences with the men I have met. My boss was a man, awfully soft and a good educator, he loved me very much and I liked him, too. I have a good relationship with my husband, as well; he is a soft man, too. I am a tougher woman, he is a softer man, it's a good match. Gay men are clearly different from straights – this is obviously a stereotype. But if I had to choose who to spend a longer time with, I would choose gay men. They're more sensitive, softer and nicer; they show much more of themselves and are easier to communicate with. I'd rather not give a generalized opinion about straight guys or about guys in general. Women are the minority, but men are more defenceless, despite the fact that they have the power and they can make important decisions. I pity the man who is led by his dick. It must be a terrible feeling: you are just standing there, your brain shuts down and your dick takes over. This is an extremely defenceless position; I've never seen anything like this in women, not even when in love. Men are much more enslaved to their own bodies.

R: You've mentioned that your marriage was a conscious choice; you wanted to live in a 'normal' relationship.

GYK: I got married when I was twenty-five and we lived together for fifteen or sixteen years. It was a long, slow process of getting distanced from each other; officially I got divorced only this year, after thirty years. These nearly twenty years were spent together in a stable heterosexual relationship. Before the marriage I told my husband about my previous lesbian life, that this is my story. He knew about it, it wasn't a pig in a poke. The marriage was working well, we were a good match; I would rather say that it ran out of fuel. I never cheated on him; bisexuality doesn't mean what most people think, that once you are with a boy, another time with a girl. While I'm with a particular person, I'm with that particular person, be it a man or a woman, I don't do swaps. The marriage worked, I was occupied with raising children, which really tied me down, there were family programs, and I spent a lot of time with my father. I took care of him for ten years. When he died and my children grew up, my new story began, which I wanted much more than to continue with my marriage. I thought that this was a new period, something I had to live through, that this was part of me, as well. I wanted to be with a woman.

R: Where could you meet other lesbians?

GYK: My meeting with the real community was parallel to getting to know *Labrisz*. I had no gay acquaintances, apart from the two girls I had had love affairs with. There were no gays in my neighbourhood, although from childhood I was familiar with the term that "this guy, well they say that he's gay". Or there were the celebrities, who were out. It was common knowledge about several singers. Like about Hilda Gobbi: it was in the air, but never verbalized. I tried to find literature on the topic; I rather read than looked for living, human contacts or a community. *Labrisz* was the first place where I found people that I could talk to openly, with whom I could identify, who said that it's no problem at all. I could talk about myself without discomfort and attend events together with my partner.

R: When did you find *Labrisz*?

GYK: Around the time it was founded. As a straight-out liberal and leftist inclined person I was a regular reader of the magazine *Magyar Narancs*;⁸² it was there that I first read about the group *NINCS*,⁸³ which later became *Habeas Corpus Working Group*.⁸⁴ These were my first contacts. They advertised open discussions for everyone interested, that's how I found them. I went to these talks, and I didn't really like them. Then I was able to lay my hands on the first *Labrisz Newsletter*, which was a xeroxed paper with only a few pages. I read some articles that I liked there, I started correspondence with them, found out where they held their meetings, and once, with shaking legs, I went to see what these meetings were like. I saw lots of young and older people there. My first fears passed. I could see that they wouldn't jump on me, they wouldn't bite and run me down with questions like "and who are you?", but you talked only if you wanted to. It had a good atmosphere, so I stayed. Soon after the designing of the school program "Getting to Know LGBT People" started off, and as a teacher I could be there right from the very beginning. Since then this story is a well-integrated, affectionate part of my life which I am open about, I couldn't really imagine my life without it. Unless perhaps if I travelled to the end of the world and lived alone on a small island.

R: What was it like when you 'entered' *Labrisz* or the first lesbian community?

GYK: This was in 2000. It was empowering. People talked to me, asked me questions, I could talk with them, I enjoyed it. I really liked the discussions at the *Labrisz Evenings*. Partially it was about communal alcohol consumption, which I didn't really like; there were debaucheries, which we don't really have any more. Or perhaps it's me who has turned into an outgoing, drinking type and I don't notice. I felt good because people knew how to address me, there were people to talk to. I met people with whom I could connect intellectually, as well. It's really very important that I didn't go there to pick up girls, I wasn't looking for a partner, but I wanted to see for myself who these lesbians were, what they looked like, how they behaved, how they talked. I wanted to talk to 'such' people, discover what it's like to live that way. It was important that I met intelligent and nice women. So relationships formed, as well. It's been very important in all of my relationships that she would be an intellectual partner and that she could give me something which I could admire. This could something be intellectual or a kind of creative power which I lack but I find fascinating.

R: Did you felt *Labrisz* was a real community? Could you make friends there?

GYK: Yes. My circle of friends was transformed, because I preferred to be among people with whom I didn't have to constrain myself so much. Now I have much more gay friends than straight ones. Those old straight friends of mine who I could come out to have remained my friends, thank god. If I have a choice I usually opt for a gay event – when friends are concerned and it's not particularly about the event. If it's about the event, it really doesn't matter

⁸² *Magyar Narancs* [Hungarian Orange]: a liberal Hungarian weekly. Its title refers to the 'Hungarian lemon', a major motif of the renowned Hungarian film, *A Tanú* [The Witness], directed by Péter Bacsó (1977).

⁸³ *NINCS: Nemi Identitás Nélküliek Csoportja* [Group of Genderless People], a short-lived informal group formed in 1995 for people and ideas outside the prevailing categories of gender and sexual orientation.

⁸⁴ *Habeas Corpus Working Group* (HCM): a civic and human rights association working for sexual minorities' and women's equal rights. It was founded in 1996 and it dissolved in 2008.

whether it's gay or straight. I have more and deeper emotional relations with gay people.

R: You joined this community around 2000. Could you draw a comparison, what was it like now and what is it like today? Do you see any difference?

GYK: I wouldn't say that its profile has changed much. Perhaps it is involved in more things. Earlier there were no film projects, for example. It has transformed a bit, but not in spirit. The people who have stayed in *Labrisz* are traditionalists in the sense that they have stayed with the original spirit and values. There's always room for something new, but the really wild new things have been done outside the frame of the association. Its orientation hasn't changed, it has always stood for social awareness-raising and advocacy. Also, there's a very strong cultural focus, it was there back then and it's still there today. I don't see a big change. It would be better if there were more of us: then perhaps we could do more kinds of things.

R: Did issues like women's rights or women's solidarity, feminism, gender topics, or relating to political movements emerge back then?

GYK: Yes, in the sense that the first members were devoted feminists. Also, it was a feminist or a women's organization, *NANE*, which first gave home to *Labrisz*. Our first members were strongly connected either to *NANE* or to the feminist movement. There are still some who are. We have had several discussions about such topics, there are [feminist] programs, and *Labrisz* is integrated into the women's network. I don't think that it had any political allegiance, not that I remember. We've been always glad when any political party started talking about gays and equal opportunities, and that something should be done for us in legislation, the issue should be dealt with. But I wouldn't say that we've been the voting base for any of the parties. It felt good that someone paid attention to us, as well. I usually vote for small parties, regardless whether they talk about homosexuality or not: small liberal parties.

R: How important would you say it is or was to establish the life of an independent woman for yourself, financially and emotionally?

GYK: I find it very important and I've always done so. I think I've managed to work it out, as much as I could. I lived with a man who had no problem with me not taking up his name; he had no problem with doing the dishes, cleaning or ironing. It's been a problem in society, at work, at school, in the wider family. It's an essential part of being an independent woman that if I live in a relationship, I let the other be and do what he wants. I dare to be who I want to be. I dare to say no to traditional female roles. And if I don't – I was at home for five years on maternity leave –, then I do it because I want to, it is my own free choice. I thought I was free to have my own money, my own ways, my own friends, my own personal training programs. I talk it over with my partner, but I don't think that I need to ask for his permission and make it depend on his approval. Concerning self-training, for instance, he never said, 'You have children, don't go for trainings, stay at home.' I could train myself a lot, I could travel, he took care of the children too, it was not a problem. I can say that I was lucky in this respect.

I did have and still have questions about the essence of female existence. I see women: lots of things that don't make me happy give them joy. She buys a new dress, takes her time to pose in front of the mirror, puts on make-up the way she thinks her man will like it, and this gives her joy. Or she makes a meal

and serves it to her partner, and this makes her happy, too. Men compliment her, tell her stupid stuff, help her get on, help her get off; and it makes her happy, too. It disturbs me. I often think that I'm a misshapen woman because these things don't give me joy. Flowers on Women's Day simply drive me crazy! I don't want Women's Day flowers from anyone! This year one of my pupils said, "Well, real women like it." I was sitting there in front of the class and I was informed by him that I'm not a real woman because Women's Day flowers don't make me happy. We continued the conversation: what makes a real woman, what this flower is about; that I like flowers and they can bring some for me any time, if it's a sign of respect. But not because I'm a woman, but because they like me, or they know that I like flowers, or simply because they're having a great day and they feel happy about something and they'd like to share their happiness with me. Flowers would really make me happy if I didn't receive them on Women's Day or Teachers' Day, as something mandatory. I'm a woman the way I want to be. It's good that sometimes I can wear a skirt, too, not just pants; this is part of the game. I haven't been a 'real woman'. Women can move gracefully; I move in an awkward, lumpy way, I'm angular, not soft and plump. But it's possible to be attractive that way, too. I see many women who are not typical-looking, and they can look really great: they are unashamed of being fat or bald or a smoker.

R: Why did you join women's, green and other activist movements?

GYK: So that we do something more than our jobs. We should take more care of the people, objects, nature and the artificial environment in our surroundings. I started late, already as an adult. What proved to be decisive was the fact that I belong to a minority and I pay attention to human rights. I've always had the urge in me, I wrote my MA thesis about the value orientation of children in state care. I visited children in state care; I took care of them and took them home for summer. I felt we had a shared fate, I felt that I had also lost my family. I became distanced from my family during high school; I was left to my own devices. When I was at home on maternity leave, I was interested in old people in the village. My parents were growing old and I thought that I should record them on video, so that they could tell about their war years, their joys and sorrows, because they would die. At school I became the supporting teacher of the students' council. I took the kids to various courses, I motivated them, I founded a human rights students' circle. I always made my voice heard at work, at the faculty, or at home, when people uttered various exclusionary remarks or stereotypical views. I have two sisters, all of us got married, and all of us kept our family names. This is something I inherited from the family, from my mother. I started dealing with eco issues more consciously after I met András Lányi⁸⁵ at the ethics training course. It was seven or eight years ago, not such a long time; though all I have to do is remember my childhood in the countryside, how my grandparents lived on their farm, how my mother lived. It was a careful, sparing, environment-conscious and harmless country way of life. Two or three years ago I thought that I wanted to deal with the mentally disabled, that I wanted to live among them. I suspended my work and went abroad. I didn't want to become a theoretician;

⁸⁵ András Lányi (b. 1948): writer and philosopher, writing and acting in the fields of ecology and environment protection.

I wanted to experience things, to see what they're like. This year I'm engaged with the Jewish issue in more depth. I have always picked and chosen a slice of human rights issues. I've never been a feminist, though there was one year when I got involved with *NANE*, I did some activism with them and learned a lot, though I didn't stay with them permanently.

R: Did you see any lesbian role models abroad to follow? What is your impression, how do foreign lesbians live with their lesbianness, their gayness?

GYK: I was travelling mostly in Eastern Europe. I didn't see any role models there. I didn't have any acquaintances, either; I had no foreign role models. I have one very clear memory related to this. I was in Rome fifteen years ago with a university group; we visited museums in the Vatican. We were going through the halls of a museum one morning, and one of my greatest experiences was seeing a male couple strolling in front of the pictures hand in hand. They were a really nice and sweet couple. I'd never seen a gay couple express themselves so openly before, especially not boys. They were very decorative, nice and refined; they looked really great in that museum, that gay boy couple. I went through the museum at the same pace that they did. Somehow I found it important that they were there, as well. It was such an experience.

R: What was your impression about Eastern Europe and lesbianism?

GYK: In the past few years I visited lesbian circles in Saint Petersburg and talked to lots of women. I saw a really vivid gay life, though a different one from what we have here. There were no organized advocacy activities but cultural events staged in private apartments: playing music, reading poetry, cooking, doing sports, excursions. When I told them that here at home we were working in an organization and going out to demonstrate on the streets, they said that it's really great and they wondered when they would reach the stage when they could organize a Pride on the streets. They are trying, perhaps they've already made some progress, if not in Moscow, then in Saint Petersburg.⁸⁶

R: Why was it important for you to become an activist?

GYK: I had done similar work before: in school I did consciousness-raising educational work about minorities. There was a club that I started: the humanist club. We had conversations about literature and music, but we never organized big events that included the whole school, we rather worked as a club. Finding people who were thinking in similar ways about issues of equality, fairness, segregation and tolerance was not the only reason why I needed *Labrisz*: I also needed it to meet lesbians. It was obvious after joining this community that the cause of gayness had to be represented more intensively. It is also an encouraging, empowering, safe environment for the individual: you can be yourself there.

R: What are the activities you are involved in in *Labrisz*?

GYK: Around the foundation we started the "Getting to Know LGBT People" program, and I participate in that as a voluntary organizer, trainer, and coordinator from the very beginning. Occasionally, I participate in everything

⁸⁶ The interview was made before the most recent homophobic backlash in Russia.

else. I coordinate the Monday counselling hours, I can be found there more often than others.⁸⁷

R: What does that mean?

GYK: During our Open Hours on Monday, we are available in our office personally as well as through Skype. People show up in varying numbers and intensity, but they do come and ask for help. Just yesterday a couple from England wrote that they'd like to come home for LIFT Festival⁸⁸ and bring some photos to exhibit. We were talking on Skype about that and it felt good, because they expressed their appreciation for our work. They said that they had left the country because things were terrible here. They want to live together, but they were too afraid to be out at home, and *Labrisz* deserves great recognition because of its struggle and work and advocacy activities. It felt really good. There was another girl who came personally and needed emotional help, which I offered her, we talked. Sometimes new people come, people who are interested, and later it turns out that it's only after long deliberation and several attempts that they dare to come and inquire, ask for information and help. These are the two things for which I take greater responsibility; in the rest of our programs I take other, smaller roles. It depends on what kinds of people are needed and what I'm good at.

R: You've mentioned LIFT Festival. What is that?

GYK: LIFT stands for Lesbian Identities Festival: it's a series of cultural programs, film screenings, discussions, games, parties, music, and literature. Basically it's a one-week cultural festival, which in the last one or two years has started with a series of film screenings and ends with a day of workshops on Saturday. We arrange art exhibitions and competitions, and present the best works. Some Hungarians living in England come home to visit because of this. Many people come from the countryside, they love the opportunity. It's a women's festival, but boys come, as well. The topics are of women's concerns, but interested men also visit, in growing numbers, we hope.

R: What is your relationship with male organizations?

GYK: Mine or *Labrisz's*?

R: Yours. Do you have any contact with the gay male movement?

GYK: *Szimpozion Association*⁸⁹ has been a long-time partner in the "Getting to Know LGBT People" program, we work and train volunteers together. They are a fundamentally male gay organization, and we have a really good contact it's a fruitful partnership. Usually it's the Pride where we work together with male organizations, especially with *Háttér*. There are some events – sports or dance primarily – where it doesn't matter if it's boys or girls, it's the activity itself that is important, that boys and girls do sports and dance together. I enjoy being together with gay boys. I really like working together, talking, hiking, even dancing with gay boys. By the way, I don't really like dancing... yet.

R: What is that?

⁸⁷ At the time of the interview *Labrisz* was running Open Hours, counselling hours for lesbians every Monday afternoon. Later this program was closed due to the lack of resources and a regular need for it.

⁸⁸ LIFT: Lesbian Identities Festival, an annual cultural festival organized by *Labrisz* since 2005. See: <http://labrisz.hu/lift>

⁸⁹ *Szimpozion Association*: LGBT association founded in 2002, organizing cultural and community events, and managing the school program "Getting to Know LGBT People" with *Labrisz* since 2004. See: <http://www.melegvagyok.hu/>

GYK: It's a foot-holder for my keelboat. I've had this belt strapped on it, so now it's ready to go. I have a past in rowing. I was a race rower in high school; I was the national champion several times. As an adult I bought a travelling boat which is called a keelboat, with double oars. There are two people to row, one passenger and the navigator, but it goes well enough without navigation if the two people row well enough. It was a very old ship, and its leg-straps got damaged, that's why I've had it fixed. Now I'm going out to Dunaharaszti to put my boat together. I like the Danube, I like rowing on the Danube. This is the foot-holder of the keelboat, made by the same person who did the bracelet. That's the interesting bit for today. The foot-holder is ready, I hope it will fit well and hold legs tight. You strap your leg in here, so you can pull yourself forward and do real long pulls. Rowing on the Danube is great.

R: Looking back to your relationships, how would you characterize them? Did they just come about or were you consciously seeking them?

GYK: That's interesting, because I never sought any of them, not a single one. They just happened, they found me. They never started off as a date or a relationship, but more like a friendship, getting closer. They were beautiful, slow times of getting in tune with each other. My first relationship as a youngster was a crush. There was no deliberation, reservation, slowness. But then I didn't know it was love. It was very unexpected and shaking. I wanted to be in love, but I thought that I was in love with a boy. My relationships slowly became deeper and more meaningful, two to five years on average, relatively long ones. Not many. I've never cared about fast and easy relationships; I'm slower in this respect. It just came and I marvelled – I accepted it like a nice present, unwrapped it slowly, rejoiced about it and I already knew that I had to give it back. It was not mine. I never thought that I could live in a long relationship or marriage. But the time might just come when I tell myself that I want to grow old together with someone, and 'play grandmas'. I don't feel it yet. I said that I wanted holidays, not weekdays. I had weekday type of stories, as well; they were beautiful relationships and I'm happy that I had them. I couldn't say of anyone that I regret it because s/he lied to me, cheated on me or used me. I have no bad experiences in this sense, neither with boys. It's not that case that boys are like this or that, or that my husband changed, he became a bad man. That was a good experience as well, only it was enough. A new stage is set, with new interests. The way I see it is that I don't commit myself to something to which I am loyal till the end of my life, but that my life consists of several periods and all of them are beautiful the way they are. I am often reproached for being an egotist. People call it egotism when you don't want to commit yourself because your freedom is the most important thing there is. To this I always answer that it might look like egotism, but when I am together with someone, that person is with me because it is joyful for her, as well. My philosophy is that what we have lived through together is a gift from life for both of us and this is what we should remember and cherish. Of course, it's not always that easy when you split up. But I think that retrospectively you can sort it out.

R: By holidays you mean the beautiful moments?

GYK: Yes. Everyday life can really ruin a relationship. Even if those days are good – we're not fighting about who should iron that shirt or who should do the dishes – it's not interesting enough for me if I know everything in advance. If

it's calculable, if I know exactly what will happen. A happy, balanced relationship becomes a hell of a bore after a time, and there's no way I can think of boosting it with new things. It gives you the harmony and safety you need, that's fine, of course. It's important that I know what I can give the other, what I can expect, what are the values we share, what are our common goals. But in gift-giving, in the holidays emotions are much more intense, the moments are more special. I can decide and that's important! I don't feel the need to live through the events of everyday life with a partner. I can do that well enough on my own. That's how I see it now. I don't know what will happen in five or ten years.

R: If you think back to where you started from and where you are now, what would you say? Did you manage to fulfil your wishes, your plans and expectations in life?

GYK: I'm not sure which part of my life I should think of. My work, my hobby, my private life, what are you interested in?

R: Everything.

GYK: I guess it's gay identity that is important in this story, as a focal point or a red line to follow: the things I do or don't do as a gay person. Is it worth talking about this separately?

R: As you see it.

GYK: If I consider my private life, I have a lesbian relationship, and I would call it good and balanced. In this respect my private life has been alright for the past one year, I don't miss anything. I live it the way I want it to, I invest as much energy as I want to, I give and receive just as much energy as I would like to. My private life includes my children and my friends; I've already mentioned them that my circle of friends had transformed a bit and now mostly consists of gay people. But I have managed to keep my non-gay relationships – those who I call friends have remained. This year I have managed to keep a friend of mine who had really great trouble getting over this whole experience. She found out after many years, and it was quite a shock to her, as I used to be her teacher, as well, but eventually we remained friends. Tomorrow I'm going to visit her and talk the whole story over – I hope I'll be able to say the same the day after tomorrow. I think this is a success story. At my workplace I have done what I wanted to do in the past one year, more or less; I feel free and respected. I have overstretched myself a bit, due partly to my school activities, partly to being a form tutor, partly to arranging student circles as well as to my volunteering activities. This is my luxury, overworking myself. My civic activism, my work in the association is just as fine. Sometimes I feel that others work much more, sometimes I feel that I've simply had enough. But I am attached to the cause, the organization; *Labrisz* is like an extended family. It may sound commonplace, but I can trust these people. They can trust me as well: I do whatever task I undertake, or else I let them know in advance that I won't be able to. We've made some great steps forward with the "Getting to Know LGBT People" program as well, something is unfolding on college level, and we might get accreditation for the program. It was quite a successful year for it.

R: If we consider all this not just for last year but since you were a teenager or twenty-something, could you give a summary of your desires?

GYK: Jesus!

R: How do you see the span of your life: what have you managed to accomplish since your teens or twenties?

GYK: These are difficult questions. What is this? A life story interview? At sixteen I thought that I'd be the saviour of the world and eliminate all evil and poverty. That's how I started off and now I wonder why today's sixteen-year-olds don't want to do the same. Today's teenagers want to be rich and live an easy life. What I thought was that I'd become a mixture of Mother Theresa and Che Guevara, and that's how I'd live and become famous! I'll be the saviour; Jesus Christ was in the picture, too. I wanted respect and to become a teacher, so that I could tell youngsters how interesting and exciting life was, how good it was to be good and act good, to be brave. I've become a teacher and I think that I've managed to tell a lot of these things.

My other main principle was freedom: I didn't want to have my mouth shut or conform to stupid laws and norms. As a young teacher I taught Russian and Latin. It was compulsory to arrange a 'Who knows more about the Soviet Union?' competition, I didn't like that, but we also arranged tea parties during afternoons, and those who were there enjoyed it. We had to do performances, which we did, but not in the usual way, and it immediately made sense. We didn't praise the liberators but talked about other things. I don't want anyone to shut my saucy mouth; I want to feel free and independent, and not just in my work, but in my private life, as well. If and when I choose a partner, I'll choose so that we'll be equal partners in everything. I'm free and I won't be a housewife with chains around my neck, cooking book in hand. I've never been such. I managed to choose a partner with whom this wasn't required. Many people didn't like it and told me that I was strange, but I don't think that I've ever made too many enemies.

The third principle was that my life should be interesting. This means constantly learning something new. I'm not creative enough to make an interesting life out of nothing; the exciting part of my life doesn't come from sitting in front of the television and switching channels, but from learning new things, meeting new people. I can learn even now, I am always searching for learning opportunities. When I was at home for five years on maternity leave, I did a correspondence course in Esperanto; I could do that on leave and I was always interested in languages. I flee forwards from everyday existence and boredom; I really can't bear monotony. Around fifty I asked myself what else there was still to do, was it time to stop. I'm looking for the same meaning for my old years: being free, making freedom interesting and active, useful for others. It's one thing that I earn my bread and sit at home with a full belly, all cosy and safe and warm, but that doesn't satisfy me. As long as I find the activities, people, aims, goals in life, this thing will continue. As long as I can grow and not become disabled, physically or mentally. When I was young I very much needed security, knowing what I could expect for every day. But not any more. Perhaps it will come again, the need for a little quiet peace, meditation. But not for monotony, never.

R: What has the lesbian community given you?

GYK: What has it given me? Myself! We have to find ourselves at some point. It's great if we can find ourselves and can say that this is how I identify, I can call myself a lesbian. That's not the only thing I want to call myself but this is mine, it's me, I've lived through it, I identify with it. I have felt happy, I have

felt whole in these relationships, I have found myself in them. This is the greatest experience it has given me. It is a world which I sometimes find special. People say that we are the same as everybody else, we behave, eat, sleep in the same way, we are not different. But in some sense we are. As human beings our basic functioning is the same, but there is a special experience in belonging to the gay community, which strongly separates us from others and ties us together very firmly. There is a subculture which I am part of, this is a singular experience. I might as well belong to a folk dance group or a religious community of whichever sort – that could or would also make me singular all the same. It is not a superior or inferior experience but a singular one which enriches my life.

R: And what has the movement given you?

GYK: Apart from all this, it has given me an opportunity to utilize my knowledge. I'm more open with people, braver, my identity becomes stronger. My call to stand up for others is also stronger. Not only for gay people but for anyone. It has given me a kind of inner power, position, energy, a will to solidarity, and the ability and will to act. Where feelings and thoughts are concerned, anyone can feel solidarity or sympathize with gay people, but they won't help them, they won't stand up for them. They are good people in their own sense, but they claim that this not is something to stress and articulate; it's better to keep quiet about it. They might be straight or gay; I have heard both sides say the same. Participating in the movement means that I do something, I act. It can be writing, speech, marching, painting, anything. I take responsibility. It's a question whether I give my name to it, as well, but I'm definitely there in my actions. To what extent I do it under my own name is another interesting question. First I also wrote under a pen name, now I give my own name. I think that I've managed to reach the point where it cannot be dangerous for me, for my family, for the people who are close to me. I won't bring trouble to myself or to others, or if I do, it's something I can handle. I can protect myself as well as the people close to me if I get into a situation where it becomes unpleasant that I'm recognized by name as a gay person.

R: How is it to experience right here and right now that you are a lesbian?

GYK: Right here and now? That's what I've been talking about until now. I was talking here and now. It is good to sit with you here and now in the Orczy garden, though the sun has nearly set. Here and now. I'd rather go home to my girlfriend. I'd be good if there were more of us. It'd be good, if this 'herstory' series was an endless series of stories. And we wouldn't have to finish it, because there would always be someone to tell a story and say thank you very much, she feels fine. Thank you very much, I feel fine... that's it!



1969



1971



1972



1973



1973



“My emotions are quite mysterious even to me”

Lenke Szilágyi (b. 1959)

R: How important is your lesbianism in your life?

LSZ: Well, I’m not a vigorous activist. For any issues, not only for this sort, but in general. Of course, I consider myself a feminist on the level of emotions and all, but to rush out to agitate for that, I wouldn’t do that. But it’s simply about my temperament, not for any other reason... So I don’t have anything against it, only my temperament isn’t like that. Also, I have family, relatives in the countryside, and all... I wouldn’t like to let them know about this, although I guess they know it already. Well, this is why I have never really liked to be in the spotlight. My parents aren’t alive any more, so it doesn’t matter to them anyway, but this isn’t something I need in my life. I guess it’s also because I’m conflict avoidant. Moreover, I don’t have relationships, so there’s nothing to come out about.

R: But you must have your personal story too, separate from movements or your public appearances... When did your parents die?

LSZ: I’m one month older now than my mum was when she died. That was in 1989, and my father passed away later, in 1995? I think that was the year he died.

R: And did they know?

LSZ: Well, yes, they did, to a certain extent. Mum knew it; dad... it’s a problematic question, since we weren’t ever on really good terms. Moreover, this whole thing’s actually an absurdity for me; I can’t believe I had any relationship with someone like that at all! Let alone having him as my father! So I can’t feel any community with him. Once he snooped into my stuff, and found some mail there, which I vehemently denied right away, saying it was just a kind of literature quotation. Which he either believed or not, but there was a fight about it anyway, yeah. After that the topic never came up again.

R: So there wasn’t really a coming-out or any kind of announcement to them.

LSZ: There was to my mother. But she was a completely different character. So she didn’t interrogate me, she was just surprised, and asked some questions about it.

R: Were you on good terms with her?

LSZ: Yes. So nothing, only my old man, he was an insignificantly average guy in my eyes, who proved to be an egoistic, petty creep in every crisis situation. Which I don’t think I have anything to do with. At any rate, these two sides of our family are like night and day...

R: Do you have siblings?

LSZ: I have a younger sister.

R: Have you ever talked to her about it?

LSZ: Not really, but she still knows about it, and did in the past, but she is a tolerant type. She lets everyone be who they are. Just like me.

R: Do you have a story in your life about recognizing it and trying to deal with it?

LSZ: I do, I knew already at the age of three what the situation was. A lot of people imagine you choose to be like that for yourself, but not at all, it’s just a given, and that’s all. Those who say this isn’t natural, of course for them it isn’t, because they aren’t like this. But those who are like that, it’s natural for them.

Until my adolescence, I didn't really encounter this live, so to speak. I found some hints and allusions in books, but not so many. Particularly that my mum was a psychologist and she had books at home that I could look up.

R: What kind of books were these?

LSZ: For example there was a thick and heavy book titled *Psychiatry* that I remember. Plus parents have the habit of dealing with these kinds of uncomfortable topics by putting some sort of sex education books in front of the children reaching adolescence so that they could look the awkward matters up there. Of course, the children talk about the topic among themselves, too. But naturally, I never mentioned this to anybody, I treated it as highly confidential matter and with great secrecy, in fact I have always looked on it as a private matter, so why let others know about it. And these sources also contained only a few lines mentioning that this thing does exist.

R: What were these, can you recall them?

LSZ: I can't remember them any more.

R: But did you recognize at the time that these were referring to what you were?

LSZ: Yes. I did, and then I had attempts too, of course, when I was an adolescent, to live up to the expectations and standards of the world. But obviously out of curiosity too, one or two things happened with boys, but I always felt that wasn't me. Truly, I don't know how to interpret it or define or name it all. So my emotions are quite mysterious even to me. This whole love thing has always been on the level of poetry for me. So there have been huge crushes and unrequited longings and those kinds of things. I even managed to fall in love very passionately with a man, in this platonic way.

R: Did these people know about it then or not?

LSZ: In my childhood they didn't at all, but later, after my adolescent years there were times when people figured it out. I had some long-term I-don't-know-what, emotional storms. It usually came to light in one way or another; we got along well, but still... I don't know. Rather not! Never mind. So these physical matters, so to speak, have always been prosaic pragmatic issues for me. For some reason I have never felt comfortable with them. Or I didn't feel the whole thing was mutual enough and equally balanced enough to be worth it – and without that, if it's kind of asymmetrical, you don't feel comfortable. I wouldn't say there was nothing at all, since I have had some affairs. But at any rate, after a while, let's say, after thirty, you can judge how your life path is going. And I got the picture that love relationships were not only far from playing a central role in my life, but they didn't play any at all. However, I feel comfortable with that. After I thought through why waste such an enormous amount of time and energy for unreasonably exalted emotions that supposedly wouldn't ever lead anywhere, I decided to stop it. So I would rather set up goals and objectives and deal with other things.

R: Were you able to redirect these energies towards your work or other activities?

LSZ: Well, yes. Anyway, while I was living in Debrecen, I never met anyone who was in any way similar to me.

R: How long did you live in Debrecen?

LSZ: Until I was fifteen-sixteen years old. I attended a high school for two years there after the eight-year elementary school, and after that I came to the

*Kisképző*⁹⁰ to Budapest, but instead of getting into the third year,⁹¹ I restarted it from the first. There were a few boys in that school who were gossiped about, and these gossips turned out to be justified. But I must say I seldom met girls of the kind, only after... Szini...⁹² perhaps. She was the first one, and then through her I began to make acquaintances with others, as well. And when these new places opened in the city, we visited them sometimes.

R: In your twenties?

LSZ: Yes. But I was so stupid that once, for example, a girl made a pass at me at a house party, and I didn't realize for quite a long time what was actually happening. However, I observed later on several such occasions that it wasn't actually me who stirred up the interest, but the whole situation, I mean people wanted to try it out of curiosity and I wasn't interested in that.

R: Did your lesbianism play a role in your initiative to make contacts with this alternative scene? Was it perhaps easier to live it in this milieu, to make relationships, acquaintances through this culture, to make this type of 'otherness' accepted? Did lesbianism have a different place in this kind of subculture than in the wider society? If it had a place at all. Was it visible?

LSZ: I went to these sorts of clubs out of curiosity, but I didn't make any relationships there. People I got to know closer I met mostly through my circle of friends. It's interesting because for example, when this voting happened recently⁹³ that was the point where I actually had to face the fact that I don't live in the full world, but only in a 7% slice of it, and what is outside of this is much larger and wider, so I practically don't know the world I live in. Since I move around within a certain milieu, my acquaintances also come by and large from within these cultural circles, but that is only a small part of the big picture. So one activity where I can meet different kinds of people is mountain climbing. Or in the past when I used to listen regularly to Balázs Pálfi's radio program, I couldn't avoid facing the reality of that 90% who do scare me a bit. For example at the time of the Gay Pride March a few years ago – I wasn't aware, by the way, that it was held on that very day – I went down to the corner shop just when the march was passing by in the middle of the road. And in the shop I could hear the comments the people watching from inside made there. Well, these things can be scary.

R: So compared to this, the alternative milieu gives you some kind of protection?

LSZ: At any rate, perhaps they are more willing to accept you the way you are, so... with your extremities.

R: To what extent were you or are you visible there as a lesbian?

LSZ: My immediate environment knew it about me already in my twenties, but I didn't spread the word myself. There were some malicious remarks made by one or two people, but basically it seemed to me I got accepted, and the rest was unimportant. In other words, I haven't really had any serious conflicts. And if someone knows me already, and they suddenly find out, I don't think they it would upset them too much. Maybe people are less irritated when it's about a

⁹⁰ The Secondary School of Arts and Crafts.

⁹¹ Eight-year primary school was followed by a four-year secondary school.

⁹² Ildikó Szineg, see: Chapter 9.

⁹³ She probably refers to the national elections in 2010 when the right-wing party *Fidesz* won with a two thirds majority and the extreme right-wing party *Jobbik* won 15% of the votes.

woman than in the case of a man. And it's less visible too, probably because women generally demonstrate less what the situation is. In the case of men it's easier to get the picture.

R: So the few relationships that you have had also came from this milieu?

LSZ: Not necessarily.

R: But did you see other lesbian relationships in this milieu?

LSZ: Sure. Well, there were some in my circle of friends. And György Szomjas made a film – *Csókkal és körömmel*⁹⁴ – which I worked in, we were shooting in Angel Bar too, and the women who played the couple in the film were really in a relationship, though I hadn't known them earlier. Well, I'm not so good at relationship building, and I'm not the sociable type, but there are people who are more active. So they went to these places more often, and there are people who have the inclination to organize programs, who like gathering people together. I haven't been present in these activities too much, so that's why I've said that I don't have so many interesting things to tell.

R: Did the relationships you witnessed showed any signs of change in the course of time?

LSZ: Later some organizations were founded, as we know, like *NANE*, *Labrisz*, *Háttér* and the helplines,⁹⁵ and many different activists were working there whom I knew in person, for example Márti,⁹⁶ so I met these people several times. And that the whole matter became a part of public discourse. Because in the old times, I mean, until I was about twenty it didn't come up at all. Nothing.

R: Did this change leave any mark on your everyday life?

LSZ: Not on my everyday life, I don't think so. But in any case I got to know a lot of people who were connected to this matter to some extent. Szini, for example, was a member of *NANE*, and I met people through her, and Bíró⁹⁷ too... But, as I said, I usually settle for just playing the passive bystander in most cases, unless there is some big trouble and we have to speak up or take a stand or something.

R: In your work, in photography, has it ever occurred to you that this could be an interesting subject?

LSZ: It did, but then Luca Góbbolyós⁹⁸ accomplished it much better than I could have.

R: But she shot photos of transvestites.

LSZ: Well, that's true, these things merged somewhat at these places where you could go. Yeah, the stage performers, they fall into a different category after all. So I'm quite impotent when it comes to this. It has always been my weakest point that I don't have good communication skills, I can't really arrange such a thing. When I take photos of people, they just show up in front of me or we have some personal relations or an opportunity just comes up. But for me, to approach total strangers in a casual manner... In the first place it wouldn't

⁹⁴ Kisses and Scratches. (1995)

⁹⁵ She probably refers to *NANE*'s hotline for battered women and children and *Háttér*'s information and counselling helpline for LGBTQ people.

⁹⁶ Márta Kis, see: Chapter 5.

⁹⁷ Csilla Bíró, see: Chapter 15.

⁹⁸ Luca Góbbolyós: photographer, in 1994 she had an exhibition on the Hungarian transvestite and gay subculture.

work out, even if I wanted to do it, because my actual work method of making good pictures is to catch sight of and find the scene. When I have to figure out everything and arrange the setup, it doesn't usually turn out so well. And you can't pounce on total strangers with a camera all spontaneously, or at least I don't know how to do it. So I'm simply a clumsy person in everyday life as well as in photography, so...

R: But you do shoot plenty of photos where you are supposed to be present very much, or which requires contacts with others, even a personal relationship. In far-away countries, or in villages, those slice of life pictures... you do need to create a situation of trust or an inspiring atmosphere to catch.

LSZ: Well, you do have to get into some sort of a situation. But lately I have lost my appetite for it, because people's behaviour has changed for some reason. Or I don't know... they express distrust.

R: In photographers?

LSZ: Yes. For example when I made this party photo series, I went into a gay bar and they weren't too happy when I showed up with a camera stand saying I wanted to take photos. Not only there but in other places too, if you have a camera larger than a cell phone in your hands, that is already suspicious for some reason. But I even got kicked out of this particular gay bar in the end. They told me to leave the camera stand in the cloakroom. And I didn't leave it there, as this wasn't why I'd brought it along. But it's always the staff that makes a fuss. So not the guests. The guests were willing to let me, they even asked for it, but I got caught red-handed somehow, since some fairy from the staff spotted it and started to make a fuss. First they told me to delete the pictures. I said I wouldn't delete them and offered them to have a look at them... as the subjects were obviously posing into the cam, so they were all aware of being photographed. Whoever asked me not to, I didn't. So why make such a scene? In the end I didn't have to delete them, but I got led out of the place.

R: Did this happen recently?

LSZ: Not so long ago, let's say two years ago, two or three.

R: Can it be some sign of relapse?

LSZ: Perhaps. It's rather fear, but I don't know what they are afraid of, because the internet is also full of party photos. But the same thing happened in other places too, I mean, I made a portrait of someone on the street, I explained who I was, what I was, that I wasn't a press photographer but I had exhibitions, I even invited the person to the exhibition where they didn't come. However, later I wrote an article for a photo journal about portrait photography and I included that picture as an illustration. And stupid as I was, I even gave them the journal to show they were there. And then a lawyer called me that this person hadn't given their consent to the publication. Go to hell then! So in the end I just lost my appetite for the whole thing, in this form and manner. And another thing, photography is a kind of lifestyle in a way – well, it used to be, but it's not the same any more! So the pictures aren't the same any more, either.

R: You mean technically?

LSZ: Both technically and thematically.

R: What does it mean that photography is a lifestyle?

LSZ: It means, for example, that back when I didn't have my own apartment but I hung around at everyone's place and everywhere, and nobody had

telephones yet, I spent much more time with people, among friends, than now. Now we do have parties, but I go less often than before, and this side of photography has just faded away somehow.

R: But mountain climbing has entered your life instead. To what extent does it serve as a photo theme?

LSZ: This is a difficult question that makes me wonder a lot. In any case, when this inner development or rather decision-making happened that I wasn't going to deal with things that were not worth dealing with but set up other goals instead and search for suitable people and opportunities for their accomplishment, that was the time when I began to climb mountains. It was also an old childhood dream of mine, but being a late maturing type, I started to do it in my old age. But I thought that if I really wanted to do something about it, it was time to give it a go. At the same time it's a contradiction, too: the night life, the city 'underground' milieu and the healthy, sporty lifestyle.

R: On the one hand, you say you're a typical bystander, passive, not too much of a challenger type, but on the other hand mountain climbing seems to be a very active, adventurous thing.

LSZ: Yes, after all, it's actually the adventure that has been motivating me all along.

R: Is this a different path to self-understanding than, say, what a love relationship would offer? Does it make you face different types of challenges?

LSZ: Well, I'm not sure because, as I said, I haven't had too many love relationships, I don't have much experience in them, but friendship has always been more important to me somehow. To have friends. I have had desires and dreams regarding love relationships, and I have had some affairs... Well, the last one was especially interesting because it happened after I had given up on the whole thing. So that it happened at all was a gift falling onto my lap, and I wanted to expect nothing more from it than what it could give. And I could completely accept the person, together with all her excess. When it came to an end, I was very sad and all, of course, but it was already obvious at the beginning that it was going to end shortly, so it would have been a pity to waste the little time given to us on pointing out her faults.

R: Why was it obvious? Because of her way of life?

LSZ: Yes. It was actually part of her path seeking. By the way, she has passed away since then, unfortunately. And the whole relationship brought, how to say it, quite a youthful lifestyle to me at that time. Crashing in parties all night long, drinking... I mean it was a bit tiresome for me.

R: And you didn't miss love relationships so much that you would start to seek partners very actively, post advertisements somewhere or anything like that?

LSZ: No way! No. No.

R: So you rather settled for waiting if anything of the sort would come along...

LSZ: Well, I didn't wait for it. It came onto me without waiting. There was a quite long thing, which lasted approximately seven years... with someone. How to say it...

R: Did you live together?

LSZ: Nope. That only happened in the middle somewhere, for some very short moments. But, how to say this, I'm attracted to women, and she didn't have these... preferences. But she impressed me deeply, and she accepted it to some extent. And once we really got together, and that was the time when I realized

that it didn't make any sense like that, if the attraction was not mutual, then the whole thing became so miserable, so it's not worth insisting on it.

R: So these seven years, these...

LSZ: Well, it was an emotional matter.

R: Was it you who was into it emotionally so long?

LSZ: Yes, but she was also involved in it to some extent for a short while, and we are still good friends. We don't talk every day, but we are stable points for each other.

R: So this is a stable, and in a way unquestionable relationship, even if it's not a love relationship in the conventional sense.

LSZ: Yes, for me it is.

R: During your foreign trips did you get into contact with such circles, or did you search for them at all?

LSZ: But of course, and this is very interesting! I didn't search for them, but I found them. I think in the year 1991 I was in... now I'm not sure which country I should name here, whether it was still part of the Soviet Union at the time. Now it's either Georgia or Abkhazia, there are several options, never mind. So I spent a summer at the seaside under the Caucasus, where I wound up finding myself among Russians, Georgians, Abkhazians and other local ethnicities. There was a female couple there, for example, a poetess and her girlfriend. It was a quite funny relationship, because they kept addressing each other formally, while they had a normal love relationship. Then they even had a child together. One of them got hold of a child somehow, but the father didn't become part of the family picture, but the girls got a child. And there was another same-sex couple, two boys. Gogi was a Georgian film critic, he has visited Hungary several times because of film festivals, and he had a male suitor. They invited me to their family bungalow where there were Gogi's mum and dad and everyone. And it looked really funny, since these people had quite a temperament, and the mum would sometimes blurt out "look at that, what a daughter-in-law I have here!" So they knew the real situation, and they accepted it. They weren't too happy about it, but they couldn't help it.

R: What situation did you meet these people in? The girl couple, for example.

LSZ: There at the seaside... Laci Haller, who gave Russian lessons at the university, used to go there on holidays every summer. And then I once said that I was interested too, and he replied, okay, come along with me! And just like that, we went and spent three or four months there. I had prepared for only a month's stay, but I enjoyed it so much that I extended it to four months. There were the local acquaintances and the company gathered together on the beach... It's not so common there to go to the beach, so practically the whole seashore was empty and deserted. The only ones who actually used to go to the beach were the local intellectuals and some other people who spent their holidays there. A painter, the poetess, a journalist, the physicist woman and various interesting people. Of course, when those wars broke out, everyone scattered. Although Nadia the poetess, and her girlfriend Lena are still there. Yeah, and the other fun moment was when this Gogi's dad just spilled out the beans in an evening conversation that he had always been very attracted to midgets. And that he had had a longing for a midget woman all his life! And then once a real circus showed up in town, and then they really got the midgets involved. So, whatever. There were funny conversations like that. And then in

Berlin – that’s the place where I hardly know any normal people, so to speak. There I got involved in this mostly women’s, lesbian circle. This happened through acquaintances too, of course.

R: Through Szini?

LSZ: Yes.

R: When did you start going there regularly?

LSZ: Well, regularly only when Szini got there through her girlfriend who lives in Berlin. So I visited them a few times. Actually, I only went there when I had something else to do there, exhibitions or something.

R: And what was it like to meet the lesbians there? Was it an international community or mainly local Berliner women?

LSZ: They were Berliners, but international too, since all kinds of people showed up there, Catalonians, Italians and all sorts. I made a few portraits there. About a few women couples. So at that place I know selectively, or how to say, mostly these kinds of people. But I don’t speak any foreign language very well, and I have difficulties communicating even in Hungarian, not to mention foreign languages!

Yeah, and also in London, but that happened really long ago. In 1984 I travelled to a Western European country for the first time in my life, and this country was the United Kingdom, namely London. We visited many places of this sort there. They had both women-only bars and mixed types, as well. It was the first time for me that I actually saw these things with my own eyes... I mean I could see the whole thing existing on a societal level. At the time, here these kinds of things didn’t exist yet. And I liked it very much, because I like it when people are diverse. And it was a great pleasure to experience how common the whole matter was for them, and they let anybody be who they wanted to be, all were accepted there. So that was my first experience of facing this thing.

And what I found interesting in America was that American people tend to demonstrate their identity with their looks much more strongly. I personally find it a bit ridiculous when someone emphasizes their masculinity or femininity so much, because why boost up further what can be seen at the first glance? But if that someone is not like that but let’s say homosexual or a transvestite or anything, I find this kind of emphasis more reasonable, since their orientation might not be so obvious. So, in America, people saw me and realized right away that “well, she isn’t a woman!” – or at least not the way she’s supposed to be... And I got feedback on this several times. It was very interesting, because I was travelling with Zsuzsa Forgács,⁹⁹ and I was even skinnier than now, and she was twice as big as now... and everybody felt sorry for me, they thought this giant woman was oppressing me. And they made remarks. Well, I hardly understood them, but Zsuzsa did, so she commented on what she was hearing.

R: When were you in America with Zsuzsa Forgács?

LSZ: In 1992. We travelled around for a month, and we spent a lot of time on long-distance buses. And when we appeared in public, remarks came.

R: And was it a good feeling that the kind of invisibility you experience here disappeared and people realized what you were? Or was it rather awkward?

LSZ: No, it wasn’t, since, as I said, I didn’t really notice this so much; it was just strange for me that they felt they had to draw boundaries so much, I mean,

⁹⁹ Zsuzsa Forgács: writer, editor, her book *Talált nő* [Woman Found] was published in 1995.

to define so clearly where everybody belonged. And that it was so visible. That people watch out for this so much. So, I say, compared to this, the British milieu was much more tolerant, and it seemed to be more normal for me. Because there was more diversity there. Yeah, so in the USA, if I entered Harlem, for example, it was a problem. I felt very strongly the hostility around me, like "Why does she have to bring her white butt here?" I've read the autobiography of Miles Davis recently, and it continuously lays stress upon the topic of colour, and who belongs where, and if you don't fit in, you are no good. So that is exclusion. And he writes the same, by the way, that he loved Paris because that kind of thinking didn't exist there. That one is black, the other white, and this hostility, the overly strict separation of things.

R: Did you feel that this exclusion came from every direction?

LSZ: Yes, and that it's much stronger in America. Yes, the need to fix people into categories.

R: Do you feel that gay marches, gay festivals, or the participation in gay cultural events are unimportant, too?

LSZ: I think I have participated in one or two marches. What I don't like there is this loud, tasteless style that sheds a bad light on the issue rather than a good one. But apart from this, I have also had positive experiences. For example, I entered a photo lab, and a woman told me that she had seen me at the march. I said, "Oh, yeah?" And she explained that she had not taken part in the march, but she was okay with it and thought it was needed. She didn't ask what I was doing there, what I was like, only signalled that she didn't have any problems with it. I replied okay, I didn't have any either.

R: Does this mean that you don't see the march as a good strategic tool in gay issues?

LSZ: Not the march itself, but the presence of excessive people who put on airs so much and vehemently there, that it's, how to say it, just too radical or too gaudy for common people, and consequently they end up enhancing exactly the side that creates negative feelings. Because people already think ill about the matter, and they will see their opinion underlined by this attitude.

R: You mean the drag queens?

LSZ: Yeah, they often do this show of sorts, and I don't find it a very appropriate way to advertise the whole matter. The point of demanding acceptance would be exactly that everyone can have their own different habits or preferences, but those don't determine what kind of persons they truly are. But this opinion of mine refers specifically to Hungary, because in my opinion our society hasn't matured yet to the level where it could simply swallow this. I mean the fact that people can be equally normal in spite of having different sexual preferences, which don't get practiced on the street anyway, but they are basically everybody's private matter and others have nothing to do with it. And beyond that, nobody should picture or fantasize about others' private life.

R: But private and public matters quite overlap concerning this issue.

LSZ: Well, that's right. And it's also important, of course, that some steps get taken forward in the line of public affairs related to the issue. We attended, for example, a gay wedding of sorts this winter. The main point was to make it happen as fast as they could, while it's still possible, because soon there may not be a possibility any more.

R: Coming back to your first circle of friends, how did you meet them?

LSZ: Szini and Bíró were still a couple at the time, if I can remember well. This was obvious at first sight. How did I get to know them? I don't remember any more, but I recall that I first saw Szini in *FMK*. She was completely and bestially wasted, and yelled stupid things. This happened at the beginning of the eighties. And then, that way, more and more new acquaintances or candidates turned up in this group of friends. I can't tell the story amusingly. First, Szini stayed at Bíró's. Then I had a tiny photo lab where I was also living secretly, and once Szini moved in there. Later her father died and she got an apartment in Óbuda and we moved in together. Then Tamás Fuchs¹⁰⁰ also got to move in there somehow, because he didn't have anywhere to live either, and the three of us stayed there together for a few years. Then we started to disband. I can't tell too many interesting stories about these times.

R: So was it shocking for you in any way when you saw lesbian people around you for the first time? Or it wasn't so emphatic in that situation?

LSZ: I don't know. When these places got opened where you were free to be out, at least within the limits of that closed circle, I was happy, because it was not only about me. Obviously, society will accept it more only if the information that it exists becomes common knowledge. So it also exists officially, so to speak. And if someone is seeking relationships, she has also more chances at these places. So the fact that there are places where you can go for it. That counts as a positive development by all means.

R: So you didn't feel it especially important to be part of a lesbian space, and you preferred to live your life as you would, and within this, some encounters just happened to you.

LSZ: Yes.

R: When you talked about this, what terms did you use for yourself or for others?

LSZ: We call ourselves and similar people simply 'faggots', but this term, 'gay' is such a stupid word... I don't know how it got invented. When I was still a child, when the topic appeared in school bullying, they used the word 'fairy'¹⁰¹. But the term 'gay'¹⁰² It sounds just so stupid! And also the term 'lesbian' sounds dull. Right, okay, officially you can use 'homosexual' too – but that's too long. So we simply use 'faggot' among ourselves.

R: And what if anybody else calls you that?

LSZ: If others do it, that's no good. Because outsiders obviously intend this as an offense. So this is rather a kind of ironic term used only among ourselves. Obviously, being called names like 'faggot' is another matter. Or if one gets called a 'Jew' or a 'Gypsy', that doesn't only define their origin but suggests pejorative judgment.

R: You have said that you already knew at the age of three that you were attracted to women. How is this possible?

LSZ: Well, I already had these big crushes on... women. The first one happened back in nursery school, on a little Gypsy girl, Erika Kemény. I can recall her transferring into some other nursery, or kindergarten followed. But I do recall how profoundly the realization that we wouldn't meet each other any more

¹⁰⁰ Tamás Fuchs (b. 1962): contemporary painter.

¹⁰¹ *langyos*: lit. 'lukewarm'

¹⁰² *meleg*: lit. 'warm'

shook me. And later on, I remember from my kindergarten days that affections flared up inside me for various people. But of course, these only happened in the deepest secret, in my soul.

R: Towards kindergarten mates?

LSZ: Or towards adult 'ladies'. There were some mates too, and kindergarten teachers or older girls. Hearth throbbing, blushing and continuous thinking about them, so on this level. Oh, yeah, I always had someone as the object of my admiration. These crushes were so frequent that I think I wasted way too much time on these emotions happening completely in myself. Anyway, I hardly have these things any more.

R: But you can still have them.

LSZ: I would be surprised, but of course, why not. In fact, love is always unfair, because it elevates someone up to the highest stage over the heads of everybody else in our eyes, although this person is just like anybody else. So I don't think that it is worth dying for anybody, or going to such extremes, but try convincing a teenager about this! I don't think it's important that one's whole life should be about only one thing. Especially if that one thing can't even succeed for some reason, so it's practically in vain. So along these lines, I decided it wasn't worth spending too much energy on this matter, since it's just a useless struggle to push a cart which doesn't even exist. The probability of reaching that ideal state where everything works out with someone is statistically so low that I'm amazed to see how many people can find a partner and stay together with them for a long time. And also, I guess I've already lived alone too long. So I don't suppose I would really be able to get accustomed to somebody. And as I've said, the whole matter has been mostly platonic affections in my life. I don't have that much libido, either. So needs are different, some people suffer from loneliness, or they miss sexuality more. For me, even when love still occurred in my life, sexuality wasn't in the focus. That wasn't the point. I see that it usually takes quite a central role in people's life. Not in mine though, not so much. There are people like that, too. That's why I told you that I wouldn't be able to tell any exciting stories.

R: That's already pretty exciting. You talked earlier about childhood loves. By the way, what kind of child were you, either at a young age, or as a teenager?

LSZ: I was already quite a loner. By the way, in my childhood, I pictured myself to be a much more ardent feminist than what I actually became later. And I came to realize only in my adulthood that maybe not all men are beasts. So I found this out relatively late. In my childhood days, I looked at boys as stupid beings who spent all their time fighting, torturing animals, who didn't show any respect towards anything, spat on their parents, and thought so big of themselves, though actually they were only pitiful little idiots, and it seemed to me all incomprehensible what they were so proud of. But I still had friendships with boys as well, so this was just general experience. So if we don't have to be in a 'man-woman' kind of relation, I can get along with them very well. It was also obvious to me that the world has always treated women badly and unjustly, and that I would never go along with this. I saw this show called family as men confusing their family with a bunch of servants. And I didn't get to see any family model that I liked to the degree of wanting the same for myself.

R: How was your dad with you or with your mother?

LSZ: On the one hand, I think, he didn't really know what to do with children. On the other hand, he seldom did anything with us, but if I had done anything naughty, he was fast and ready to put the blame on my mum, like "Look at that, this is your upbringing!" Of course, it was my mum's upbringing, as he never added anything to it. But I suppose he would have been pleased if he could have been proud of me for something.

R: And wasn't he proud at all?

LSZ: Well, he wasn't. Not in my childhood. We hardly communicated with each other. And if we were just the two of us at home, I was particularly discomfited. I preferred my mum to be at home, to have her nearby. And when conflicts arose between my parents, he acted especially mean, as I saw it. And I hated him expressly for this. So I wouldn't say that our relationship was any good. It was only near the end of his life, in his last couple of years, when our bad relationship eased up a bit.

R: When you became a renowned photographer, did you feel he was proud of you?

LSZ: I had an exhibition once in Debrecen, and I could see him a bit moved at the opening ceremony. At that time he might have realized that what I was doing was not that silly. Because all they understood of my job was some strange noises in the middle of the night, and me wandering around in the house aimlessly, so they couldn't get enough sleep. And the noise of the water running. So I think until that very moment he hadn't really taken seriously what I was doing.

R: What was his job?

LSZ: He planned electric networks for an architectural office, he worked as a draftsman. For example, he created the whole electric system of the Szoboszló Bathes.

R: And your mum is a psychologist.

LSZ: She was.

R: Did you have this androgynous appearance as a child, too?

LSZ: Yes.

R: And did they have anything to say about this? Didn't your parents want to make you wear skirts and things like these?

LSZ: They wanted, but failed to. By the way, I do wear skirts. I've worn them this whole week. The only problem is that I don't have matching clothes. So I don't have footwear that goes with skirts except during very hot summers, when one pair of sandals and a skirt are enough. But when I have to get dressed up decently for an event, I face some difficulties. At the time when I got the Artist of Merit Award,¹⁰³ for example, I got round it by having a plane ticket already, so when the official notice came I could reply to them that I was grateful but unfortunately unable to receive it personally, so I could escape like that.

R: And how did you handle these expectations in general? Like when you moved to Budapest. Or was it possible for you to escape by saying that you were an artist, so you could look as you pleased?

LSZ: I have always handled this very badly. I don't usually excuse myself as an artist, but say in the Arts and Crafts high school it was fashionable at the time

¹⁰³ National prize for cultural and artistic achievements.

to wear torn jeans with knee-long shirts, and the like. So there weren't such expectations there. The high school in Debrecen had its own uniform, which we were supposed to wear at ceremonies. It was quite awful, but you could still put up with it twice a year.

R: Do you have women who had unusual fates or who were different from the average in your family lineage?

LSZ: I don't really know. I know something interesting about my paternal grandmother, that she somehow came up with the idea that... her surname was Szilágyi, and she wanted to marry a guy also named Szilágyi, in order to keep her name – and she did it. So my kinship network is confusing, since everybody is called Szilágyi on both sides. Even my great-grandmother on my mother's side, and also my great-great-grandmother. And on the father's side practically everybody. By the way, my grandmother made a mésalliance, because my great-grandmother was some 'Honourable lady' – I don't know what that rank meant, but it had to mean something – but she married a locksmith, so it meant a comedown. But she stayed Szilágyi! On the other side of the family it's not clear; they were peasants living in a village with many kids, a poor family. I feel some community with my grandfather on that side, because he was an adventurer. In the sense of travelling a lot in the world, though not for pleasure, but because of the world wars and so on. He got carried off to Siberia as a prisoner, and he managed to escape somehow, and walked all the way back home or something like this, a really brutal story. And later he somehow got to Argentina. The women? There's nothing to know about them. They were decent peasant women, gave birth to a bunch of children, I have a huge number of cousins, and all are normal, average people, they tend to get married at the age of twenty, then the kids come, so I never really understood how I could get born into this environment.

R: And your younger sister?

LSZ: She has three kids. And I'm very happy for having children in the family. Since the problem got solved without me!

R: Was your mum a psychotherapist?

LSZ: No, a child psychologist. She was the youngest in her family, the eighth kid, and like it is written, the youngest one always does something different from the others. All of her siblings remained agricultural workers in the village, she was the only one to study further and go to university. First she did kindergarten teacher's training and worked as a kindergarten teacher. Then she accomplished her studies on a correspondence course at the university, while working. She even got a doctorate degree later. At the beginning she worked as a psychologist in a state care home, and then became the director, but her field was child psychology, for example, she successfully treated hyperkinetic children. At the same time, there were a lot of Gypsy children and orphans she helped. I feel that my inclination for tolerance and acceptance was inherited from her.



1967



1994, fotó: Szabó Judit



2006, fotó: Szilágyi Lenke



“At the time the ‘outsiders’ wanted to make music”

Ildikó Szineg – Szini (b. 1963)

R: When and how did you move to this farm?

ISZ: Three or four years ago. I’ve been longing to live in the countryside for a while, and now it became possible. I’ve had enough of city life. First I found this small house with my girlfriend, bought it, and then we thought that we’d use it in ten years. Eventually we already moved here after two years.

R: Don’t you miss city life and playing music?

ISZ: No.

R: How do you live, what is your everyday life like?

ISZ: First thing, I get up. If there are animals, they have to be taken care of; if there’s a garden, then that, too. Chopping wood for the heating, cooking, cleaning. Like a real housewife. Housewife and man in one: I do the wood chopping, as well. I read in the evening. I’ve been learning to play the piano for a few months now, so that we’d have a bit of music, too.

R: When did you stop playing music?

ISZ: Ten years ago, I guess. The garden is more or less enough for us. We don’t have everything in it, like wheat, for example, but we do have vegetables.

R: What do you buy from the shop?

ISZ: Wheat, pasta, or chocolate if we want delicacies, and milk. That’s it, more or less. And cigarettes.

R: How much are you cut off from the outside world?

ISZ: Unfortunately, we’re not. It’s a far cry from being ‘cut off from the outside world’. I wouldn’t mind it, but we’re not.

R: Why would you want to be cut off from the outside world?

ISZ: Because I don’t care. I don’t give a shit.

R: Since when?

ISZ: A long while. If I’m interested, I go there.

R: You were very active in Budapest in the eighties.

ISZ: I used to be, yes, and I enjoyed it back then. There was an active urban life, Budapest night life at the time. We used to get up, but not in the morning. When we ran the band, there were lots of rehearsals, at least three or four a week. At night we went to pubs, to concerts, on tour.

R: Where did you go on tour?

ISZ: Once we went to Zirc, but we went abroad, as well. There were quite a few tours in Germany. Once we had a real big tour, we visited lots of countries. It was at the time when it still took a lot of time to get visas; it took us almost five months. Germany and the Netherlands were the two primary destinations. Or any place that showed some interest in us, where we could travel to have concerts.

R: How did you get into the band?

ISZ: I wanted to get involved. I wanted to play music, so I went to learn playing guitar from a guy who had just started a new band, because his old one had split up. He said that we should start a band, so we did.

R: Who were the other band members?

ISZ: The guy’s girlfriend, some friends of friends. It was amateur stuff, people only just started to learn to play; “let’s show our talents in a band, if we are learning, let’s learn in a band”. In those times others also said the same, like

Európa Kiadó,¹⁰⁴ all these people learned to play on the stage. People learned for a few months, then took to the stage and played there for thirty years. It was easier to learn there, because you had to come up with something.

R: How did you come up with the band name, *Kampec Dolores*?

ISZ: It was an idea that came to us, something like 'the end of pain' – 'kampec dolores', everybody liked that. Nobody had any objection to have an end to pain. So we settled on it, and that was that.

R: What kind of music did you play, how could you define it?

ISZ: I've read that it's alternative rock; also read once that it's alternative 'pink punk rock', or simply 'punk rock'.

R: What do you think?

ISZ: I think it has Bartókean depths. This is a quotation from someone, but not about me. I think the music itself is alternative rock, or 'punk rock', or something like that.

R: And the lyrics?

ISZ: The lyrics were mostly done by Gabika. I wrote about one or two at most. They were all really fairy-tale-like, but not so much about 'happy feeling'. Evidently we had a folk sound, as we come from and return to the folk. We had a violin to start with; it's kind of hard not to play the violin in a folkish way. Then you have to play Vivaldi on it. Folk music always comes in, whether you like it or not. We were inclined to it anyway, we liked it; it just came along, unnoticed. It wasn't like we decided to include folk elements, it's just that many of us came from a similar background. Many of us listened to folk music or attended dance houses.¹⁰⁵ Not me, but I did like it.

R: And your instrument was...

ISZ: The bass and the guitar. Mostly the bass.

R: When was the band founded?

ISZ: Around 1985, I can't say for sure.

R: What did you do before that?

ISZ: I worked at the Film Factory. At the time, the so-called 'outsiders', as someone said recently, wanted to play music. But there was this 'you must have a Workplace' thing. If you have a workplace, then eight-nine-ten hours slip by, and you can't really play music after that, you're dead tired. We were looking for jobs which did not consume so much time. The Film Factory is kind of loose; sometimes it's real hectic, but mostly it's quite loose. Gardening was the same, where you had to tend parks. We were tending parks with other, really talented musicians. Back then the musicians' association was the gardeners' association; today's famous musicians were geodesists.

R: How did you realize you wanted to play music?

ISZ: I'm not sure where it came from. When I was a child I went to a music school, I learned solmisation. I even started to learn some instrument, the violin, but I quit after a year. After that I never really started to learn instruments; I always wanted to, I just never came around to do it. Then I managed. I decided, that 'now is the time!' The times must have had their pull; everyone was starting bands at the time. The music school was during the

¹⁰⁴ *Európa Kiadó* [Európa Publishing House]: alternative rock band in the 1980s.

¹⁰⁵ Places where people can learn and dance traditional folk dances. Dance houses became a mass movement in the 1980s in Hungary.

sixties and seventies, when you had Kodály¹⁰⁶ in every school; almost every kid went to these schools. They went there, took the exam, they could do solmisation and read the notes. You had to attend these for a couple of years, after that you had music theory. Many kids were enrolled for that, my parents enrolled me as well, why not! And I liked it.

R: Did your brothers and sisters go there, as well?

ISZ: I had no brothers or sisters. I was an only child, but I won't talk about my family.

R: What do you think was the source of this rush?

ISZ: That every boy bought an electric guitar? I don't know, I've never thought about it. Probably it was because they could. It was at the time when you could already do that. When not just János Kóbor¹⁰⁷ or Gábor Presser¹⁰⁸ and company could make music, but normal people, too. Before that such things didn't exist. It was then that these things got started: small bands, clubs, in small places. Many people would've loved to make music even before that, but there was no opportunity; guitars were expensive, there was no money.

R: Did you guys have a club of your own?

ISZ: No.

R: And your own place?

ISZ: That we did. At first we were given a place for rehearsals, we had to play there. There were many bands rehearsing there; it was the studio of the Ikarus Factory. *Kontroll Csoport*¹⁰⁹ and the like rehearsed there. Maybe *Európa Kiadó* too, and many others. Later we had to rent studios for rehearsals. You had to have your own equipment, though there were some things there as well: cables, maybe amplifiers. At the time these were expensive things, and they were hard to get hold of. Those who could brought them or had them brought in from abroad. There were these horribly crap guitars you could buy here; I had one of those terrible, really crap guitars. There was this guy, I think he was the bass player from *Másfél*,¹¹⁰ who once said how easy it was for Westerners: they just put all that gadget on stage, and they didn't even have to play, it did the entire job for them. But you really had to learn to play these instruments, they were really that crap. After a while you saved up some money and bought yourself a normal instrument from the West; one that you could actually play, and the strings weren't three meters far.

R: Could you make a living out of music?

ISZ: No, it was impossible. I still can't understand how I managed, but yes, somehow I managed to make a living. I suppose I didn't really need too many things. If you pay for something, it's costly, but if you know people and get invited, it's different. The one who happened to have money invited all the rest. Those were different times.

R: Where did you have gigs?

¹⁰⁶ Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967): Hungarian composer, ethnomusicologist, music teacher, linguist and philosopher. He is best known for his music teaching method for children, the 'Kodály Method'.

¹⁰⁷ János Kóbor: leader of the rock band *Omega* (started in the 1960s, still exists).

¹⁰⁸ Gábor Presser: composer, leader of the rock band *Locomotive GT*, also founded in the 1960s.

¹⁰⁹ *Kontroll Csoport* [Control Group]: alternative rock band of the 1980s.

¹¹⁰ *Másfél* [One and a Half]: alternative rock band founded in 1989 (still exists).

ISZ: At first the Ikarus factory was a regular thing; there were many gigs there. Later the *Lágymányosi Community Hall*¹¹¹ was the usual place.

R: Pubs, clubs?

ISZ: No. There was *Tilos az Á*,¹¹² of course! But that was later, around ninety-something.

R: What kind of audience did you have?

ISZ: People. They were usually young. We never had a big audience. In the beginning I never thought that we would ever have.

R: Why was that?

ISZ: Because it wasn't popular music; nothing like what most people are into.

R: Did you ever want to play something else?

ISZ: No. I do now. I'm learning to play the piano, from score; I never did anything like this before. We never had any scores. Someone had an idea and played it for us; someone else had another one, and it was put together. The teacher had a great experience in that, this was what he did: he was musicologist. He knew how to put things together. The tune came from ideas, and there were lyrics to it. If you have an instrument in your hand and tinker a bit, you don't really need a score any more.

R: How many albums did you release?

ISZ: Around five, six or seven.

R: How many of those did you collaborate in?

ISZ: Certainly in two or three. Maybe in four or five, I'm not so sure.

R: Why did you stop?

ISZ: Because I'd had enough of travelling. We travelled a lot towards the end, because even if you couldn't make a living out of it, it was still money. The others had children and apartments: things that cost money; evidently you need more money for that. I was completely broke, but sometimes I had some money. We went on tours, and afterwards I had some money. Then again I didn't. I had enough of those trips, I didn't really feel that they were getting me ahead, I was bored with concerts.

R: Did the others know that you wanted to quit?

ISZ: Yes, they did.

R: What was their reaction?

ISZ: Nothing. We were a small family, a family band. We are on good terms even today, though sometimes we don't meet for years. When we meet, it's like meeting my family: the way I imagine a family. There was no problem with this, it was completely normal. There were no remarks, nothing whatsoever.

R: Were there any conflicts about you being a lesbian?

ISZ: Of course. Once some guy tried wooing, and I said, "Listen! I'm not interested!" He told me, "You're not like those". I said, "What do you mean by 'those'?" But I didn't feel like inquiring. This is really offensive! What was he talking about? What 'those'? I must have had other conflicts, I just can't remember. Let's move on, because I really don't want to linger on this for ages.

R: Since when have you known that you are lesbian?

ISZ: I always knew.

¹¹¹ *Lágymányosi Community Hall*: cultural centre in a suburban part of Budapest, regularly hosting alternative rock and blues concerts in the 1980s.

¹¹² *Tilos az Á* [T Forbidden]: popular bar of the Budapest underground music scene from 1990 to 1995.

R: When did you first know?

ISZ: I already knew in elementary school.

R: From what?

ISZ: I always fell in love with girls or women. That's a sign that seems to be pretty obvious. That's why I suspected.

R: What did you think? What did you call yourself?

ISZ: Nothing! I didn't even try to process this, because I had no idea what it was! I tried to get around it in elementary school by being the leader of the boys' patrol. I guess that's how I wanted to handle where I belonged. It's uncomfortable after a while, of course. It was for me, anyway. It's not a nice feeling not to know anyone; it's not good not to belong anywhere.

R: Did you have your first love in elementary school?

ISZ: Of course. Some classmate. Nothing important. The second was the same, and the third, and the one after that, all in the same line.

R: Did you tell the others?

ISZ: No. They were idiots if they didn't notice, but I told them nothing.

R: Who did you tell first?

ISZ: To some close friend. There was no consequence. I was around thirteen or fourteen; we had a great talk about it, and remained great friends afterwards. There are intimate talks among kids as well: we were making pancakes, and then we turned serious, and had a talk. Like in real life. Kids have that life, too.

R: Who did you tell first that you were in love with a girl?

ISZ: I was under twenty, but a lot of stuff happened at that time, and things get mixed up. Not like today. Now I would remember.

R: And what did that person have to say about it?

ISZ: She was happy because she happened to be lesbian, as well.

R: Did you know about it?

ISZ: No. She suspected. There were some that I knew they were, more of them later, and some I didn't know about.

R: What word did you use to describe yourself?

ISZ: I used 'faggot'.

R: Always?

ISZ: Yes. Especially at the beginning. Later it was softened to 'lesbian'.

R: Did you know other lesbians?

ISZ: No, but I saw some. When I was a kid, there was a girl in our street who always wore boys' clothes. I always paid close attention when she passed in the street. I saw two like that. But I never knew anyone closely. I recognized them, I tried to ask around, but I never managed to find out anything.

R: Did your friends ever talk about her?

ISZ: No, they only knew her by sight. Nobody talked about them. If they had, I could have had some information.

R: Did you try to find some more information later on?

ISZ: I did. There was absolutely nothing I could find. At least I didn't manage to find anything about these things, not a single word.

R: What was it like to realize that you are different?

ISZ: A bitter thing. At first I thought that you can come out of this. It would've been better if I could have just ignored it; there was enough trouble in the

world without it. But now I don't want to come out of this any more. I never could, of course.

R: Did you find company?

ISZ: What company?

R: An open, welcoming one.

ISZ: Yes, sometimes. But I never had a large company. I had many friends, and many people knew about me, but I didn't really know too many openly lesbian people before my twenties. At least none that I was aware of.

R: Did the band help with meeting other lesbians?

ISZ: The fact that we travelled west did. Not to mention that once, when I was eighteen, I travelled around Western Europe for a month without the band, and I had an affair. Not love, rather a quick affair, just like it is written in the books. First sight, a few days, and that's it. At the time it was huge luck that I got a passport, because they were really hard to come by.

R: Why did you go there?

ISZ: To travel, to see what it's like over there. I was really curious. In my generation my type of people were reading books by the beat generation. I was really interested in what it was like. I was in Amsterdam, France, here and there. Being someplace else was a really great experience: the whole life over there, the freedom, the fact that the policeman didn't tell you to go home to your own district after looking at your ID, just because you were standing or walking in the street.

R: Didn't you feel alone?

ISZ: I was alone as a lesbian, but I always had lots of friends. But you are always alone, of course. Alone, by yourself. Right.

R: Did you have any close friends?

ISZ: I'll give you a number: five. And I had a hundred friends because of the life I led.

R: Did the recognition of your lesbianism bring any new acquaintances?

ISZ: Not at first, no. After a while it did. In my twenties.

R: Did you know any lesbian groups?

ISZ: Not at all. I read something in a paper, we went to some apartment and that was it, but it was much later. Things went on in secret, but the periodical *Mások* already existed, I think it was there that I read a notice about a 'lesbian group of friends' or something. Probably they wanted to expand the circle of people. It was good that I went there. I got to know several people there, which was good. It wasn't a lesbian paper but a gay one, primarily for boys. It included some female advertisements, as well.

R: What did you gain by expanding your circle of acquaintances?

ISZ: It brought a lot of things. We could discuss these things. At the time I thought that it was not important for me to talk about such issues; what was important was that they were my friends. It was then that I discovered that I had said all this so that it'd be easier to survive. This was important. Even today I prefer to be with lesbians than with others. It brought nice people, many friends. I can't talk about this with people who aren't lesbians themselves. If there's no group, then I can talk to the person I am with: that amounts to one person altogether, or there's this division of 'the heterosexual' and 'the lesbian', and that's completely different, they have no clue about this.

R: Did you analyse your lesbianism by yourself?

ISZ: There was nothing to analyse. I tried all kinds of things to make it disappear, but it didn't. After a while it became clear that there was nothing to analyse. What is there to analyse? I'm simply a lesbian and that's it, there's nothing I can do about it.

R: Could you accept completely that this is what 'you are'?

ISZ: It was a longer process. It's about now that I have come to accept it fully. Of course it's also a question what 'fully' means. I wouldn't say even now that I would tell it to everyone, every time, everywhere. I think full acceptance is that you are out to anyone, anytime, anywhere. Not like I stand up and declare it, but rather that I don't have to think about whether to come out or not.

R: Could you tell it to everyone?

ISZ: It depends. It has happened that my coming out ended up in a heated argument. But the whole thing is just so damn boring, I don't want to argue with straights, I don't care. We had the pride parade not so long ago; I heard some reports on the radio. People say bullshit like "I have no problem with them, but they shouldn't expose themselves on the streets like that!" It drives me crazy; don't these people have any limits? Apparently not. They're just big zeros, you can't argue with them. Who can you argue with here? About what? If they are on this level: "they shouldn't expose themselves like that"? Someone does that, makes a stand; it's a terribly difficult thing, and then... you know what I'm talking about?

R: Did you like being with the band at the time?

ISZ: Yes, I did. It helped a lot, I made lots of acquaintances. The people who visit these events are usually not accountants. It's not a nice thing to refer to accountants here, but the fact is that most of them are a bit marginal; those who live this life and go to these places are a bit more open. They have a broader view of the world; they're more accepting. If many such people meet, then optimally it can broaden the limitations of "I have no problem with them, but...", or "those faggots", "those Jews". When lots of people talk together, this might change.

R: Did great love affairs emerge in these circles?

ISZ: They did. We met in a pub; you could say it was a great love affair. I guess she thought the same. But who has many great love affairs? There weren't many, no.

R: When was your first long-term relationship?

ISZ: This pub thing lasted for a couple of years. I had no year-long ones before that.

R: How did dating go? You caught sight of a woman in a pub...

ISZ: I caught sight of her, we talked, became friends, then it turned into love. First I always made friends.

R: Did you have a fan that you had an affair with later?

ISZ: Yes, it was at the time when musicians and fans could maintain a normal relationship. It wasn't any more like there were these big bands, like Omega or whatnot, who stood on the roof of the Parliament and you just stood down there, counting ants. Things changed, there were many smaller bands. You stood just a few meters away from each other; you could talk to them, give them a beer or a cigarette and have a chat. Before that it was different: like I wrote a fan letter to Omega, like "Oh, János Kóbor, you have such a lovely blond hair, and I'm so fond of Omega". "Yes, dear fan, I'm overjoyed that you love

Omega so much, please buy another record!” Here relations between band and fans were very different: that huge distance between the two shrank to a minimal level. You could see that musicians were also human. It was quite a flow at that time, bands were mushrooming – and they sang about everyday life, too. Until then no one had written about the problems of young people. If you were standing on the street with long hair and torn jeans, you could take it for granted that a policeman would come up to you, ask for your ID, which, of course, contained your address, and he would simply tell you to ‘return to your district’. If you had long hair and jeans, you were surely a troublemaker. What this trouble was supposed to consist of I’m not quite sure; I don’t know what they had in mind. But it was enough of a problem that you looked different.

R: Was it good to belong to these circles?

ISZ: It was great; in retrospect I’d say I was quite cool at the time, I really belonged there. I felt good, they were really normal people.

R: Was it rather a men’s world?

ISZ: There were lots of men, but also lots of women. Our band had two women and three men, which is almost fifty percent. Luckily our band happened to have super great people in it. The guitar teacher and his wife, well, they were terrific people! The others were nice, as well. Csaba and Gabika had a child relatively early, and at that time it was fantastic for me to see that Csaba had no problems with doing the dishes or cleaning up; he liked performing ‘women’s work’. He was a perfectly normal man. I felt real good in this world, where there was no such work or job which one could not do as a man or a woman. That’s what the band was like. I’ve known and respected them for such a long time; they are like a real family to me. That is what I call normal.

R: Did you know any other female bass players besides yourself?

ISZ: I knew some, though none of them were Hungarian. I knew several abroad. There was this American girl, Amy, she played lots of instruments as well as the bass, and I knew a few female bass players from Germany. There was the band *Tyereshkova*, who had a female bass player, but I didn’t know them. There are lots in the West. After a while they started coming here to play, as well.

R: Was a female bass player considered to be something special at the time?

ISZ: I don’t think so. Others might say it was, but it wasn’t for me.

R: You mentioned that it was a really family-like band, that they were very accepting towards you. What about other bands?

ISZ: Some were accepting, others less so. With some I was on real good terms, others I didn’t like. Not because of who was straight and who was lesbian, but because of other things. Among musicians it’s not the primary concern; you rather start with musical issues. There were many festivals with several bands, five or six, and we knew each other quite well. If we went on tour together, we had the same accommodation. Not in the same room, but the same corridor; we spent our time together. I really loved *Vágtázó Halottkémek*;¹¹³ we never had a dull moment with them. There was always something going on; I like them, they’re great guys.

¹¹³ *Vágtázó Halottkémek* [Galloping Coroners]: psychedelic punk-rock band active from 1975 to 2001, re-established in 2009.

R: Did you get any harassment in this company for being a lesbian? Did you try to meet women?

ISZ: I don't remember being harassed. I never really cared for others' orientation, I tried and sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

R: How did you go about it?

ISZ: I just did. I made an acquaintance, and it either turned into something more, or not. That was my mating strategy.

R: Did you manage to expand your circle of acquaintances with this strategy?

ISZ: Rather by meeting people systematically. Not through personal ads, but rather through the 'let's get to know more people' type of ads. It was a good idea, it'd have never occurred to me. Not that I had anything against ads for seeking partners; I simply consider it to be a great idea to expand your circle of acquaintances through such advertisements. How else can you make friends, or get to know more people, if there's absolutely no information about it, and it's all hushed up? There was this Károly Makk film in the eighties, *Another Way*, which everyone saw at least thirty times. I heard afterwards, that people posted ads with the code word 'Another Way', so that's how you knew. It was an incredibly suppressed world back then. It's simply terrible not to have any information at all about something! When I went to Berlin, a whole new world opened up for me. Over there it's not like here in Hungary, like "Wow, we've translated three books, now there are ten books about this issue in Hungarian!" There are whole libraries dedicated to this issue over there. A slight difference! Sometimes it makes me sad, though at other times I'm really happy that another book is getting translated every year, but it's still very sad; how far are we behind, thirty years? There are whole libraries, I'm sure there's a book even about the direction of hair growth among lesbians! I remember when they first started publishing stuff about this in Hungary: the popular media released a leaflet-like little booklet which contained interviews with whores, some of which happened to be attracted to women. In Germany there are women's centres; two women sitting there, there's counselling, there's everything! It was a great idea of me to go there, because I could see a different world. Not just this misery. I still consider this to be a misery, though the younger generation, who are into gender studies, they must be seeing it in a different way. It's imperative that you go abroad to have some glimpse of the whole picture, that it's perfectly normal, that all the others are the idiots, not you! For this you need to be able to get out of your confines: those are being shaped by others, not by your own will. It's your own only because you grow up in this, and don't know anything else.

R: Why did you go to Berlin?

ISZ: Because I felt like there was nowhere to go further. I felt that I was stuck, I needed some new input. True to my 'outsider' nature – as I'm usually called – I simply went there and said, "Okay, let's see how it turns out". I have no capital with which to fly around: I try it out whether it's good or not, and then fly to a different place, check whether it's good, and if it is, I move there; what's in my pocket is all I have. I always try to start from scratch. I was in my thirties, but it was worth it! I learned a lot, including the fact that it doesn't make a difference where you are. But it's still good that I was there, I saw lots of new things. I was so enthusiastic about all the things there! Like there are so many things to read in Berlin. Not because I like reading, but there are so many things

you can learn from books. Cooking, sawing, you can learn anything; reading other people's experiences. There are plenty of women's centres, every district has one or two, there's all kinds of help: counselling, film screenings, a multitude of topics. On Wednesday we watch a lesbian film, on Thursday we watch a film about "the-life-of-disenfranchised-lesbians-somewhere", on Friday we watch a film about "lesbians in the heavy industry"... All this stuff, you just stand there and stare, yes, it's possible to do it like this, as well. There are lots of things to occupy yourself with. I loved it that you could simply walk in and say, "Wow, this is terrific, I've never seen anything like this, can I have a look around?" "Of course, look around, you can do this and that too. And here's the list of all the other places where you can do things." It was a completely different world!

R: Were you stuck as a musician or in your life in general?

ISZ: I couldn't see how life here in Hungary could bring any novelty to me. I started to get acquainted with feminism. Here it has no tradition at all. Actually that was the reason: feminism. German feminism is famous, it has a great tradition. The whole thing started by going to Berlin with some people, by car. We got in; we were fined a hundred times in Slovakia, because at the time German cars were fined for just about anything. But somehow we managed to get there, and I really loved it. I came back one more time, but then I went back again, as a homeless person. I wasn't homeless, I always had a roof above my head; what I mean is that I went there without any property whatsoever. Then I was much more open and friendly, ready to roll. In one or two months I befriended a hundred people. I started systematically going to places where I could meet people. I met people; I talked to people. I know more people over there than some local Germans do.

I went to the western part, to Kreuzberg; there was a great alternative life over there, lots of Turks, kebab, stuff like that... And they received me with lots of love and openness. I couldn't mention an instance when someone behaved like an asshole. Everyone was interested. Many German friends who later visited Hungary complained that even though everyone spoke English in the company, no one ever bothered to say a word in English to them. They just sat there dumb and nobody cared. No one asked them anything, like "Hey, where do you come from? What do you do?" I was asked. Out of a hundred, eighty people were interested, and it's not country in the middle of nowhere where you never see foreigners. Half of the people are foreigners. But they were interested and open; they took the trouble to switch from German to English. It was the exact opposite of what I experienced here later – with very few exceptions. Those exceptions came from feminists circles: if someone didn't speak Hungarian, they switched to English. It never happened anywhere else that people switched to English only because there was a foreigner among them, or that they were interested apart from wondering, "Who's that and what is she here for?" One of my best friends comes from East Berlin. The other one comes from West Berlin. They have a different attitude: they're both really open and interested; that makes all the difference.

R: How long did you live there?

ISZ: Ten years.

R: What did you do?

ISZ: Everything, all that you can image. I lived, and that was the most important thing. I got to know things. Then came a moment when I told myself that I already knew so much that I didn't want to know anything more. The countryside was an old dream of mine, so I thought, "This is it, now is the time!" I got bored, the last year was boring, everything was already familiar, and I didn't learn anything new. There were these huge CSDs,¹¹⁴ two hundred thousand people, or five hundred thousand marching, if I remember well. At first it was like an atomic bomb in my head, like "Oh my God, this is actually happening, it's great!" But after a while I didn't even bother to attend, it bored me so much. It built up in me, brick by brick: I said that I wanted some peace and quiet, a little nature. I didn't want cars to pass me by when I was cycling. I didn't want to tremble when I was turning left, because someone might hit me. I didn't go to places any more, I was bored with everything and I felt that I knew too many people and there's no possibility of getting to know new people. I'd always longed for a rural life and then – it might sound conceited, and I don't think that way any more, either – I felt that I was 'ready'. Now I could do what I wanted; animals, plants, the countryside: this is life.

R: And a partner?

ISZ: And a partner, yes.

R: Did you find a partner?

ISZ: I'd always wanted this, even without a partner. But it helped that she wanted this, as well. I might not have decided so quickly to move to the countryside if it wasn't for her quick decision. She liked it too, the countryside.

R: Had you ever lived in the countryside?

ISZ: Not for a long time. Back then I couldn't imagine life to be possible outside of the city. Going to the country for a couple of days was always good, but then it was always like running back to the crowd: "It's night, the lights are on, back to the pub quickly, let's mingle with people". The warmth of having people around you. Back then I couldn't imagine this. Or I could only imagine, but to imagine that I would actually do it, well, never.

R: Weren't you interested in Hungarian feminist groups?

ISZ: There were feminist groups, of course, but those groups weren't my own, so I didn't care. I just didn't like it. I wanted something else, and I felt that I simply couldn't get it.

R: How were you first acquainted with feminism?

ISZ: Antonia Burrows came from England, it was through her. She was an English feminist, and she got introduced feminism to me. She founded a helpline, *NANE*, I was part of that. It was her who started these things. It took me a while to realize what this was all about. Back then I had the feeling that I always had to return to square one when I was talking with people and I was trying to explain things to them, and it bored me after a while. It was easy for Antonia, because she was a teacher, but I wasn't like that. I was bored with returning to square one and explaining everything time and again. I wanted things to progress, that's how it was.

R: Did you get to know other lesbians, gays, or feminists?

¹¹⁴ CSD: Christopher Street Day; in Germany this is the term used for Gay Pride Marches, referring to the original New York route.

ISZ: I got to know *Háttér Society*, some of its members are still good friends of mine. I heard of *Szivárvány Társulás a Melegek Jogaiért* [Rainbow Association for the Rights of Gays and Lesbians],¹¹⁵ and *Habeas Corpus*. I don't speak their language; I just heard of them, they were one and the same for me.

R: Did you join any of these?

ISZ: Only *NANE*, not the others.

R: Why?

ISZ: Because that one was enough.

R: Did you look for other lesbian circles?

ISZ: I was so overwhelmed by feminism that I didn't. Many old friends took me for an idiot and I lost many of them because of this. I seemed to them as an enthusiast who's fanatic about an idea and has gone crazy; many from my older circles think this way. I wasn't looking for groups, I was simply so amazed by this new concept: women as a minority in society. I discovered things that I'd never even thought of before. What fascinated me was the fact that things have so many sides, that you can approach a single issue from such a multitude of angles. I liked this, the feminist approach, the feminist angle. That's why I could have appeared to be a fanatic. I guess I was, too, at the beginning. That's how I am, I always delve into things with a huge momentum. I was really interested then.

R: Are you always like that?

ISZ: Not always, no. But if something shakes me to my foundations, then yes. This doesn't happen very often.

R: What else had this effect on you?

ISZ: I can't recall anything else. There were some. But this was so significant because I was no longer young when it happened. Earlier music was like that, I jumped into that with great momentum, as well. But I'm trying not to become a fanatic. It's a fact though that I've always been more interested in theoretical stuff. Okay, music is not that theoretical, but we can call it that, as there are music theories. The more emotional types can express themselves better through music. This is a theory as well, I guess. Feminism: new ideas, new points of view, there's a lot to it. For me, looking for lesbian circles was the same as looking for lesbians. I visited some lesbian circles here and there and it was great, but still it wasn't. I didn't feel that I was learning anything new.

R: Were there any opportunities for lesbians to meet?

ISZ: There were some parties, there was *Bécsi szelet* [Wiener Schnitzel Restaurant] at Kálvin Square, Ildikó Juhász's place. Or at *Háttér*. I enjoyed myself there; it's great to be among your own kind. Only that my brain was more preoccupied with feminism.

R: Were there any specific places for lesbians?

ISZ: I didn't really frequent these places. We went a lot to the Háy Wine House, but everyone went there, all the musicians. It was a far cry from a lesbian meeting place. I went there a lot, and to *Tilos az Á*. It was only later that I

¹¹⁵ *Szivárvány Társulás a Melegek Jogaiért* [Rainbow Association for the Rights of Gays and Lesbians]: gay/lesbian rights organization formed in 1994, which never got registered because they would not limit their membership under age 18 (the age of consent for same-sex relationships at the time). After several years of struggle for registration in court, it dissolved.

learned about specifically lesbian places. I didn't go to these places, because I didn't know they existed. I'd heard about the University Café when I was younger, but I never went there, I didn't like it. It was full of guys; I didn't like the people who were there. Lots of guys, there were only guys. I looked in from the outside, from a glass rain shelter at the bus stop. I never saw a single woman. Why should I go there?

R: What were the lesbian parties like?

ISZ: It wasn't a party but an apartment, where three of us sat and talked, and after that we had the house party, which was more or less the same, only with twenty people. We talked about everything. There were some sandwiches, maybe with some of paprika cream spots, and talking about anything.

R: Did you organize any of these?

ISZ: No, because I didn't have an apartment. If I had had one, I would've organized some.

R: What were the conversations like?

ISZ: It was good to be together with similar people; good to know that there are all sorts of lesbians.

R: Were there any places for women?

ISZ: There were later, but when?! There was this place called *Eklektika*, I'd also call it a workshop. As far as I know, they held women's nights there. But then I wasn't living here any more. When women's places started to open I wasn't here, and I don't know about the earlier ones. I've heard of the *Eklektika*, that's it.

R: Homeros, *Labrisz*?

ISZ: Oh, right, I attended a few Pink Picnics. Homeros sounds familiar, though I don't really know what they were.

R: Where did you hear about Pink Picnics?

ISZ: From friends. Everyone knew where it was, you didn't really have to look for it. Some of us went there together.

R: What were these like?

ISZ: It was like we got off the bus, and from the bus stop we walked out to a green field, where we sat and talked, in a kind of relaxed manner. It was very pleasant. Lots of gays sitting together in the grass, talking.

R: Did you hear about *Labrisz* then?

ISZ: Yes, but I can't say much about them. They were there for sure. I always heard that there'd be a *Labrisz* meeting, but I always missed it somehow. I joined them at the time when they had only this small, folded A/4 newsletter. We were working on it together with Judit and Gabi, but that was a long time ago.

R: You mentioned music and lyrics: did you 'talk' from there?

ISZ: Music is a great way of self-expression for those who live their emotions internally and not externally.

R: How many pieces of lyrics did you write?

ISZ: Not many. One of those is about emotional struggles. The other is a nice Katalin Karády¹¹⁶ imitation that I wrote. It starts like "The minutes glide by, time never waits for you". I remember sitting on the tram and thinking of Katalin

¹¹⁶ Katalin Karády (1910-1990): legendary actress and singer in the 1930s-1940s, a lesbian icon in Hungary (she was bisexual). She immigrated to the US in the 1940s.

Karády. The re-release of Katalin Karády's album was a big favourite then; it had a golden cover with her picture holding a cigarette. I wrote three pieces of lyrics. Two were about internal emotional struggles, the third was inspired by Kati Karády's music.

R: Was she your role model?

ISZ: I wouldn't say that. I loved her. She was no role model but we listened to her day and night.

R: Were there any others like her?

ISZ: Kati Kovács,¹¹⁷ when I was a kid, then the Rolling Stones, then blues, after that Frank Zappa; he's still a big favourite. Now I think the latest Rolling Stones album is a pile of shit, but Frank Zappa is great. There are no ideals now; I like pieces, songs, stuff like that. My female favourites are Madonna and Kati Karády.

R: If we disregard music, who is your female role model?

ISZ: Tyereshkova. No kidding, I'm serious. When I was a kid we had the pictures of Tyereshkova and Gagarin above the blackboard in the classroom. I thought, "What an awesome girl this Tyereshkova is! I want to be a female astronaut, too!" But they said, "Don't be stupid, kiddie, you can't be a female astronaut!" So I said, "Okay, can I be Gagarin then?" "No, you cannot be Gagarin either!" I loved Tyereshkova for a while, until it turned out that I couldn't be Tyereshkova. I had a Karády era, and I loved Madonna very much, as well. The actress Kathy Bates too – it must be because she's plump, as well. But it's not just that, she's great. There are lots of them, they're there on the bookshelf: Simone de Beauvoir, or that Austrian woman, who wrote *The Wall*.¹¹⁸ It's hell of a book, I recommend it to everyone. Virginia Woolf is a must for everyone, Patricia Highsmith is the most brilliant detective story author, and there are a lot more. Three quarters of the bookshelf are full of these. I've always loved Otilia Solt¹¹⁹; she always fought for the poor. Angela Merkel! I almost forgot her. I love her. That woman, she's terrific. First thing, she's honest, it shows, which is a huge achievement for a politician. I love the way she dresses; she's never overdressed. She's famous for always wearing the same suit. She must have ten, for ten days. I do talk to Germans to decide if it's just me, whether I'm an idiot and I miss some things she does, but everyone, even the staunchest leftists respects Angela Merkel. I really like her, she's a good chick.

R: Have you ever stood up in front of the public as a lesbian?

ISZ: Not with my face, not in Hungary. This is a big risk; either you're lucky, or you're not. If some idiot happens to see it, then you're not. I'm not sure it would've been a bigger risk back then, but I was much more paranoid. I still am. Some people say that the problem is not being paranoid but not being paranoid enough. Looking at the Hungarian political situation, maybe it's even more risky now than before, because now the country's full of tension and violence unheard of twenty years ago. Aggression, complete frustration. How can you possibly satisfy so many people? If so many people remain frustrated,

¹¹⁷ Kati Kovács (b. 1944): popular female pop and rock singer since the 1960s, best known for her adaptations of foreign songs.

¹¹⁸ Marlen Haushofer, Austrian writer; the book mentioned here is *Die Wand*, published in 1963.

¹¹⁹ Otilia Solt (1944-1997): sociologist, editor of *Beszélő* samizdat paper, founder of the Poverty Reduction Fund (*SZETA*; see: footnote 193), MP for the liberal party from 1990 to 1994.

aggression is channelled somewhere. Here or there, doesn't matter: where the minorities are. If it had come to light back then, it wouldn't have had any terribly great impact on my life except I wouldn't have got a passport. Getting fired, c'mon, who gives a shit; work was compulsory, I'd just have gone to another geodetic department. I had no university lecturer's position to hold on to. They couldn't have put me in jail, either. In the film studios every fourth person was an informer, anyway. It's getting uncovered nowadays. And there are so many things that don't get uncovered. I had a friend who smuggled books over the border, on a train, and he was caught. He never ever got a new passport after that. Everybody thought then that that was it. But then once, in the early nineties, the police took in his girlfriend and it turned out that they already had a file on this friend of mine. It was a complete shock for us: it was then that we realized that even in our little insignificant lives, even us, who did not participate in anything big, there were files even on us. On me, for instance, though I don't give a shit. I always thought that nobody cared about the small fish. My friend was a small fish too, and he also had a file, because once he dared to bring in something. I don't remember crashing against the law in such a way, but at the time my whole existence was a crashing against the law. I didn't have a job for a long while when it was compulsory, it was called 'SP' or Social Parasitism, etcetera. It's possible that there was a file, but I didn't care who the informer was. There must have been many among the people I kept company with. Just so they'd know what you were up to and that you were not dangerous. Because you were different than the others – though there were also files on those who were not different.

R: Are you afraid of anything?

ISZ: I'm not afraid of anything. I'm not afraid that my leftist or rightist inclinations might be disclosed. I wouldn't care. I was never approached, but I know it was damn hard to say no when you were approached. I knew lesbians, I knew this friend of mine who had a file so I must have been interesting. I knew musicians.

R: Does your family know that you are a lesbian?

ISZ: My family is one person, who knows - even if we don't mention it. We never talk about it. It's like we've tacitly agreed not to discuss it.

R: Your lyrics about emotional struggles, what exactly are they about?

ISZ: I thought of my lesbian self as "How should it be? Should it be, or shouldn't it be?" Well, I have it after all, but it was a struggle, I was struggling. People love the Kati Karády song. Zsuzsi Ujj¹²⁰ started singing because she heard that. That's what she told me, but she might have been lying. "The minutes glide by, time never waits for you. / I turn off the light, in darkness I wait for you, and I'm afraid. / I love you, you beautiful life! // Your steps I follow ceaselessly. / For the lights of dying embers I strive. / I love you, you beautiful life!" The other one: "Lesbos in body, transvestite angels / heavenly walk, earthly talk / perverted angels, fly!" This one didn't have much melody, that's why I didn't sing it.

R: What did the others say about it?

ISZ: Nothing! They were happy! These are great lyrics.

R: Everywhere the same reaction?

¹²⁰ Zsuzsi Ujj (b. 1959): Singer, songwriter, artist. Her band *Csókolom* was founded in 1992.

ISZ: Once we were touring in England and we had this manager, and they acted like it was a big thing. We had to translate it into English. "Such lyrics?! You can't have lyrics like that in England...!" Everybody was shocked. "It's forbidden in England, and not in Hungary? Is it permitted to say 'transvestite'?"

R: Did the audience understand what it was about?

ISZ: I don't know. The straights did. And more than one lesbian found me by these lyrics. Someone liked it so much that Gábor Bódy¹²¹ wanted to make a film of video clips, and it would've been included. I was the 'poetess of the apartment blocks', because we were living in an apartment block at the time, and just then Gábor Bódy died. That was the story of the song; the record was complete, and then Bódy died.

R: When was that?

ISZ: Damn me if I know. They made a film out of the video clips of the marginal bands of the time. There were musicians who were looking for songs by marginal bands for this, and this song was chosen. It wasn't Bódy who collected the songs; the musicians did, and he either gave his approval or he didn't. Obviously he must have approved of it, because the record was made. The recording started and then he died. We sat in the studio, I remember, full of excitement. It was a big thing then: a free studio recording!

R: Had you already had an album by then?

ISZ: Our first album was made in Amsterdam. Everything went illegally. There were bands that made lots of recordings and had their own studio. They saw us at a concert and invited us. It was clear that Eastern Europeans didn't have the money to live there for a month, so they invited us to live there and eat for free, they'd record the album, even release it. That was our first album. The second was made in East Berlin. There was this football-player type, permed East Berliner guy, who was the studio owner. We always went to eat trotters to the neighbouring street. He had a really great studio considering the circumstances of the time. We recorded the second album. The third one was made in Brno. There too we lived at some place or other, I can't really remember; I know we had to go out to some studio. The fourth album was a Hungarian one, Laci Hortobágyi had a studio. We recorded a Laci Hortobágyi-type Indian music at the *Délibáb* [Mirage]Studio.

R: Do you feel guilty about quitting music?

ISZ: Not at all, never had. Dear Csaba was here three weeks ago, he's sending the scores to learn.

R: You never miss it at all?

ISZ: I was really fed up with music. We had to listen to other bands as well, because we went on tour so much. I didn't turn on the record-player or anything for years. I packed it up, so that I don't have to listen to music. I barely listen to music today, only classical music or folk music. I don't listen to the albums of all my friends. I can't bear it! I'm full, like when you fill up a cup.

R: What kind of classical music do you listen to?

ISZ: I love female opera singers very much. I'm not saying I put them on every day, but I often play operas. I bought a whole pack of Maria Callas. There's another pack of folk music. I've noticed that I like perfectly stupid pop songs

¹²¹ Gábor Bódy (1946–1985), film director, famous for his alternative works.

as well, ones that I used to consider phenomenally crap. I love listening to those, but only on the radio.

R: Hungarian songs?

ISZ: "Everything is growing old around the old house" – I'm very fond of that, by Kati Kovács.

R: Bartókian depths?

ISZ: Bartók only occurred to me because I'm learning from his score. It's a famous one, and a real bitch at that, extremely difficult to play. Some acquaintance told me that they have a friend who's running a band, and I must go to see them because they're really 'Bartókian depths'. I recalled this, because I couldn't stop laughing.

R: Was it some kind of defence mechanism, coming to the countryside?

ISZ: I needed the change. There was some kind of escapism at the beginning, but I really don't miss the city. I have a goal that I'd like to achieve: to respect myself, to be satisfied, to feel good, to like my surroundings, to like getting up, to like doing what I'm doing. To achieve this I want the least interference in my life. Very rarely I find myself thinking, "Damn, it'd be great to go to the pub". It's a kind of self-defence that I don't remember things, because who knows what might come up. At the same time I'm occupied with other things, so I don't care. If I can quit smoking, I'll reach that point which I'm striving for. If I can do that, I'll say that I can do anything.

R: Do you have any desires?

ISZ: I hope to reach that point when I desire nothing and I'm satisfied just by sitting here. That would be good.

R: Anything else?

ISZ: Only this. I have no other desires. I used to have some, but they're old ones. Now I don't have any. Being satisfied with respecting myself is quite a good goal, I think. Maybe I'll make it. I wish for nothing else. Though... I guess everybody has heard of the rightist stuff, the Hungarian Guard, whatnot. There are two Guardsmen here in the village, as well. This is where I slip into what I didn't want. That we're in Hungary. This is what I didn't want! (*They go to the piano.*) Come, I'll show you what I've learned so far. I should have practiced a bit before this. I learned this as the first one (*German song, sung with lyrics*).

R: What was that?

ISZ: The tune of the old GDR bedtime story: "Sandman, sweet Sandman, / It's time now, the children are going to bed." A German folk song. How does it go? I forgot it, I'm a bit excited. But that's the beauty of it, no? Damn it, I forgot! I have to check the score.

(*They go to the yard to feed the chickens, Szini sings*) "Elias, Tobias, one bowl of squash, you ate a bit much. The chicken to the yard hurries, wants to eat all the berries. Elias, Tobias, one bowl of squash."¹²² It was beautiful. Thank you very much! Go, mummy is there! Good! Alright, can we go? Little ones! Come-come-come-come, my sweet ones! Should I bring Hoodoo? Here's the lovely pasta for Hoodoo! You'll be a famous film star! Hoodoo always misses the food. Sometimes she doesn't. Do you see that, Hoodoo? Do you?

R: How did she become blind?

¹²² Hungarian folk song.

ISZ: She was born this way. But even the blind chicken finds grains. Her eyes are always closed because the others keep picking on her. Because she's so miserable.

R: How did you notice?

ISZ: First she just looked weird. We tried palm-feeding her, because she was very tame. She never found the food, always missed it. We started testing her, how blind she is: well, quite a bit. There's a pot full of corn, that's what the chickens eat. When the others leave, they sit down perching, and the cowardly ones eat at the end. They love pasta.



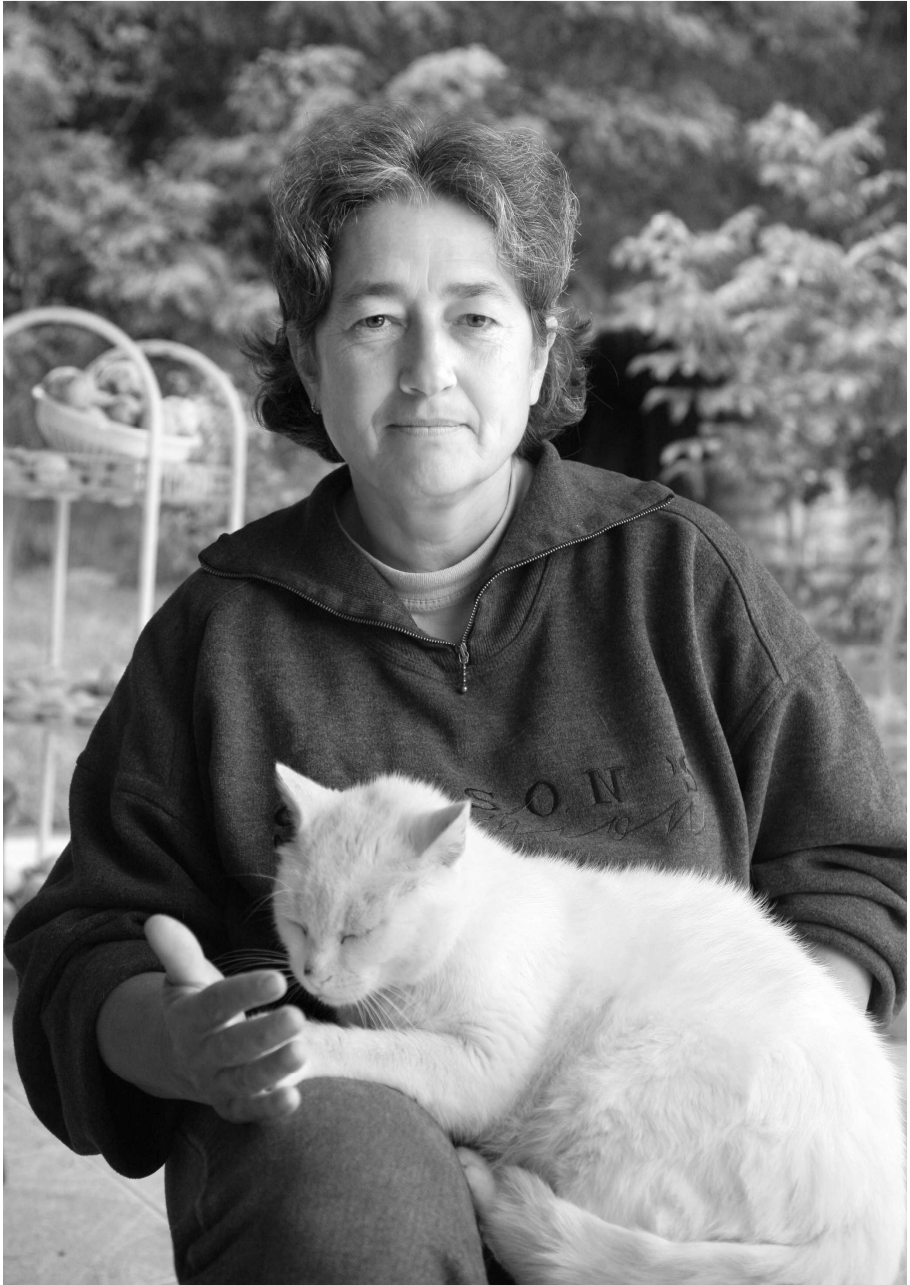
A kampec dolores zenekar, Graz, 1988, fotó: Szilágyi Lenke



Pisa, 1988 körül, fotó: Szilágyi Lenke



1. 1989, fotó: Szilágyi Lenke



“I’m living here in some Paradise-like state, alone...”

Mari Bán (b. 1959)

R: Can you tell us about your family and the place you are from?

MB: I was born in Budapest. I lived in Óbuda until I was 41, then I moved down to this small village, Szatina. I had once come here to visit someone earlier and I liked the scenery very much. As I felt that no bonds were tying me to the capital any more – no work or any other attachments –, I made the decision that after the bustle of the city I would prefer to live in a more introverted way, closer to nature. The family? I’m an only child, my mother brought me up alone. My older relatives (except my father) have all died, the younger ones have started their own families, nobody and nothing held me back, so I left Budapest.

R: Did you know your father?

MB: I was two years old when they divorced, but later we had quite a good relationship as adults. But he has been very sick for a few years now, and his daughter born from his second marriage turned up out of nowhere, so they are living together; unfortunately I don’t know where, so I can’t pay him visits, either.

R: When did your interest in music start?

MB: I got my first musical experience at the age of six, when the *Táncdalfesztivál* [Pop Song Festival]¹²³ got broadcast on television. From then on I was constantly listening to music: I was given a teeny-weeny radio working with two button cells, and it was glued to my ears nonstop, night and day. At the age of ten I started learning to play trumpet, although I would have preferred to learn drumming, but the drum teacher wasn’t willing to give me lessons. But seven years later I could start drumming, that’s when I found a teacher.

R: Why didn’t the drumming teacher want to give you lessons?

MB: In the sixties-seventies it was very difficult for a girl to do anything that was supposed to be done by boys. I really wanted to play drums – but I wasn’t allowed. I wanted to learn to drive – it wasn’t allowed, either. At the time only a few female celebrities or performers had a driving license. I wanted to become a camera operator, but I was told that female camera operators didn’t exist at all! After primary school I wanted to go to work in the TV, so I inquired what kind of studies I had to accomplish to become a camera operator – that’s when I was told not to even dream of something like that, because a woman could never become a camera operator, perhaps a film-editor or something... But nothing else stirred my interest.

R: Where did you apply finally?

MB: Finally I was enrolled in an economic secondary school, “in order to learn a trade”, then I found a drum teacher in the third grade and I could finally start drumming. I learned solfeggio and harmony theory and things like these at Ferenc Liszt Music School. From that school almost everything applied to the

¹²³ *Táncdalfesztivál* [Pop Song Festival]: pop music talent show aired on the National Television from 1966 to 1994. It was a starting point for the careers of many young pop singers and musicians.

College of Music, which occurred to me too, but at the time I was already drumming in *Bizottság*,¹²⁴ and jazz faded into the background.

R: What did your mother say about it?

MB: Obviously she wasn't glad, my studies were not paid by her, either, but by my godmother, and I also bought my first drum with her help. She was very cool, exactly ten years older than me, and she lived in the years 1968-1970 as a hippy, learned to play the piano too, and she liked the idea that I wanted to play drums, so she supported me.

R: Did you have a good relationship with her?

MB: Uh-huh. She was my best friend at the time, and as long as she lived I could share everything with her. She was the first person whom I told that I liked girls. At weekends, when I wanted to go to a jazz club or to a concert, I changed clothes at her place, she lent me her jeans, because I didn't have any yet at the time. My mother didn't know, of course, that I used to go to 'dress-change' parties.

R: How did you become drummer in a band?

MB: I became a member of *Bizottság* by accident. I had an alibi boyfriend, with whom I once rode a motorbike to Szentendre,¹²⁵ and Wahorn¹²⁶ (with whom my 'boyfriend' was together in the army) was doing a jam session at Church Square with an occasional formation (it wasn't *Bizottság* yet). We met there for the first time. Later I learned that they were searching for a drummer for *Bizottság*, so I tried it and stayed there. I liked them like crazy.

R: What alibi boyfriend?

MB: There was a boy around the family, who my mother liked to look at as a son-in-law candidate – I couldn't tell her the truth about myself yet. She saw him as a decent, modest young man with whom she could let me go out to party or ride a motorbike. For me it was a real good solution, he didn't try anything, and my mother was happy that I had a decent boyfriend.

R: Were you already aware that you were attracted to girls?

MB: Yes, I courted a little girl already in the kindergarten, then in primary school too, all along. I was in the fifth grade when my first girlfriend, who was in the seventh grade, taught me to French kiss. It lasted for two years, until she graduated and left school. Then in secondary school, when it came out that I was attracted to girls, the school doctor was informed about it and she sent me to a psychiatrist who told the doctor and my form teacher that they shouldn't worry, this was just childish admiration, I would grow out of it.

R: How did it come out?

MB: It happened on the school trip – it was an all-girls' class! – that I got together for the night with one of the girls and the others told the form teacher that Mari Bán... And the teacher probably thought that I was a threat to the form. But my classmates were very nice, they could have cast me off or bullied me, but they didn't. When I stood up and told the truth, my classmates received it very well, and from that point everybody teased me, but in a friendly way, and they flirted with me. So they were nice, and in the end I had four fine and

¹²⁴ *Bizottság* [Committee]: alternative rock band in the 1980s.

¹²⁵ Small town north of Budapest, famous for its lively cultural life.

¹²⁶ András Wahorn (b. 1953): avantgarde artist, musician, filmmaker. He was a member of *Bizottság*.

fun years at school. But only my form accepted me. The other students at the school didn't.

R: How did they react?

MB: The others were whispering things behind my back and pointed at me, like "look, there goes the faggot"... and it felt very bad. That's when I realized that I was someone who didn't measure up to the others – and I began to pull back and became quiet. I liked to be the centre of attention in my circle of friends, but among strangers I rather pulled back to a corner. For example, I didn't get on the bus if it was too crowded, and later, when I worked as a deliverer at the TV station, I didn't dare to enter the office if more than three people were inside. Serious inhibitions developed in me: I was convinced that it was written on my forehead that I was gay. It was approximately ten years ago, around the age of 38, that I managed to get rid of these inhibitions, but still not completely.

R: How long did you keep your mother believe that everything was all right with you?

MB: Until I was 26 years old, when she read my mail and it turned out that I was in correspondence with a Monica instead of a Mario. And once my mother visited me and found some fake eyelashes in the bathroom – at the time I was living with an elegant actress, but my mother knew about a 'Peter'. So I got found out. Then she didn't pry any more, but at least I didn't have to continue lying. We settled for the agreement that she wouldn't ask and I wouldn't tell.

R: And what happened when she read that letter?

MB: Well, she cried for a week. I told her that this would stay that way; I'd really tried everything but couldn't help it. Really, around the age of 18 I thought that I must try to sleep with a boy. There were a few guys I liked very much; it's just that I wasn't in love with them. I arranged with one of them to get into bed on a Friday and not get out until we manage to make out, but after 10 minutes we started laughing and gave up trying, I was totally hopeless. So I told my mother that I had tried everything but couldn't help it, and she had the choice to accept it or to lose me. There was a boy with whom we loved each other very much, he treasured me, protected me and all, but it didn't work out, we just cried over why we couldn't succeed. I was around 18 or 19, but even today, if we bump into each other somewhere, we give the warmest hugs to each other.

R: After this you didn't fall in love for a while, did you?

MB: No, I didn't, I didn't feel the tingling, or that when I saw someone she would touch my heart. A person who isn't gay can't imagine this feeling, though it's the same when a straight girl meets a boy. Me, if I see a girl, I feel the same as a straight guy; this is not a question of choice, you can't consciously control your emotions – at least I don't think so. It's bullshit what's so frequently stated nowadays that homosexuality is fashionable and children have to be protected from gays so they wouldn't 'pick up' the wrong habit. It doesn't work that way! The feeling comes from inside and you can't change it. I know that I was gay already in kindergarten, that's sure. I liked a little girl there, we escaped together from the kindergarten, we went to play truant, strolled around looking for bird eggs... (And since then she's turned out to be a lesbian, as well!) So I don't believe that a doctor would be able to change this. Psychiatrists can only help us to accept ourselves.

R: When and whom did you tell for the first time what you were feeling?

MB: To my godmother – I was eleven years old, and already totally sure of being gay. She received the news very well and suggested that I could tell my father, too. I told him when I was 14; we had departed together for a holiday trip, so it seemed better to inform him early enough, just in case I managed to pick up someone, to protect him from getting a shock from seeing us together. He also received it very well. Only my mother took it badly, but she was the person I was living with. But it wasn't that bad, I didn't have to make too much effort to tell stories about girlfriends or to hide them, because I didn't have any... It was so hard to find a partner at the time! I didn't know anybody and I began to believe at the age of 17-18 that I was the only one in the world who felt like that. Apart from Hilda Gobbi, because she was widely known as a lesbian. You couldn't post advertisements anywhere, either. One girl from secondary school advised me to go to Astoria.¹²⁷ So I showed up there and stood waiting in the underground passage until a girl picked me up, we went together to the Youth Park, we danced all night, we kissed... And she kept calling me Peter and wanted to take me to her place, she thought I was a boy. And when it turned out that I was Mari, not Peter, she freaked out and left me on the street.

R: After this where and how did you meet women?

MB: It took me years to find a real flesh-and-blood lesbian, I was already 21-22 years old. I didn't know where to search for them. Once I had managed to pick someone up in the street, we figured out from the eye contact that we were both gays, but we didn't match and it didn't last more than two months. And I had the band and the music, too. There were a lot of nice people, many people liked me, girls also flirted with me, but nothing came out of it. Then on a New Year's Eve we gave a concert with *Bizottság* at the College of Theatre and Film Arts, and I met an actress there, so this was the first real, serious love relationship – we even moved in together, she was 'Peter' with the fake eyelashes!

R: Now you say you're gay... I'd be interested in what you called yourself at the time, what term you used for yourself.

MB: Until I was ten years old I woke up every morning checking if my weenie had grown out at night. Quite simply I didn't feel like a girl. I acted completely like a boy, I went to play football, I checked out the girls together with the boys. I lived in the mental state that I was a boy, only my weenie hadn't grown out yet. Then later, when I got together with that girl at 11 and we I kissed in the street, she told me that if someone saw us at that moment, they'd think we were faggots. And at that moment the penny dropped and I realized, "Oh, my god, I'm a faggot!" Before that I hadn't even voiced to myself that I liked girls in spite of being a girl. I got hold of a medical book right away that contained case studies, and I read the term 'lesbianism' in there, so this was how I found out that I was a lesbian. But there were such stupid things in that book, like lesbians had moustaches – and I started checking myself in the mirror, thinking, "Oops, I also have a moustache, so now everyone will know that I'm a faggot..." So this was a horrible feeling! Then I began to close up.

R: Did the feeling that you were different from other girls come from inside you or did you get feedback from the outside world, too?

¹²⁷ Subway station in the centre of Budapest.

MB: The outside world didn't pay attention to me yet. But when I started to work as a deliverer in the summer holidays at the TV station at the age of 13-14, it happened once when I was walking in the corridor that I could hear a lady (I won't say the name, she's a well-known person) calling out to another, "Hey, this little deliverer chick, she's a faggot", and the colleague said, "Oh, yeah? Why do you think so?" So those who were more sensitive could spot it, but I didn't know who was sensitive and who wasn't, so I constantly felt spotted. I was afraid of unpleasant remarks, like that one. She could have chosen other words, like "Do you see that little girl running down the stairs? I think she is a lesbian..." So I got totally upset, and went down to the deliverers' office, and I told the others that someone had called me a faggot, and how it hurt me – but only because I was afraid they would start gossiping about me.

R: It's not a common thing for kids of 12-13 to work as a deliverer at the TV station.

MB: My mum – who was a latent lesbian in my opinion – had a friend, a sweet, little old maid called auntie Marika. She was the chief of the deliverer team at the TV station, so my mum left me in her care for the summer; she looked after me, since my mother had to work. That's why I was so worried that others might start to spread rumours about me being gay, that's why I went down to the office to complain in such a hysterical manner, because I was afraid that auntie Marika would tell on me to my mother. But she was kind, she protected me, and I was happy that I'd done a good job! I loved working there, and I sensed that there were some gay people there, but I didn't dare to approach anybody, I was so afraid of getting found out.

R: Didn't anybody show interest in you?

MB: No. Though I wouldn't have minded... There were a few film-editor chicks who set my gaydar to work... Well, so much about realizing and living gayness in childhood. The worst was the lack of places where you could meet women. But later that girl whom I picked up on the street – I think I can reveal her name, since she played an important role in the gay community: her name is Judit Bajkó. She couldn't meet women in this country, either, so she was trying to figure out something all the time to make it easier for girls to meet each other. Then one of her friends, a gay man created the first dating agency in Hungary, but he focused mostly on guys. Of course it was a straight dating service, it couldn't be anything else. So Judit founded the other dating service and she focused on girls. That's when I started to get acquainted with people, through this dating service: Magdi Timár, Gerdus, for whom Judit waited for two years to move here from Germany. I got involved in the gay community through Judit; she always knew where and when parties were held. Then we didn't meet each other for a long time, but meanwhile I got to know a lot of people.

R: Did straight people go to the dating agency too? Was that the cover activity?

MB: Yeah, yeah. The rule was that you could get three introductions for 500 Ft, and if you sent the money you could get an appointment from Judit. The introduction took place in an office-like place where the other person also came. Mostly young guys applied, since the girls didn't seek partners that way, though not too many gay guys turned up. Those who did were grateful to Judit for her courage to start this whole thing.

R: When did this happen?

MB: Around 1983, no other dating service existed at the time.

R: Did the lesbians know they had the chance to find partners if they checked in with Judit?

MB: Yes. A few of us sat down together, my actress girlfriend, Judit and her girlfriend, and some others, and we held a brainstorming session to figure out catch phrases that could help the person reading the advertisement recognize...

R: And then the gays...

MB: They applied on their own; yes, they dared to write it down. And they said at the personal meeting who they were looking for, what they meant, or what expectations they had.

R: You mentioned that a lot of straight people found partners, but are there any gay or lesbian couples who got together with Judit's help?

MB: Huh! I met two girls like this, Rita and Magdi Timár – Judit brought them together, and they were together for half a year. Then Magdi came to know Gerdus and the story continued: they lived together for six years. And me, I slowly got out of this circle of friends – I focused intensively on music in that period and I didn't have the time to meet them. But I heard that the office ran well for years.

R: Can you remember any of the advertisement texts you invented?

MB: Ah! No, I can't remember any more, I've forgotten so many things!

R: But still, did you keep one of these newspapers, perhaps?

MB: Well, I surely didn't. Judit might still have some.

R: And were you accepted in *Bizottság*?

MB: Sure, they were like foster daddies for me, Wahorn and Laca – I was 21 and they were over thirty. For me, the great experience in being a member of *Bizottság* was not music itself, but the kind of mind-opening I received there: the first encounters with Oriental culture, the work of Hamvas,¹²⁸ Zen Buddhism, this whole spiritualism. It worked like a family, and *Bizottság* was a lifestyle. But later, when the band became more and more successful and we recorded our first album, a tour period came up, and I didn't like it any more, inner problems started to emerge. Eventually, I announced that I'd quit.

R: While you were still in the band, did you manage to have relationships?

MB: I had straight girls clinging onto me, but the pattern was that if one didn't manage to get a boy from the band, she would be willing to end up in my bed – and I didn't want this, I didn't long for one-night stands but a real girlfriend. They were groupies swarming around the band, and this repelled rather than attracted me.

R: Can we say you were lonely?

MB: No. I had amazingly good friends there. There were a few women among them too, a painter and a poet and a photographer. I had the opportunity to meet fantastic women, but I didn't have to sleep with them – I had learned by that time that it's not obligatory to sleep with every woman in order to have an amazing relationship with them. And there are so many cool women, you can't have them all! With some people I still keep in touch.

R: What was next after *Bizottság*?

¹²⁸ Béla Hamvas (1897-1968): Hungarian philosopher and writer, who wrote extensively about Buddhism.

MB: Zalatnay¹²⁹ had already been 'chasing' me for a while – but the idea of quitting *Bizottság* hadn't occurred to me yet and her music style was also very far away from me. But once we were at the record production factory for an after-recording session, when Cini called me, and she was so pushy that I finally went to meet her. I recognised an amazing, strong character in her, so she won me over right away. She had a kind of female energy that took me in, and I needed that so much. Nothing happened between us, it's just that at that moment I was really taken by her. I had to keep on drumming in *Bizottság* for another half a year, then I joined Cini's band for good.

R: Were you and the others Zalatnay Cini's background band?

MB: Yeah, we were called the "Cinibabák"¹³⁰. And I got involved with the bass guitarist girl right away. She was gay too, only she wasn't aware of it yet. This happened in 1983, I was 24 at the time, she was also a young, very serious girl, and as long as the band existed, we stayed together. *Bizottság* was a happening-band, rather a feeling, not really about music, so it was with Zalatnay that I really learned drumming. We were four or five chicks, and a jazz pianist, János Fogarasi. It was great, but it came to an end. Then I played in an elegant bar, of course in an all-girl band, for two years – that was the place where Kati Rácz¹³¹ was singing, I adored her voice. Pista Ungár, the well-known jazz saxophonist worked as our rehearsal coach – I was learning from a bunch of amazing people, it was a very good school for me.

R: You became a member of another all-girl band, as well.

MB: Yes, after a period of being a bar musician I felt homesick for the rock stage, so I found an all-girl formation called YA-YA, which became *Moralisa* later, and we published an album. And in order not to offer an opportunity for attacks, I agreed with the girls on not being out, not to bring hard times upon the band – that was the time when *Kacsá Magazin*¹³² and the tabloidization of news began. And at the time my godfather wrote a book entitled *A homoszexualitásról* [About Homosexuality], he planned to include interviews too, so he asked me if I agreed to give an interview. But I told him I was sorry but I couldn't do it because of the band.

R: Who is your godfather?

MB: His name's László Tóth, he's a sociologist. It came out finally as a fairly thick collection of studies, the first one published about this matter in Hungary.¹³³

R: So did the girls accept you?

MB: Yes. And the family and my friends too, I never had problems with them. And also, for me music means a kind of intimacy, a different thing from sitting in an office without even knowing who is sitting next to you. Here we went on tours together, we slept in the same room, ranting and chatting continuously about guys, and I was asked, "Hey, Marika, what's up with the chicks?" I didn't have anybody at the time, and they put a paper on the wall in the rehearsal room, and if I just mentioned that I had seen a hot girl, they drew a mark on

¹²⁹ Cini Zalatnay (b. 1947): Hungarian beat and pop-rock singer.

¹³⁰ Lit. 'Cini Babes', sounds similar to 'hot chicks' (*csinibabák*) in Hungarian.

¹³¹ Kati Rácz (b. 1958): Hungarian (Roma-Jewish) jazz singer.

¹³² *Kacsá Magazin* [Duck Magazine]: the first tabloid in Hungary, started in the 1990s.

¹³³ László Tóth (ed.): *A homoszexualitásról* (On homosexuality). ELTE Sociology Institute, Faculty of Social Politics, Rezső Hilscher Association, T-Twins Publisher, Budapest, 1994.

it. They were cool. Love relationships weren't so important for me, only the band, and that I was able to share everything with them.

R: Did you have any bad experiences?

MB: No, luckily I moved around in a milieu where I never had to confront anybody. Actually, I also lived my everyday life in a way that I didn't have a gay identity; I just lived my life and did my business. Of course, sometimes I got feedback from the outside world about my gayness. But I didn't have any bad experiences.

R: Didn't you encounter any violence against gay people?

MB: I heard that queer-bashing existed, guys did get beaten up, but girls were much more tolerated. But personally I didn't encounter any of this. I had a German girlfriend for whom I tried hard to find a gay husband, and it happened in Berlin that I met a guy and I heard these sorts of stories in his company, that they got beaten up at night when they came out of the clubs. Girls are more tolerated by straight men too, because the idea excites them sexually. No. I'm trying to search my memory, but I can't recall any bad experiences.

R: So, did gay clubs already exist at that time?

MB: There have always been places for guys. But the problem was that they weren't for girls, because girls didn't count as income-generating customers – so at many places they tried to open the doors for girls on days like Tuesday or Wednesday, when nobody else would go out. But the girls did, they were happy to have a place to meet up. But even for guys there weren't too many places, and they were also known by people who wanted to bash fags. In the eighties it was not because of my gayness that I had conflicts but because of our alternative ways of thinking that characterized the whole *Bizottság*: I was monitored, taken to the police, and so on. Wait, I did have a bad experience related to my gayness, now I remember! I was making out with my colleague from *Cinibabák* near the head of Margit Bridge on the Buda side, in a small park. We were sitting on a bench in big hooded coats and we were kissing. Suddenly two policemen showed up, and exactly like in the film *Another Way*, they collected our IDs: "Erzsébet! Mária! Just what are you doing here?" We replied that we were just whispering into each other's ears, we were in the process of creating a song melody and lyrics, because we were musicians who played in the same band, and bla-bla-bla. So they took us down to the underground passage, into a small room where the janitors kept their mops and stuff. They treated us in a rough manner, trying to intimidate us. They wrote down our personal data in a notebook, put our names on a list, the same way as all homosexuals used to be registered at that time. I had this one bad experience.

R: Weren't you scared?

MB: No, I had great fun, moreover, I had to be strong, because my girlfriend got freaked out, and I tried to calm her that no further consequences would come out of it, only we got put in a database, and that's all.

R: Do you know about gays being monitored?

MB: I don't know, I only guess. The guys for sure: they always received their mail opened and taped back. And then, obviously, their environment was also monitored. And I have photographer and musician friends at whose places I turned up on a daily basis, and we were aware that their phone calls were taped. I didn't sense being monitored, I only supposed I was. For a while I

played the role of a sort of postwoman between foreigners and local people, because we thought I wasn't monitored. I could look it up in the Archives, but it doesn't really matter for me.

R: Do you think there were stoolies among you?

MB: I think these underground music groups were under a tight watch at the beginning of the eighties, there were stoolies and we even guessed who they were. We sometimes intentionally made up totally artificial conversations in their presence. This is how we grew, we knew we weren't allowed to say anything anywhere, and I accepted that at the time. And also that we weren't allowed to drink alcohol or kiss in public, well, okay. If you aren't allowed, you adapt to this and learn to live with this, accept it. You must.

R: Was it really this easy?

MB: Well, it was bad that you couldn't walk around holding hands with your beloved, or when an emotional tide swept over you, you weren't able to kiss her – when people are in love they always want stay in physical contact with their beloved. But you couldn't do it. To tell the truth, I'm also bothered when straight people are kissing on the street – they shouldn't! Maybe I react like this because I wasn't allowed to do it. Anyway, in my opinion nobody should live their private life on the street.

R: So weren't you monitored as a lesbian?

MB: No, I don't think I was monitored for my lesbianism. However, when I was in Berlin visiting my girlfriend, they rang the doorbell on the first morning and asked for my passport to check, but they never did it again on the street. I knew they were everywhere – if I showed up in the street with someone new, they appeared and asked for the other person's papers but not mine, saying, "Oh yeah, we don't need yours, we already know you." It was a strange feeling, but I accepted it, "alright, so they know me".

R: Do you have more stories of this sort?

MB: Yes, I remember another bad experience, where politics and gayness are connected in a peculiar way. There was a dude around the band when I had the actress girlfriend, and that dude very much wanted to do a threesome. As we didn't agree to it, he reported my girlfriend for reading *Beszélő*¹³⁴ – and that's why her professional career toppled. The most painful thing was that Évi's career got cut off because of our gayness, but that young man intentionally added a political colour to the facts, and that's why Évi finally had to leave the country. She sang in Munich for years, then came home after the regime change and continued here as a singer.

R: Did real gay places open in the second half of the eighties?

MB: Well, Homeros Association was founded around 1986 or 1987,¹³⁵ it was the very first gay civil organization, and with its help the gay bar called *Lokál* opened in Kertész Street, opposite *Fészek Club*. At the time we used to go to *Fészek* for partying after concerts, to let off some steam. And if I longed for different company, I crossed the street to *Lokál* – the place had a very good vibe, you could dance, there was a bar too, you could hide in a comfy corner if you were with a partner. It offered the opportunity to socialize with gays, so to

¹³⁴ *Beszélő* [Speaker]: liberal political-cultural magazine, first published illegally as a samizdat from 1981 to 1989.

¹³⁵ Homeros Association was officially registered in 1988.

speak, but I seldom went there. I don't want to hurt gay people, I just didn't pick my friends on the basis of their identities. I had quite small groups of friends, anyway, always limited to the music band I was in. And since they weren't gay, it was me who accompanied them to straight places. If I entered a place with an all-girl band, the guys often tried to hit on us like "Hey, girls, can we join you?" And the very moment we told them we wouldn't want male company, they called us faggots – this was guys' first reaction. I can't really say much about gay night life, because I wasn't really part of it.

R: Did you try to pick up girls?

MB: Nope. Never picked them up at such a place. At the very beginning, when some lesbian places opened, I realized that I couldn't find partners of my taste at them. You went down to the club, hunted for partners, but you found nothing but one-night stands. I never managed to find a serious relationship, a partner at these places. I was lucky though, because fate always brought me someone to meet even without seeking. For example, in Berlin I met the German girl who played an important role in my life for a very long time. Then I met a teacher from England,¹³⁶ who was a lecturer at ELTE University here, in Budapest, and we met each other at a presentation, through Feminist Network.

R: How did you find feminism?

BM: The feminist line came into the foreground right after the regime change, like many other things, and I went to take a look at what they were doing, how they were thinking. I entered the place and was stunned, like "Jesus, there are thirty women sitting here who think the same way as me!" And then I decided to help their work as much as I could. After talking with the girls in the band, I offered them that we could perform at the events of the Feminist Network. That was the way I could support this cause; and I got to meet my girlfriend there, too. Later, some of us in the Feminist Network found it very important to stand up against domestic violence – it was a taboo topic in Hungary – so we decided to establish a forum that girls and women who got abused or raped could turn to. That's how we created the *NANE* hotline. The best point was that without revealing your name or face you could give support to desperate women. Feminist ideology itself seemed too aggressive to me after a while; this practical support was much more important. Of course, the whole work that the Feminist Network was doing was very important, but after some time I didn't feel so addressed by it any more. At this period I became attuned to a different way of looking at the world: I was engaging with metaphysics, the work of Helena P. Blavatsky and Alice Bailey. And then I withdrew from the activist way of life.

R: How did you prepare for operating the helpline?

MB: Croatian and Serbian Women helped with starting *NANE*. I remember how great the first training was, which they held with the purpose to bring out our personal experiences. Someone asked me what my personal motivation was in participating in organizing *NANE*. And then, during that conversation it just blurted out of me, that oh my god, really, the postman used to draw me under his coat on the playground – I was of kindergarten age – to touch his 'finger'. I also told them that I had a gender identity problem in my puberty, and I believed that I was a boy. And bit by bit, all my memories about men much

¹³⁶ Antonia Burrows: founder of Feminist Network and *NANE*; she was living and working in Budapest in the 1990s.

older than me came back to my mind: I wanted to learn to drive, and one of them offered to teach me, but we had to go to a place where we couldn't be seen by others. So he took me into some dark forest, and then – well, something for something! So these were quite horrible things. In the pioneer camp we were kept on holidays together with boys coming from juvenile delinquent homes, and an 18-year-old guy – I was only 11 – literally raped me. I had buried all these things so deeply in my mind that it was only at that point, at the age of thirty-something, that they resurged. Images, emotions, everything came back to me. Maybe these things could happen to me, because I had this problem with self-searching. And maybe I've got engaged so deeply with esoteric philosophy and psychology so that I figure out why I'm gay. What work, what task it gives me. When I go to a gay NGO, or any organization, I don't feel the same joy, the same motivation that I felt while working at *NANE*. So I haven't felt that I should actually do things for gays.

R: So you have distanced yourself...

MB: Yeah, right. And I was also thinking that probably it wasn't my task to fight for gay rights. After all these events I came here to Szatina, to experience first-hand all that I had learned from esoteric literature, metaphysics and from mentors. I can't go hiding in India or to a cave in Tibet, but I can accomplish a more silent, meditative kind of lifestyle – that's what I thought, so this is why I came to this small, one-street village. Sometimes I don't meet anyone for days, and only my own thoughts are rolling around in my head, so to make them slow down, to control them is really an exciting task.

R: How did you find this village?

MB: This was very interesting: Magdi Timár¹³⁷ showed up at a *Moralisa* concert, and she said she was going to have her first date with a woman there – that woman was Ágota Kun,¹³⁸ who was accompanied by her nice ex-girlfriend. I liked it so much that she accompanied her, to protect her from the harms and dangers of the city, and from getting devoured by Magdi Timár... When they moved, I came to visit them, to see how they had settled in here, in Szatina. As my car was rolling slowly into the village, I felt right away the knot in my stomach, like when I'm touched by something or fall in love. A state just before crying, a lump in my throat – and I knew at the very moment that I would want to live here, once the bonds tying me to Budapest come apart. I always have to wait seven years for everything, I've realized this, so it took exactly seven years before I was able to buy a house here.

R: When did this happen?

MB: Well, Magdi and her partner met in 1990, and they moved to Szatina in 1991, and I bought a house here in 1998, and after that I had to earn money for the construction, since the cottage I had bought collapsed.

R: Did a relationship tie you here?

MB: No. The fact that I regularly made visits to Szatina was totally independent of whether I happened to have a partner or not. Szatina, and Kun and Timár were for me like mummy and daddy whom I paid visits in their country house. I was here for feast days, I celebrated my birthdays here, and I came here for

¹³⁷ See Chapters 12 and 12A.

¹³⁸ Ágota Kun: The birth name of Agáta Gordon, see: Chapters 12A and 13. The names Ágota and Agáta refer to the same person, Agáta Gordon.

New Year's Eves. I always ran to them when I longed for some warmth. Then just when I'd finally moved here, they left – later I was thinking that it might not have been their persons that drew me here, but the place itself. I realized that I must live in nature, at a calm place like this, and get close to the earth. And you can achieve this only by touching the soil itself, feeling it, working with it. And since I am a very 'airy' personality – I was born under the Libra sign – I need the air very much, so I close my door only in the coldest months. I think I'm living here in some Paradise-like state, alone, but I enjoy it a lot.

R: Did you move here alone?

MB: Eventually I moved here with the partner I had met here at a New Year's Eve party, and who loved my plan to settle here and live a meditative life. She asked me if she could join, and I told her if she really wanted, she was free to come. We built up this house together, but right after we completed it, she left.

R: Was this a true love?

MB: Not on my part, but on her part, I suppose it was. I don't know. I didn't experience it as love. It was good, we lived in a harmonious relationship at the beginning, but then she shut me out of her life somehow. So I'm not sure what it was.

R: And how do you support yourself?

MB: You mean, how can I make a living here? Well, from the garden. I had an awfully hard time after my dear ex-girlfriend had pulled the ground off my feet. I had decided still in Budapest that I wouldn't continue playing music when I moved to Baranya,¹³⁹ so I would need to figure out a job that I could live off in the countryside, too. By one year of hard work we created a small T-shirt printing workshop, which paid very well. And when we broke up, my girlfriend took away the work tools, the machine, everything. I stayed here without any savings, with a house nicely built up, but completely empty, without furniture, since she took away everything that was moveable. I couldn't apply for aid, either, since I wasn't registered as unemployed, and I didn't get a penny for a whole year. The Timárs brought dog-food, and another friend from Budapest sent me some money sometimes.

R: What did you have left for yourself?

MB: I thought that if the dogs could stick it out with one meal per day, and if Buddha could live on one bowl of rice per day, I will manage, too. I tried living on one bowl of rice and what I could find outside – like comfrey leaves, alfalfa, things like these –, and it was a very exciting period of my life. And very important too, because I recognized that this was what I had to experience, and not the role of the house-building millionaire or the rich T-shirt designer businesswoman. I can work as hard as a draft animal if I'm told what my job is, and I always have ideas too, but I can't realize them all alone – I need a partner for creating things. So when I got left alone and I got broke everybody gave me the cold shoulder – and I became a down-and-out queer.

R: At the beginning didn't you have problems with this?

MB: No, when we moved here with my girlfriend, they saw the money in us, and the business opportunity. In a few moments they switched to a kind mode, accepted us, but then the name-calling began – especially after I got involved

¹³⁹ The county where Szatina is situated.

with a local Gipsy woman.¹⁴⁰ Many people think that I got together with her because I suffered from loneliness or from lack of sex, but they are wrong, it was true love! And mutual! When we became acquainted, we started to have talks – I used to jog every morning, and she called out for me and asked for advice on some legal issue, then she invited me for a glass of wine, and we continued to talk until five in the morning. In two weeks it turned out we'd fallen in love with each other, though neither of us had intended this. But we couldn't help it; love was much stronger than us. We bombed apart the world around us, the only important thing was that we could be together.

R: How did the local community receive this turn of events?

MB: Earlier we talked about receiving negative feedback on my gayness from the outside world – well, I had the opportunity to face this on a daily basis here, this small local community did everything it could to destroy our relationship, to get me, the faggot, away from Mari. They talked about me bewitching her by making her drink love-potion and putting her under my spell. And they managed to plant the idea in her head that I only wanted to use her – and she believed it. So this very beautiful romance got spoiled, but we still stayed good friends, I follow her life, and I help her children in whatever way I can.

R: How long were you together?

MB: It lasted for one and a half years. But it turned out soon that love couldn't bridge all, and how different the cultures we got brought up in were. Her fears, her jealousy, her lack of confidence, and the fact that she got socialized into solving every conflict by violence and then we cuddle up – well, I couldn't bear this. We lived together approximately for a half year, but we had to separate, or else one of us would have died.

R: Are you serious?

MB: Oh, yeah, near the end I felt my life was in danger several times, there were one or two situations when it was a matter of seconds that I stayed alive.

R: Why, what was she doing?

MB: She was strangling me. She almost strangled me to death several times. I recognized if I didn't change things, I would get done in, but I also knew that I couldn't just walk out of this relationship. Because she would have stalked me or broken into the house and kill me. So I couldn't say, "Hey, Mari, it's the end, bye, sweetie!" I loved her like crazy, but I was horribly afraid of her.

R: How did you eventually manage to resolve the situation?

MB: I want to make it clear that I have never considered the use of magic to be an ethical method in a relationship, but that time I felt that I had to pull a trick for my self-defence, so I meditated for weeks, focusing on someone coming up in Mari's life, so that she would be the one to say the words that we were through. Three weeks went by like that, then she came here – I can recall it so very clearly! –, sat down in the kitchen, and said, "We're through"! She showed me text messages on her cell phone and she told me that a woman wrote them to her. I learned only one and a half years later that not a word of it was true, she only wanted to make me jealous. She saw that the whole world clouded before my eyes, but she didn't say, "Mari, I was just joking", because she wanted to play it out to the end. And the end was that we grew cold towards

¹⁴⁰ This story was depicted in a documentary film by Kriszta Bódis, titled *Falusi román* [Village Romance] (2006).

each other, really, it had this fairy-tale ending. I mean, fairy-tale ending for me, as both of us stayed alive.

R: Were you able to process the fact that you were actually living in an abusive relationship?

MB: Yes. She was also a victim in her previous relationship. She got raped at the age of 13 by the man whom she was forced to live with in continuous fear until she met me. And at the very moment when she got released from the pressure, she switched – we learnt about this at *NANE* that 50% of those who are abused will become abusers later. Maybe in her next relationship she will treat her partner better, but she did lash out on me. So – that’s all. I’ll never use ‘magic’ again to influence a relationship, I use this sort of knowledge only for healing, but at the time I was scared like crazy that one of us wouldn’t survive.

R: What’s your life like lately?

MB: My life? Well, in solitude. Solitude. But I don’t have time to experience it; there is a lot of work to do if I want to make this garden feed me. I wake up in the mornings, write my little to-do list – but unfortunately, as I’m growing older, I feel that I can’t handle as much physically as before. Still, I must do it. There is always something to do from dawn to dusk, in summer and in winter. For us winter is the period of holidays, we go on long walks with the dogs, we stroll around. Sure, there’s a lot of stuff to do in winter too, chopping wood, sawing, pruning – but when I get released from the daily work, we stroll around in the hills all day long. This is very important, it fills us up with energy, the dogs are very happy, and me too. Then in summer I work like a dog, and they are depressed because I can’t play so much with them.

R: What is your relationship with Mari like now?

MB: There is no relationship. Really none. But with nobody either, people don’t greet me. Since Mari, people have come to look down on me, and they say that I went so low because I got together with a Gipsy woman! This is so horrible that I don’t mind at all if they don’t greet me. At the beginning I said hello to everybody, but they kept ignoring it – then I decided not to pay attention any more. I don’t need them.

R: And don’t you miss a person from your life, if not a partner, but at least some company?

MB: The music. To play music together with others, I miss that very much, and to share with someone what I feel, what I see – because even in this big emptiness so many impulses reach me, I get to see so many great things, and it’s bad that I don’t have anybody to share them with. The things touching me: how beautiful the flight of a bird is, or the tree-frog’s croaking, or the sight of two plants embracing each other... But there are a few people in Budapest who I meet once or twice a year, so I share it with them. From the old team only Gerdus¹⁴¹ has stayed here in Szatina. It’s good that we are here for each other. We aren’t together all the time; she is pretty much a loner. We haven’t really managed to make a serious friendship, but I consider it my mission to keep an eye on Gerda. I go over to her place every day, or just check in on her, has she left the house, is she moving around, can I hear her call the dogs, or see her go for a walk...? When I’m walking on one hill and I spot her walking on another,

141 Gerda Schmied, see: Chapter 11.

I don't go over to her. If I see that she's fine, then it's fine. But if I don't see her for days, I run over to her house to see if she's doing OK and everything's alright. She is a kind of reference point for me. Because she was the second or maybe the third lesbian woman I had ever met. And she connects me to that circle. We get nostalgic every now and then: "Do you remember, when...?" We've been through a lot, we have many experiences in common.

R: Do you keep contact with a few people then?

MB: With many people, yes. We exchange e-mails, there is an internet room in the next village, in the community house, so I write the letters here at home, save them on an mp3 and take them with me, I go there every Monday. I also have some people with whom we correspond in the old-fashioned way. It's actually a good feeling, we look forward to receiving each other's letters, and sitting down to write a letter is such an intimate thing.

R: How often do you go to Budapest?

MB: Once or twice a year. Something always comes up; I don't specifically go to visit certain people. Or for example, there was this event, LIFT Festival, I got invited there – it was all unexpected, I had looked after Gerda's dogs all summer while she was working, I couldn't leave the village. So it felt great to go there and relax a bit, meet people with similar identities, seeing female musicians – well, I had a lot of fun. But that was enough of the bustle!

R: Don't you want to return to Budapest?

MB: No, no. My friends often tell me, "Mari, you are in the middle of nowhere, this is not good for you!", and to move at least nearer to Budapest. But the reason to move here was exactly to get away from Budapest! My vision of the future is that I won't sell the house as long as I can still lift a finger, and then I'll buy a room in some retirement home. And I will spend my time playing rummy and canasta with the old chicks all day long. And I'll have my drums with me! They will stand next to my bed... and I'll beat them continuously like crazy! There might be other old ladies who can play music, so we'll play together. I saw once, in the old days, that a bunch of really old ladies made some excellent music somewhere in a pub, they played the drums, the guitars, and the piano every day. It was amazing. I'd be happy to do that!

R: Do you have someone you're close to nowadays?

MB: A partner? Wow! Must I tell...? Must I really...? Well, there is someone I'm deeply in love with, but she doesn't love me back. But I learned that platonic way of love long ago in my childhood days, so for me what is important is to love someone. Not to be loved. I can't live without the feeling of loving someone. The important thing is that she exists, that I can give her, I don't know what, a jar of canned fruit... I harvest the fruits from spring to autumn with the intention to preserve them for her, and the jars will contain all my love. But she doesn't have to know about it.

R: Why don't you confess that you love her?

MB: She knows about it, I've told her many times. Once I told her, "I used to be in love with you". And then she asked me, "Are you sure you only used to be?" Then, long years later, I went to visit her because I wondered if I still felt the same when I saw her. And she asked, "So?" I told her that I still felt the same, and she just smiled, and that's all. Now I think that if she doesn't become my partner, nobody will. I don't need a partner. All my life it has worked like I met someone, fell for her and then I had a partner, but I wasn't looking for

them. I'm able to live alone for years, and I'm having a good time like that. Of course, if a big crash hits my heart, something will happen. But not by all means.



Bizottság zenekar, 1982, fotó: Szilágyi Lenke



1984



Moralisa együttes, 1988



NANE-aktivistákkal, 1993, fotó: Bozzi Vera



“Not allowed to cultivate friendships with Hungarians...”

Gerda Schmied (b. 1955)

R: When and why did you come to Hungary?¹⁴²

GS: I was trained as a cook and when I graduated I moved to Bernburg. I spent 9 months there, and then I managed to move to Berlin. And there was an exchange between Berlin and Budapest. So some cooks like me went to Budapest, and other cooks came from Budapest to Berlin. That's how I came to Budapest, and it was - wow! It was as different as chalk and cheese. It was a completely different world. We worked in a German restaurant, the Berlin Restaurant, the Hungarians stayed downstairs, and we, German people, upstairs. And of course, our exchange agreement lasted for one year, and then we had to go back. But meanwhile I got to know Hungarian people here, which I was not supposed to do. And I went back to Berlin, where the opportunity came very soon, in half a year. For some reason they had to send back one cook. "And you've been there," they said, "Do you feel like moving there for another one and a half years?" "Sure!" I said right away. But I already had an acquaintance. Finally, I came with the purpose of staying here. It wasn't so easy to make this happen, of course, in the former GDR.¹⁴³ I worked through that one-and-a-half year period, then I went back and submitted an application to transfer to Budapest. Well, it was quite hard, because the police gave me 48 hours to leave the country; moreover, I was a party member of the SPD,¹⁴⁴ so it would have been difficult to get out anywhere abroad, anyway. The whole procedure with paper shuttling back and forth took almost a year before they let me move to Hungary for good. And then only after I got married - not to a woman but a man. So I found a husband, a man I met in Berlin who was willing to marry me, so that I could move to Hungary. So we got married. So I've lived here since then.

R: So, how many years exactly have you lived in Hungary?

GS: I've lived in Hungary for about 31-32 years. I was 18 when I finished the school, then I spent one year in Tripoli, then another in Berlin. I was 22 when I came here, so in 1977. That's certain, because they didn't want to let me enter a bar and asked my age, and I stood in front of them saying "twenty-two". I remember that.

R: How did your life start here?

GS: This Hungarian language, well, it isn't an easy language, and at the beginning everybody spoke German to me anyway. I could talk in German with my ex-husband, and then with my first girlfriend, Judit, too. I could also use German at my workplace. But I speak a horrible German dialect. After that, when I was alone for a while, I couldn't help but learn Hungarian. And it's quite a difficult language. I recall that my first husband said only after having some vodka-coke that he knew how to say something in Hungarian. It didn't work every day. The girlfriend I came here for originally, I split up with her after my

¹⁴² The interview was conducted with Gerda in Hungarian. Her Hungarian is fluent but not perfect. We have therefore not translated it literally, but given the meaning of what she says.

¹⁴³ German Democratic Republic or East Germany.

¹⁴⁴ SPD: Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, Social Democratic Party of Germany.

arrival. So I had to move. There were two boys whose place I could stay for a while, it was a small room, and they let me sleep there. But it didn't work out for some reason, because I wasn't enough... womanly. I am boyish. This is what's natural for me. And they didn't like it. They said I should wear dresses, skirts, ladies' shoes, high heels – now, I would surely break my neck! So that didn't work out, and then there was a gay Gipsy boy whose mum liked me a lot. I was welcome to move there, and then she found a job for me at a private workplace, at *Muskátli Restaurant*.¹⁴⁵ I guess it was in Kamaraerdő,¹⁴⁶ somewhere like that; it was crowded at the weekends. The boss wasn't lesbian but she liked that company very much. And she organized disco-like events, which were very popular. That's where I met Mari Bán. I had met her before, but she used to frequent this place, and there I also met Magdi for the first time, and one day a boy turned up whom I had already known from Berlin. A very handsome one, he became my second husband...

He was in a great trouble, since he had a boyfriend and they wanted to move in together, but they couldn't because of his parents who lived next door. I told him, "Here, I have a girlfriend too, we don't have a place to move to, either, so let's all get married!" But I had to divorce first, because I was still married. Thus I ended up divorcing my first husband. So Magdi married one of them and I married the other and that way the four of us could live together. Our life looked like this: there were the parents, then us, Dini and me, and then Magdi and her husband, everything worked in a foursome. Every morning we swapped places really fast, that's how we could be together. It went well for quite a long while, we did many things together. Those were really nice times. But then it started to fray somehow. To come apart.

And then Magdi and I were looking for an apartment, we were wandering from one place to another. We spent more than five years together like that. Then we broke up... We kept a good friendship though; there wasn't any grudge between us. I was working in Hotel Gellért, which was a very good place. And once Magdi mentioned that there was a really beautiful place, Szatina. Well, I said, I would come to have a look. My shift was like I worked ten days in a row, then I had four days off. And then I spent the weekend at Szatina. And I got together with Nóra, Agáta's ex-girlfriend, Magdi was with Agáta, and then we moved here. And since then I have been living here. And I don't long to return to Budapest. It simply annoys me. There is silence here. I have animals. It's true, it's hard to find someone who would move here. But I got used to it after all. I'm here and I have no wish to move away. There are the Germans who come here twice or three times a year. So I never get bored or feel lonely. And I have many friends. They come to see me. Magdi comes sometimes... Now it's hard to get to the workplace from here. I mean, to get out of the village in winter. There is a beautiful place, Orfű,¹⁴⁷ where I found a good job; I have been working there every year, for more than ten years. I'm always looking forward to go back. Because it's so beautiful. And they organize shows that people enjoy. But it's rather sad in winter. Since Mari Bán became my neighbour,

¹⁴⁵ *Muskátli* [Geranium]: restaurant run by a lesbian owner, which used to have women's parties.

¹⁴⁶ A suburban part of Budapest.

¹⁴⁷ Orfű: a village in Baranya county, near Szatina, with a lake and a leisure resort.

we've had a good relationship, she looks after my dog when I'm at work. So we help each other. And that's important.

R: You mentioned that it was very hard to leave Germany and that you were a party member... Could you explain this connection?

GS: So, those times were a hard period. They sent me to Hungary, to a foreign country, because I counted as a loyal party member and they trusted me to return. At the time they did things like they put me to a test. I was waiting for a train, someone was travelling through Budapest, my former teacher. We were three cooks and we had an agreement: each of us was on shift from morning till midnight, and then two days off, so we could sightsee and get to know Budapest more, because we weren't allowed to leave the city, we had to ask for permission from our boss to go anywhere. So I was waiting at the train station, I had the *Daily News* and the *Neueste Nachrichten* in my hand, we bought these papers on a daily basis. I was reading them and a man sat down next to me and tried to tempt me by saying, "Listen, I'll take you to Austria, nothing to worry about, and this and that." I sent him away from the table, I said, "Listen, I'm fine with things as they are, I wouldn't cross my mind to leave this country!" I had to turn up at the Embassy once a month, because I was a party member. And I made a mistake that day, when this incident happened, because I forgot write a record of it. I was supposed to report it. But they knew about it and I didn't report it, so I got reproached! But the reply I gave to the guy, that I cut him off, was good. It was a proper reply. And that's why, after I returned to Germany a year later, they asked me if I wanted to go back for another one and a half years, because I measured up after all. But the matter with the papers, which I mentioned earlier, I had to request so many papers – well, the party was difficult. They weren't happy to let me leave. I handed the papers in to the police, and they, as I said, gave me those 48 hours to leave. Which I couldn't make use of, since I hadn't been officially released by the party yet. And I was obliged to get one more paper, which was ridiculous. Because I told them I intended to come here to marry a Hungarian... And I needed a document to prove that I was able to sustain a marriage... as a woman. I needed a certification expressly for that purpose, which took more than a year to get hold of. The relationship that I was coming here for almost broke up during that time.

R: And what certification were you required to get about being fit to marry? Did you have to prove something? That you were able to bear children, or what?

GS: That I was fit to live together with a husband in a family and sustain it – I don't know.

R: Who provided this for you?

GS: That was the duty of the local government, not equal to the police, neither the party, but a distinct institution like... how to call it... the City Hall. You had to request it from them. And I had to do the same at the second time, when I had already been married once. I got divorced, and I was supposed to return home after the divorce. No matter how many years I had been living here, as long as the former GDR existed, I was supposed to go home. Well, I didn't want to go home but marry again. So I had to submit all the documents again.

R: You said that when you came here for one year for the first time, you were obliged to write down all the things that happened to you.

GS: Yeah, I had to go to the Embassy every month. They held party assemblies. And there were things like... I had received a letter and I showed it to my boss. He said, "I have been expecting this." I don't remember what was in it, only something like why I insisted so much on being a citizen of the GDR. I guess they wanted to get me to cooperate with them, so that they could move me to Austria. They were obsessed with this idea: relocation to Austria. And I always said no. I had no desire to go there. I was alright with things as they were.

R: So it seems the party kept an eye on you.

GS: Yes. Not only on me but everyone. There was this year, and as soon as I arrived back here, I entered their vision right away. There was a waiter guy who lived here in Hungary. He was gay. He had a grandmother whom he went to see regularly, he spoke Hungarian too, and was permitted to work here, but when he repeatedly failed to write the due reports, he got sent home. And there was the University Café, too, it was a meeting place. Once there was a fight, we called the police, and he appeared in the police report, so he had to go home. But I could come in his place. And I got as much as one and a half years. I was so happy, because I could continue to cultivate the friendships I had made before.

R: Did the party know that you were a lesbian?

GS: Afterwards, when the walls fell down, and everybody had the chance to request the files about them, I didn't request mine... In the old days I was on the move all the time, went for meetings and stuff. A German Gipsy woman friend of mine introduced me to a club in Berlin, because officially this wasn't permitted, and we used to gather in different apartments each time. We had discussions and we tried to keep ties between the FRG¹⁴⁸ and East Germans. And there was a Belgian priest who also used to be part of the company, and he phoned just when I was visiting this friend of mine. I was visiting her just when he phoned and told me that he requested to see his files. "Oh, is Gerda also with you? Do you remember when we were going...?" He listed the *Schoppen Stube*¹⁴⁹ – it was hard to get in there –, and "Do you remember, there was a mansion in Berlin", in one part of the building there were meetings for retired people, in the other part there were presentations about gay issues and there were readings and gatherings. And once we were going there to attend a meeting, but they got raided by the police, and everyone who looked suspicious started to flee, "Let's run, here's the address"... so everyone had to be relocated in different flats. And this priest could list all these events, so I'm sure that I also have a file: where I turned up and when and which illegal places I attended.

R: Why did you want to come to Hungary?

GS: Because... Budapest was completely different. People here were open-minded. So kind. Not as cold as in Berlin. And I had my girlfriend here, too. Well, she had no intention whatsoever to move to Germany. Judit. So it was me who came here. To Hungary.

R: When you came here for the first time, did you already know Judit?

GS: Yes. I did.

R: Where from?

¹⁴⁸ Federal Republic of Germany, West Germany.

¹⁴⁹ A gay bar in East Berlin.

GS: We met each other... Where did we meet? Good Heavens! Oh, I remember. The University Café. The University worked like this: in the morning normally, and after seven in the evening, when it reopened, it became a kind of mixed, open place. For gays. That's where we met for the first time. Already in Berlin I was given a few addresses where it was worth going. And there I met a girl called Judit. This was another Judit, she introduced me around, showed where to go to meet people, where to find women. Because there was a place, I don't recall its name, but only for guys. In Astoria there were some exclusive days. University was the only place that was open every day after seven and was mixed.

R: Was it easy to meet women in Berlin?

GS: In Berlin? Well, there were one or two or three places. It was like a triangle, if you couldn't get in one, you went to the other.

R: So was this allowed in Berlin at the time?

GS: Those were public places... so everybody knew what kind of places they were. Well, we must have been monitored, as it turned out eventually that everybody knew where, when and how things happened. I didn't request to see that file. And I never will.

R: What are you afraid of?

GS: Not because I'm afraid but because... Why should I know about where I was and when?

R: Wouldn't you like to know who had written about you?

GS: Probably the name of the recording person is not included. I know this. There was a pizza guy, he was gay and an informer. Moreover, one of my elder cousins was also involved. He was in the newspaper. And I wouldn't have guessed about him. But he was involved. Many people were involved. Well, it's not so important for me to know whether it was him, or some other relative, or someone who was a good friend otherwise. I don't need to know.

R: Did they ever try to recruit you?

GS: Well... nope. Maybe, they talked about it within the party, but... they monitored me as long as... they knew what was happening. But I would have refused. And I wouldn't have been suitable. Because I would have been a flop right from the start. I don't know how to do it. Well, let everyone live their life... Regina, who I mentioned, this Gipsy friend of mine in Berlin, she didn't dare to go out afterwards, because of people supposedly watching her. Because, allegedly, she was also an informer. I don't believe she was.

R: Did you have a lot of girlfriends in Berlin?

GS: I was young... A lot. But the ones I really seriously wanted I never managed to get. Either I wasn't persistent enough, or they got bored... So they just got bored of me, because I always left. I didn't watch the time I was supposed to go home. Well, I was into everything. If I met someone and liked her, I tried. I had some nice adventures.

R: With men too?

GS: Well, there was a teacher... Eventually it was him who introduced me to this world. Because I couldn't imagine that this kind of thing existed. And I was attracted to him. I knew on some level that this stuff existed; only I couldn't imagine it.

R: What stuff?

GS: That a woman could live with a woman. Bernburg is a small town, and there... And he noticed me somehow when I was a student in the cooking school. And he invited me to see a film. So, I thought, it was going to be a fine adventure. He would be my first guy! But I couldn't... And we had a coffee upstairs before the film started. And he asked me questions like, if I was honest, who would I rather look at, someone in a skirt or someone wearing trousers? And I said, "Is there really such a thing?" He said, "Yes, there is. Come on, let's go to Jena." Jena was a bigger town. And there was a disco like that there... and he fixed me up with a girl. She was my first relationship, so... there really was such a thing! The light got switched off, it was pitch dark, and the partners got switched, too. And I didn't know who was in my arms! Who I was embracing. And when the light went on again, I just stared! Ha! Exactly the one I fancied!

R: When did you first realize that you were attracted to women?

GS: It started in school... I had a classmate, I was so much into her... I tried to stay next to her somehow all the time. But the idea didn't cross my mind. Because I didn't know that this thing existed. And after I started the cooking school, we stayed in touch, but everybody followed their own paths. And there, in the cooking school, I was running away from myself, because I didn't know yet that this thing existed. There was a woman there; looking back I think she made a pass at me... "Come on, kiss me!" I just ran away! So I wasn't yet ready for this, I was still a good girl. It's true that I was always chasing skirts, but I didn't know what to do with them. When that teacher introduced me to this, I realized that this thing did exist and started to try.

R: How did you call it? What term did you use for it?

GS: Well, I don't know. I didn't think too much about this. I wasn't interested in men but I was interested in women, and after the ice had cracked, I mean when there was a woman to teach me... So I thought I wasn't normal and my parents should never find out, because... And there was a time when I did tell my mother, but she couldn't get it... not at all. Until this very day she can't comprehend it. And she never will. That I've lived alone since my husband died, that's obvious for her. But that I've lived with girlfriends, with other women, that isn't. She can't get it!

R: And your father?

GS: I don't know my father. Who she lives with now is my stepfather. And I don't want to talk about this with him.

R: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

GS: Yes, a younger sister. We haven't talked to each other for six years, because of a conflict. I'm planning to visit home soon, so we may meet each other. She has moved, I neither have her phone number, nor her address, and she doesn't really want to keep in touch. Well, it hurts me, actually, because I can only see photos of her.

R: Do you often visit home?

GS: I try to go home every year. Once a year, because of my mother. She is always very happy to have me at home, and I'm happy to meet all the old girlfriends, too. Because that's part of it. Regina is looking forward to my next visit.

R: Do you usually visit your ex-girlfriends these times?

GS: Yes, I do. Well, not by all of them, I can't do that, but my favourite one... that Gipsy girl, Regina. I was head over heels in love with that girl. Only it didn't

work out. But we have remained close friends to this day. And I'm always glad to see her. She will be sixty soon.

R: You said you were a party member. I would like to ask you how things turned that way.

GS: Because I wanted to become a sailor. In the vocational school we were asked what we wanted to become, where we wanted to apply to study. Well, of course, if I was learning cooking, I would stay a cook. But I was obsessed with becoming a sailor. And I sent applications to as many places as I could, to Rostock, Warnemünde...¹⁵⁰ but I wasn't accepted. Yeah, and I was told in the school that for that I would have to learn bakery. That course was also organized. And I had already agreed with a private baker to learn the basics from him. And, "Join the party! You will never get anywhere without the party." So I did everything I could. But I still didn't get accepted, because my step-father used to live in the FRG when the Wall was built, and had to choose between returning immediately and staying in the GDR. And he chose to stay in the GDR, even though all his relatives lived in the FRG. And this was why I didn't get accepted. And they always wrote an explanation of why I wasn't accepted: doing that job on a ship is too hard for a woman, and... But I had a female schoolmate who was accepted. She was allowed to go. She started to work on a fishing boat, and for her the job didn't seem to be too hard. For me it was too hard. So I got rejected everywhere.

R: What do you think the reason was?

GS: Of course, because my step-father came from the FRG. And all the relatives were there, so perhaps I was expected to desert the country. So even though I couldn't become a sailor, I still had the urge to go somewhere. I'll go somewhere! And I did. And I've stayed here.

R: Did the party ever try to blackmail you or to pressure you in any way because you were a lesbian?

GS: No. It never worked that way. They never brought it up.

R: You mentioned that you had to go to the Embassy once a month and you had to write about all sorts of stuff. What did you have to write about?

GS: Well, because of... There was the duty of not leaving Budapest. "Not supposed to leave Budapest. Not allowed to cultivate friendships with Hungarians." There were regulations like that. They wanted to know about your every move. Where was I going? Why was I going? Well, they couldn't seriously expect me to spend my 48 hours off sitting in Berlin Restaurant – why would I have done so? So I was going around. Somewhere, anywhere.

R: Did you have to keep reporting on your colleagues or what?

GS: Where I was that day, which Hungarians I talked with, what we talked about, I was supposed to write all this stuff down exactly in reports. And to give it to the boss. But I didn't find it an important task. So I never wrote. I just went, did this and that. Things happened, and then...

R: And when you came back for the second time, for one and a half years, did you have to write these reports again?

GS: Yes, I did.

R: All the time?

¹⁵⁰ A German naval base.

GS: All the time. When and where I had made every step. When I had talked with someone and with whom, and what about – if the person was a Hungarian. If I spoke with a German person, that didn't matter. But I wasn't supposed to cultivate very close relations with Hungarians. And I wasn't supposed to leave Budapest. That was all.

R: Did you have to write about all the Hungarians you met?

GS: Yes. I was supposed to report that I had met one or another, I had a close relationship with one or another. That had to be reported by all means. But not when I just bumped into someone on the street and we exchanged a few words. Only when we met each other regularly or a relationship was formed.

R: You said you used to go to *Muskátlí*. Did you write anything about these friendships and lovers?

GS: No. No, I didn't. That happened when I had moved to Hungary for good.

R: But if you didn't report anything, you still had to hand in something, didn't you?

GS: Well, nothing happened to me. So I didn't write anything. I didn't hand anything in. Yeah! Only the boss told me sometimes that I mustn't do this, I wasn't allowed that. So after those occasions, I preferred not to say a word. But they probably still knew where I was, what I was doing. And when I left Germany for good, they took me into the huge SPD party centre and I had to see where they would store my party membership papers. There was a sort of large, cylindrical-like object and they put my membership papers in it, and if I ever returned home they would give it back. So after that, they left me alone. They didn't release me completely, but they did let me go. So I didn't have to pay the membership dues or go to party assemblies every month, but they stored my documents. But this happened after I moved here and got married.

R: What citizenship did you have?

GS: When the Wall came down in Germany, I lost my German citizenship. I remember that I immediately went to request dual citizenship. But the GDR didn't acknowledge that. The FRG did, but the GDR didn't. There were so many people requesting it! I was told that I had lost my German citizenship. I should return and live there for two or three years to get it back. But I had just received my Hungarian citizenship two weeks earlier.

R: After you came back to settle down in Hungary as a married woman, did you still go to the Embassy?

GS: Nope. Then my papers had already been put in store in the GDR, and after that I didn't have to do anything. I still belonged there, since I was a German citizen. But I didn't have to go to party events or anything. I only had to go there when I had some problem. For example when I got divorced, I was obliged to go to the Embassy. So I was supposed to go home, to leave the country. But, I told them, I was going to get married again! That's why I got divorced from first one. "Again?" they asked. I replied, "Yes, again". And after this there weren't any big troubles. Once Magdi accompanied me to the Embassy when I was receiving my Hungarian citizenship. Because they read the text aloud for me, and I wasn't so fluent in Hungarian yet – and I'm not, even today – but I had to repeat the lines they had read for me. And my husband from in front of me, Magdi from behind me, they were whispering me what to say ...I almost broke my tongue. I can be so nervous at such times that I stammer. But we did pass. So I passed. I received it.

R: Do you remember when you moved to Szatina?

GS: I know exactly, because there was a big farewell party in Hotel Gellért, my colleagues were all very nice. This happened in October 1991.

R: You said that Budapest was a warm type of city, friendly, but Berlin was cold...

GS: Not the city but the people.

R: And did you feel any difference within the lesbian or gay community, compared to Berlin?

GS: I'm telling you, I did. They were more open here. That kind of... natural lifestyle. Do you understand? You are nice-looking, we get along, easy-going like this... But what you are doing otherwise, I don't care. So you live your own life. What matters is that I can be your friend, there is a friendship between us. Well, my boss in Orfú, I don't really want him to know about it. But he knows it. He knew it right from the start. Because at the time it was the four of us... there was Agáta, Magdi, Nóra and me. And we were making wooden toys at the time, and... He accepted it but he wasn't interested in it. What mattered for him was to get the job done, to complete the work, and apart from this, what kind of life I lead was none of his business. And this is openness... they know how I am, they accept me as I am.

R: What was the situation in Berlin?

GS: In Berlin? To tell the truth, we were rather hiding. I would never have said it out loud that I was a lesbian. Never. I wouldn't have let it slip out. But there were people who found out and said it out loud... Because I had female colleagues there who I loved very much. I had a Polish female colleague, for example, and we used to hug and kiss each other on the cheek and stuff. And she said, "Hey, listen! Are you that kind?" I replied yes. She said, "never mind, we can still be friends and colleagues." But that was a minority. Most people, if they found out, rather tried to keep a distance. That wasn't the same here in Budapest. At least I didn't experience it like that.

R: How do you come out here to anybody?

GS: Well, there were some people I came out to, for example I had a female colleague I told, and she has surely told all the other colleagues. Because she can't keep things to herself. And it was noticeable that they were curious, "well, we have known you for a long time but wouldn't guess, although you have always been a bit boyish... but we don't mind." We have stayed the same colleagues as we were. A sweet story: I received the "Outstanding Worker" nomination in Hotel Gellért. When I was on my afternoon shift, the director used to come down to the kitchen in the evening, giving orders: "Hey, kid, three sandwiches!" "Kid, two sandwiches!" And then came Women's Day and I became an "Outstanding Worker". So what clothes was I wearing for the ceremony? A shirt like this and cargo pants. "What's that one doing among the women?" Then he was calling out the names from the list and I stood up and everybody started to laugh! Because they accepted me as I was. It was only the director who didn't know. And I went over, red as a tomato - and he might have been even redder - and he handed me the medal. Later on in the afternoon he turned up again in the kitchen, saying, "Good afternoon, ma'am, could you please prepare three sandwiches for me?" And I said I damned well preferred the times when he was still calling out, "Kid! Three sandwiches!" So eventually he accepted me. When I quit they organized such a big... "just a little" farewell

party for me, that I was breathless! Magdi helped me carry home all the stuff I was given. They accepted me as I was! And I'm sure that everybody there knew what I was.

R: If you liked working in the Gellért so much, why did you quit?

GS: Because I couldn't stand that crowd of people. I was in a cold sweat when I had to take the subway in the morning. And here I had such great time that I thought, "Alright, we are going to make wooden toys, we are four for the job. But that we couldn't live well off on that. Well, that was another thing.

R: And how did you meet Cilin? Magdi?¹⁵¹

GS: In *Muskátli Restaurant* in Budaörs, at that disco-like place. But wait! That's not true. First I met Judit, my ex-girlfriend, who had launched a dating service. And she invited me for an event... Women were coming along and Magdi was among them. I said, oh, Jesus! Quite cute... But not for me! But Magdi spotted me somehow, or, I don't know... The point is that we kept meeting each other later on and she wrote a poem to me in German. She was so cute! And we were trying to get closer... So we got closer, then we danced, and then... It was hard! It was hard, but she was so sweet, so cute! A lot of plans... Which we did realize. But Magdi is a spontaneous person and I wasn't always able to follow her. Let's sell newspapers! Me selling newspapers? I can't even speak the language. So it was like that. We tried everything. And I wasn't tough enough to hold her back. Because it was hard to hold her back. All that I had already gone through in life she was trying to experience at once. And I got tired of it. It didn't matter that I had a job, she wanted me to stand by her side all the time. I told her many times, "No! Oh, not now, I'm tired, go on your own!" But she wouldn't. I'm like this, unfortunately. But we are still very good friends, so that's something. I couldn't tie her to myself. She is kind of a rabbit type. Well, of course I had been through a lot. She also wanted to experience a lot, but for that you need to let go of some things. To hold and let go at the same time! And that's hard. And I don't really know how to. Neither one, nor the other.

R: When you arrived in 1991, what did this village look like in your eyes?

GS: Well, back then a lot of people were living here. They have died now or moved away. Now only a few of us remain. Everybody was nice, we got on well with everyone. And when Magdi and Agáta had that severe accident, really the whole community, everybody came, Nóra too, by motorbike! Rushing right away to the hospital to see what happened. Because the car wreck got brought home. And really everybody came to see, even the shopkeeper. At the time we still had a regular shop.¹⁵² They saw the wreck and they came! But unfortunately all those people have moved away. Now there are a lot of empty houses which still have owners, but they don't live here any more. There are still a few people like us here. Some of them we're good friends with, others we don't talk to much – because some of them are cross with each other and if you talk to one of them, the other one won't talk to you. That's the way it works ... around and around.

R: How many people live here now?

¹⁵¹ The names Cilin and Magdi refer to Magdi Timár (Chapters 12 and 12A).

¹⁵² Currently there is only a mobile shop coming to the village twice a week. Szatina dwellers go shopping to neighbouring villages and bigger towns.

GS: Well, I think, with the children there are about 26 of us. You can try to count us. There are 23 adults and maybe 3 children. So not too many. Dogs. There used to be a school here. But most of those old people have passed away. Magdi left in 1999, Nóra stayed here for a while, then everybody left... But it never crossed my mind to return to Budapest with them. No. Simply not. I love this place. I love it. To stroll over to Mindszentgodisa.¹⁵³ There are Dutch acquaintances there, a nice married couple, they help where they can. Well, you need this kind of relationship, too.

R: Do you miss anything here?

GS: Well, a partner with whom... we could go together or stroll around, or walk the dogs together, or go together to pick mushrooms... so I really miss this sometimes. A steady one. Someone permanent.

R: So you don't have such a person.

GS: I don't.

R: Why not?

GS: Why not? Maybe because I can't imagine it any more! I've lived alone for so many years that having somebody next to me every morning... But sometimes I miss it. Someone. For whom I could make breakfast, coffee, so I miss this a bit. But it's difficult to tempt someone here. Because I wouldn't want to have a very young one – what could I do with a 24-year-old girl, for example? There was a very cute, nice chick in Orfű, but what should I do with her? Only be a mother-substitute for her, I don't know... And who would be willing to move here, anyway? There's no disco, there isn't this, there isn't that. Well, now, it's not a big deal, I'll cope with it on my own... Probably.

R: How often do you talk with Mari Bán?

GS: We talk every two or three days, but she lives in a different world than I do. I don't know those films, those things... I'm not a vegetarian, either, nothing. So our interests don't really match up... We meet regularly, but we don't have much in common. I don't know Ibolya Oláh, Ica Bíró¹⁵⁴... Alright, I've seen them on the TV, but I'm not so much into them. Connie Francis is the one for me... but who listens to such old music today? But when one of us needs something, we are there for each other.

R: How is the order, then? Because I'm a bit confused. The girls, one by one...

GS: Yeah, the order? Huh!

R: Well, roughly.

GS: The last one was Nóra. In order? Jesus! Well, it was Judit was introduced me. So she was the first one, for whom I moved to Hungary. I had some affairs meanwhile, but then Magdi came, that was a long-term relationship, we lived together. Then Bözső was the next. The second long one that lasted for more than five years was Nóra. And then zero. That was the last one. So she left me, and since then I haven't had a relationship like that here, I mean, a long one.

¹⁵³ A neighbouring village.

¹⁵⁴ Ica Bíró (b. 1957): fitness trainer, fashion model, actor and singer.



Berlin, 1979



1981



1985



Orfú, 2005



“I decided to give myself twenty years to make my dreams come true”

Magdi Timár – Cilin (b. 1963)

R: Where and in what kind of family did you grow up?

MT: I was born in Csepel,¹⁵⁵ in a true proletarian family. My dad was an iron-turner and so was my mum, for a while. They met in the factory, it was a great romance. I have a younger sister, I'm two years older. We grew up in a small detached house with a garden on the outskirts of Csepel. We had cats and dogs. I lived there for a long time, until I was almost 20.

R: What was the atmosphere like at home?

MT: It was good, a nice and peaceful home. I think I can say that I had a good childhood. I liked living there; I loved my parents and my sister. There were no family quarrels; there was a good atmosphere.

R: Why did you still decide to move when you were twenty?

MT: Well, it was necessary to move, because I wanted to live my own life. If you decide to be gay you can't just go on living where your parents are. Then you have to move and live independently. You have to move anyway; around twenty you leave your nest and start building a new nest, anyway. So this is what I had to do, too.

R: How and when did you realize that you were gay?

MT: I was around thirteen or fourteen when I dreamt that I was in the hall or lobby of a great hotel, waiting. I didn't know what or who for, I just waited. Then suddenly a really beautiful woman appeared. She was tall, slender, and black-haired. She went to the reception desk, said something to the receptionist, and I knew immediately that I had to stand up and go there. I stood up, I went there and took her hand... and at that moment I felt that I was the happiest person in the world! I woke up at the same moment, sat up in bed and told myself that... that I was homosexual. With the same momentum that I sat up with. And I remembered it! I was so overjoyed at that moment; to know who and what I was and what I wanted. Simply put, it was like a revelation; a great-great happiness.

R: In other words you are saying that the great recognition happened from one moment to the next, because of a dream?

MT: It wasn't just because of a dream; I'd already known that I was not like all the others, that I was different. It wasn't a bad feeling, I just didn't really know what this whole thing was about. All I knew is that I liked girls and I always fell in love with girls. That I prefer their company. Years passed by, and then around thirteen or fourteen this moment came. After that I read a lot; I tried to look into these matters because I was really interested. The only word I recognized was homosexuality. It's about who's in love with whom and stuff, and then I could tell myself, yes, that's what I was. This was happiness itself, this coming to consciousness.

R: How does a child realize this?

¹⁵⁵ A suburban part of Budapest, a proletarian neighbourhood during state-socialism.

MT: The interesting thing was that at school I always played with the boys during breaks. We played soccer or whatever, but I only played with boys. So I felt good in the company of boys, and we had lots of common topics. But when it came to my emotions, they always unmistakably pointed towards girls. So it was them I liked, and I hung around with boys because we could talk about girls together. At the time it wasn't too obvious for the boys yet. We could simply talk about mutual interests as good buddies, that's why it was good. But obviously I already realized that there was something fishy about all this, that it was girls that I liked.

R: Can you remember who your first love was as a child?

MT: Yes... she was a girl who was three years older. I was around ten, and she must have been around thirteen or fourteen, because next year she left school. She had really beautiful dark brown curly hair, yes... so I wept over her leaving.

R: How did you express your love for her?

MT: I didn't. I thought that this was only my inner emotion, and I should wait with this. I knew that it was still a bit too early, and after that dream I suddenly told myself that from now on, yes, now it is perfectly clear to me who I am and what it is that I want.

R: You mentioned that his was a liberating feeling and you were overjoyed.

MT: Absolutely overjoyed.

R: There were no negative feelings or sense of guilt involved?

MT: No, no. It was such a beautiful realization, that I felt no guilt whatsoever, on the contrary!

R: I asked this because I think that especially for a child, but even for an adult, it is often difficult to cope with what his or her environment has to say about this. Because they can see that there are certain norms which everybody accepts as natural.

MT: What was strange was that I didn't feel any guilt because I knew exactly what I was and that my life would take an entirely different turn from that point on. But I'd always wanted to be able to talk about it, one way or another. It took me a long-long time until I could tell my parents, though I tried to convey the message to them. One weekend I had to do the dishes, and while I was in the middle of it I suddenly said to my mum that I didn't want to get married. My mum asked me why not, and I answered her that because I'd simply decided that I didn't want to. But still, she said, you must get married because every girl gets married and then I said, okay, then I'd have a black husband. Back then I considered that for a proletarian family from Csepel marrying a black man was almost like saying that I was going to be a faggot. To that my mum said, "Well, then you'd better not get married". I went on doing the dishes and I thought, okay, I wouldn't tell it to her. First because it was still too early, and second because things would just happen the way they ought to and it'd come to light anyway sometime. When it's time for it to come to light.

R: How old were you at the time of this conversation?

MT: Around fifteen-sixteen. I already had a mature way of thinking, I just didn't have a girlfriend yet... so I was a lesbian only in theory.

R: But how can a fifteen-year-old girl know that being black or gay is a stigma? Did you read about it somewhere or just felt it?

MT: Actually, I read a lot; I spent all my time in libraries. In fact, from the moment I learned to read and write, from the age of eight, I was a library-

going little rat and whenever I wasn't playing football on the streets with boys, I sat in libraries and read. I registered at the local adult library at a very early age, because the real interesting stuff was there. At the age of twelve I was practically reading adult literature and I did my best to take in everything I could. Then, when I was fifteen, I went to high school, where I signed up for the film club, and I saw plenty of films. There was an enormous bulk of information inside me, which made me premature. Girls my age only talked about the shade of their lipstick or their nail polish, about fashion. I couldn't talk to them about anything, because I wasn't interested in these things at all.

R: Were the readings and the films part of a conscious self-education? Was understanding and getting to know your own lesbianism the priority, or was it about being different?

MT: I think that this reading compulsion – because it was a compulsion of sorts – was partly aiming at understanding my otherness and how it works in the world around me, because I didn't know anyone else, and partly at discovering anything important or interesting in connection to that.

R: When were you born?

MT: In 1963.

R: What kind of books and films could guide you around the end of the 1970s?

MT: I must begin with the small private library of my father. I love Jules Verne very much; I read almost everything that he wrote. In every single Verne book there's a reference to another book, so I took notes of these and went to find that book next. It was more or less the same when I started reading about lesbianism: I opened the book, started reading, and when I found something that had to do with lesbianism I took a note, looked it up, and read another book or short story. That's how the entirety of English and American literature came along slowly.

R: What kind of high school did you go to?

MT: Secondary school for economics; I hated it.

R: Then why did you go there?

MT: My mum said that one must learn a decent profession. A decent profession, in this case, means that when you graduate, you have two or three professions in your hand, with which you can settle down and live happily ever after, everything is settled. Then I told mum that I wanted to be a film director. But I knew that it was kind of problematic, because it requires a degree. When I finished school I became an accountant, a statistician, a corporate planner, which is really disgusting. That was the first year when you could apply to the film academy, to the film director course, without a degree. I tried it, though I knew that I didn't have much chance. There were a lot of applicants, I'm not sure, about eight hundred, and I thought that I had very little chance. But I decided to give myself twenty years to make my dreams come true, or at least a portion of them. I'm the kind who likes to make her dreams come true.

R: Going back to high school, you said you had started going to cinemas. What were the cinematic experiences that strengthened your identity or stirred the director inside you?

MT: I was very lucky with these film clubs: I went to screenings at downtown cinemas, which were arranged by the Open University. They were held at *Toldi Cinema* and I think at *Művész Cinema* as well, though I don't remember exactly. I attended these for almost four years, twice a week. I loved film clubs and

watching films which you otherwise couldn't see in regular cinemas. For example I really loved Bergman at the time, though later I decided that I didn't like him so much because he's stilted. There were many scenes and references in the films in which there were lesbian or homosexual references.

R: You mentioned that at the age of fifteen you hadn't had a relationship yet.

MT: I had my first one at twenty.

R: Any men?

MT: From the age of sixteen, when I met the first guy, I had to be content with curiosity at most, until I was twenty. But I wasn't in love, and the stories from that time were not significant. I always anticipated falling in love with someone, but I never fell in love with any of those boys. But I knew that this was not a problem; this was my age of curiosity; it was just giving myself the chance, the opportunity. But I also knew in my heart that whoever I'd first fall in love with would be a woman, and I was right. I was twenty by the time it happened, so I had to survive four terrible years. But I was patient enough, I dated boys. Though I really don't wish for anybody to be able to eat only spinach when she wants to eat meat.

R: You knew exactly that this was not what you needed?

MT: Yes.

R: Did you have any physical experiences with boys?

MT: Yes, I did. If you're curious you don't stop halfway – people simply don't work like that. I wanted to know what it was like in bed and what sex was like. But it was a traumatizing experience. My first experience of this kind was on a simple small sofa with a bed-like thing, and my head was hanging off its side. Then I thought that I didn't want to be with a man, a guy, a boy ever again, if it means my head hanging off at the side. I was there with the first boy on that sofa, and no matter how I tried to climb back up, I couldn't set my head right. So it was really awkward.

R: Did it ever give you pleasure?

MT: Actually, sex itself wasn't a problem, if the circumstances were right. There was simply no emotion in it, and if you don't feel like you really want to do it, then why do it at all?

R: Did you try looking around for others who were like you during that time?

MT: The strange thing was that in those years when I went to film clubs and did sports (I was a sportswoman from the age of fourteen: I played handball and field hockey), although I walked in the world with open eyes, trying to notice people who might be in the same category, I never found anyone. It was as if such things didn't even exist in the world. I stood there in the middle of a city of two million, and I was as lonely as Robinson on his island. But he too had Friday, later on. I had nobody, I just lived on my little island, and it was terrible not to see anyone around me.

R: Then you lived like Sleeping Beauty, waiting for someone to wake you up.

MT: Yes, well, obviously there's a parallel, but I feel I can identify more with the Robinson metaphor, because Robinson didn't just dream, he went about busily on his island, while Sleeping Beauty was sleeping peacefully and shut herself off from the world. I didn't shut myself off, I waited eagerly for the coming of Friday.

R: And how did Friday come, how did she arrive?

MT: Well, it wasn't easy. When I got to the point that I desperately wanted to change my life and make it possible for love to come, I figured that it was me who had to take that initial step. I gave up my reserved mentality and called a dating agency. I was completely terrified, I could barely speak. I told them that I was looking for a partner and they asked me the parameters of the desired man. I told them that it was a woman that I wanted to meet. They replied, no problem, then I should tell them the parameters of the desired woman. I thought, Jesus Christ, what kinds of parameters was I supposed to tell them? I replied that it didn't really matter, the moment would decide for itself. But I had to say something about what she should be like: tall or slender or fat or thin or tall or brunette. In the end I had only one requirement: I didn't want to meet a bisexual. I knew that I mustn't get involved with those, and I was a little bit afraid, as well. I thought that she should be squarely gay as well, so that it's a bit easier to get a start.

After several days I had to make a personal visit to the agency to pay the registration fee, and they told me not to worry and just sit back and wait at my place of work, because that was the only place where I had a telephone, and one fine day someone would just call me. All day and night my hands were trembling at work, I sweated all over, I could barely do my job properly. When the phone finally rang and I heard the voice of a woman, a perfect stranger, her voice was so pleasant that I was totally smitten. We agreed on a date, I bought a bottle of wine and some flowers and stuff, and then went to Buda. I was standing there in front of the door of her apartment and I prayed silently, "Dear God, just don't send me Baba Yaga to open this door!" Well, she was no Baba Yaga. We got to know each other, we dated for three or four weeks, but then it turned out that she was bisexual and she had an ex-husband, who came back sometimes for brief visits. She had a young son as well, which really didn't bother me at all, after two weeks I was taking him to the kindergarten, but I was bothered by having someone else in the picture, and a man. So the story ended.

I called the dating agency again and asked for the next phone number. After a few days the phone rang again; another voice, another complete stranger. Now I had a bit more routine and wasn't so afraid any more. We went to have a coffee in a small pub or café or whatever, and talked a bit. But we didn't really like each other so I called the agency again because you got three dates for one registration. At that particular time there were no further opportunities so they told me that if anything came up they'd call me. In the meantime I'd already met some people and I was informed that in *Muskátlí Restaurant* there was going to be a big big party for girls only. The dating agency also informed me and suggested I could go there, I'd be able to talk and dance and meet people. It was on a Saturday night and there were lots and lots of girls. I had never seen that many girls in my whole life, there were about thirty of us. I danced and talked with girls all through the night, and it was a great and liberating feeling to know that I was not alone, there were others like me. Sometime around midnight the kitchen door burst open and a beautiful young woman appeared, dressed in white chef's clothes and toque, and she joined the dance. The moment I saw her I felt that this was it, she was the one! It only took one second. I asked her to dance, we talked a bit, then we dated a few times and then I was already in love.

R: What was her name?

MT: Gerda.¹⁵⁶

R: Let me just take a step back for a moment: that dating agency, how did it work at the time? On the quiet?

MT: Absolutely. That was the time when such dating agencies started operating. That's when people started to include it in the repertoire; it wasn't possible to advertise it openly. That was the first instance when it appeared in an advertisement that they could find a partner for everyone. This evidently meant for me that they could find partners for girls, as well. That's why I dared to call them.

R: You answered the phone at your workplace. Did you use a coded language?

MT: Not at all. We talked in an absolutely open manner. I knew where she got that number from, and then it took only a few minutes to set a date.

R: Did your colleagues hear these conversations?

MT: Yes, they did. I was working in a legal office. Three of us sat in one office room: the leading legal advisor, the young jurist and me, the secretary. Everyone always heard everything, but I could get over these things easily.

R: Did your colleagues know that you were a lesbian?

MT: The young jurist did. I told him that though I'd had no girlfriend yet, I already knew that I was a lesbian. He tried to make advances, so I thought we'd better get it straight at the beginning.

R: How did he react?

MT: Well, he was really very open person to everything; he was the keyboard player of the band called *Millenniumi Földalatti Vasútvonal*.¹⁵⁷ He was kind of an avant-garde character; it really didn't bother him and he could understand completely what it was about.

R: And had you come out at home by that time?

MT: No. Actually it wasn't me but my sister who told my parents what the situation was with me. But my parents knew, because I met Gerda when I was twenty, we lived together for five years, and no matter what family celebrations we had at home, birthdays, name days, Easter or Christmas, I always took her with me. Because she belonged with me. I presented all this to my family saying that we lived together in a sub-let because it was cheaper that way, and then why shouldn't my best friend come to the family celebrations. My parents accepted this and they really liked Gerda. And I think that somewhere deep inside they knew what this was about, because I never talked about any boys whatsoever. After the age of twenty I swam away from my little Robinson's island and men no longer played any part in my life, it was only Gerda at the time: we went here and there with Gerdus, we went hiking, what Gerdus cooked, what I cooked, etcetera. I told my sister that I'm a lesbian when I was twenty, when I thought that this was the time to tell her. She was eighteen then and I thought that she was mature enough to know. I remember telling her at a bus stop, because I was going dancing; this was the *Muskátli* story. When I told her that I was going dancing she jumped up and told me that she was coming, too. I told her that she couldn't come because it was a private party,

¹⁵⁶ Gerda Schmied. See: Chapter 11. The names Gerda and Gerdus refer to the same person.

¹⁵⁷ *Millenniumi Földalatti Vasútvonal* [Millennium Underground Railway]: an alternative rock band in the 1980s.

but she insisted on coming and it was then that I told her that actually I didn't want her to come because there wouldn't be any boys, only girls. Because I'm a faggot, that's what I told her. I didn't know what word to use: homosexual or lesbian. I said that I'm a faggot and that's it. Faggot: that was the Csepel dialect. That's when she started crying, poor girl. She still wanted to come with me and when we arrived she could see for herself that there really were no boys at all. She sat down at a table and she was crying to herself all evening, poor thing. That's when I met Gerdus. It was difficult for her, but she got over it. I think after that she explained with great enthusiasm to everyone she knew that her sister was a faggot and didn't care about men. I actually didn't mind that she processed it by telling others.

R: And how and when did your sister tell your parents?

MT: Well, twenty-four years passed between the two occasions: me telling her and her telling my parents. Meanwhile there were several women and love affairs in my life. When I met Taki¹⁵⁸ and I told my sister that I was in love, the same afternoon she told my mother, on the pier during fishing, "Listen, Mum, Magdika's in love again". With whom, my mother asked with twinkling eyes and my sister said she's some teacher or something. Then my mum asked, "Really?", to which my sister replied, "But Mum, what does it matter?" And my mum said, "Well, actually it doesn't". Then the next day I also arrived for family lunch on Sunday and while we were sitting at the table my mum suddenly turned around and asked me, "And who's your new girlfriend, Magdika dear?" Then I thought that I'd just faint; the spoon nearly fell from my hand. Actually she knew all my girlfriends because I always introduced everyone who I really lived together with. So I told her that her name was Mária and she's a teacher. I looked at my sister and knew that it was her who gave me away. But it was good that this thing was finally said out loud, though I think it was quite obvious even before, for twenty-odd years.

R: Didn't you ever consider that it might be good to come out to them?

MT: I did. When I told my sister we agreed not to tell our parents because we thought it'd be a great trauma and we didn't want to give them any pain. I thought that the time would come when this wouldn't be a trauma but a natural thing. It's a process: you introduce the ones you love to your parents, they get to know them, etcetera, and when things come to light, they already know everything about it. That's my agenda. This evidently entails the fact that the word itself which needs to be said remains unspoken, but I live my life, I don't keep it secret and don't try to hide the one I love from my parents. It was only saying the word itself that I couldn't get myself to do.

R: Tell me about living with Gerdus. Who is she and what did you find captivating in her? How was it possible to live together then, to create the grounds of a common life?

MT: When I met Gerdus at *Muskátli Restaurant*, at that very moment I was struck down by great love. I saw and received models for living together and marriage from my parents. I saw that they didn't have a bad life, they loved each other, they did have smaller problems or conflicts, but those can be found in any relationship and they can be solved. That's the blueprint I had before me

¹⁵⁸ Mária Takács: director of the documentary *Secret Years* (2009), which is based on 11 of the interviews in this volume.

and I thought that if I loved someone, then I wanted to live with her. Marriage is not possible, but everything else is. Living together and love can be experienced; you only have to want it. There were a few weeks of getting to know each other with Gerdus, and then one evening I asked her whether she wanted to live with me. She said yes. Then we bought two little silver rings, we engaged each other and decided to move together. I went home and told my parents I was moving out.

R: What did you find most attractive in her? You said that she was really beautiful, that you found her a real beauty.

MT: Well, yes. Gerdus was a German girl, from the GDR. What captivated me in her was that she was very kind, she really loved Hungary and loved living here. Her Hungarian was very bad and I spoke no German at all. So communication wasn't easy at all, but we were attracted to each other as strong as two magnets. Later on I learned a bit of German and she learned a bit more Hungarian, so we could communicate more easily.

R: How did she come to Hungary?

MT: There was some exchange program between Hungarian and German skilled workers. Many people went to Berlin to work at the time: cooks, turners, glaziers, and many workers came here from there. Gerdus came here to work as a cook; she'd worked as a cook in Berlin. She lived in some workers' hostel, where I couldn't visit her. We couldn't really meet, because I lived with my parents and she lived in that hostel where I wasn't allowed to enter. We could find shelter at friends' places for one night at a time, so it just didn't work. That's why I told her we should rent an apartment, because there we'd be free.

R: Did your first time together confirm all you'd wanted and hoped for earlier? You don't have to answer if you don't want to.

MT: Yes, absolutely.

R: How did your life go on; how did you develop living together?

MT: We both worked. Gerdus worked at Hotel Gellért, she was a buffet meal cook, while I worked at a foreign trade company's legal office. Every evening I waited for her in front of Gellért. She finished around midnight, while I finished around four or five. Then I went home, cooked something, cleaned up, went to training if I had any, and then went to wait for Gerdus. We went home, or had a beer and a talk at the University Café and home after that.

R: Did you have an intense, party-going life? Where did you go to party?

MT: The truth is that Gerdus was the partying type who likes meeting and mingling with people, while I was rather the type who likes being home and potter. But every now and then we did go to private parties, because there were no big organized ones. If there were any, they were at Ipoly Cinema. And University Café, that's it.

R: So you lived a settled married life.

MT: Absolutely. It was the kind of marriage when sometimes you go out with your partner to a private party or a birthday party, sometimes you have a drink at the University Café, but apart from that you just go home and live your life at home, like in a proper marriage.

R: Where did you start off in Budapest? Because you lived in Budapest, I suppose.

MT: Yes, yes. Our first place was near the Eastern Railway Station, some really terrible place, full of cockroaches. We rented a room in an apartment, the owner

lived there as well, and we had a shared kitchen and bathroom. I didn't like it, so I suggested renting a whole apartment. After that we only rented apartments, so that we could be alone.

R: So Gerda came from the GDR. If I'm not mistaken, there it was possible to talk about these things even during the socialist regime. What did Gerda bring into the relationship along these lines? Did you travel to the GDR, or join the social life there?

MT: We visited her parents several times in Bernburg, Germany. Gerdus knew people in Berlin too, so we went there several times, as well. But it wasn't about going to big parties, getting drunk and seducing women, but more about the more sedate part. Obviously it must have had a wilder aspect as well, but since we were married we didn't really get involved in that. Berlin was full of life, that's undeniable. Interestingly, quite many Germans liked coming here, to Budapest though. Probably because back home they were under a much stronger political pressure, while here it was somewhat lighter for them, though there were no clubs or party venues here. There were some bath houses for boys, but nothing for girls. So you couldn't really go out here, but you could in Berlin. Berlin was much freer in this respect; this aspect of sexuality was tolerated, though every other aspect was suppressed. By political stories, for example.

R: Wasn't this hidden subculture monitored here in Hungary at the time?

MT: I think they had a little file on everyone; they surely had one on Gerdus. She had to join the Communist Party of the GDR to come here in the first place. That's the only way she could get a passport. I think that everyone who was a party member and was allowed to come here had to sign a statement that from then on they would be obedient agents of their home country. It must have been this way, I'm certain of that, no matter who says what; otherwise they couldn't have got a passport and permission to work abroad.

R: Should we imagine Gerda sitting down on winter evenings and writing reports about what she'd experienced?

MT: I think she had a really serious duty to report. The joke was that she had nothing to write because she didn't really mingle in such circles. She mentioned to me once that every month she had to write a report on who she'd met and what she'd done. I wasn't stupid; I knew what this was all about and I told her not to worry, I'd help her out. Sometimes we wrote fake reports, like 'I went to the zoo with my girlfriend', or 'we went to the cinema together.' In other words there was nothing tangible in these, no politically loaded information, only bedtime stories: how she went to the market to buy things, or she cleaned up the house and never really met anyone except her girlfriend, things like that. These letters were composed so that they wouldn't contain anything that would give anything away. But they had to be written every month, and she had to include nonsense like who she was meeting regularly. Well, she was meeting me.

R: Do you think there were stoolies in these circles, too?

MT: I'm sure there were, though mostly among the boys, I think.

R: I had a fellow student at university who was a homosexual and later turned out to be involved in this informer network, so he must have been blackmailed to do this.

MT: There must have been some who were blackmailed with their homosexuality to write reports. But I think that those who agreed to do this did what they did either because they were too afraid of losing their job or because they just weren't too strong characters. Or, like in Gerdus's case, they couldn't get a passport and a permission to come to Hungary unless they signed up. I don't know if there were people who enjoyed doing this, but I really don't think so.

R: Did it ever occur to you, either with a partner or alone, to leave this country for a place where one can live more freely, where this thing has more visibility? Wasn't this secret, closeted life too stifling?

MT: I only felt bad in this country until I met Gerdus and all the other friends and acquaintances. But I never wanted to leave this country. I thought that this was my home country, and this was where I should meet people.

R: So you were satisfied when you found your own path?

MT: Yes, yes. Even today I like living here. And also, I don't speak any foreign languages and I've never wanted to move to Switzerland to wash dishes only because there are more lesbians living in Switzerland, or in France, or anywhere in the world. My profession is not something that I can settle with easily anywhere, either. So I had to wait until I got to know this subculture here at home.

R: You lived together with Gerdus for five years. Did you live in Budapest all the time?

MT: We lived in Budapest, because both of us worked here. Later, after we separated, I moved to Szatina with another girlfriend.

R: Tell me the story about the fake marriages!

MT: Well, yes. It never crossed my mind to make a fake marriage only to keep up appearance, but back then Gerdus needed to get married in order to stay and receive a residence permit in Hungary. She knew some guys, some friends of hers, and one of those guys suggested getting married, saying both of them would benefit from it: Gerda could apply for Hungarian citizenship and the guy could present a marriage to his family. And Gerdus did marry that guy. And that guy had a partner who told me that we should get married too, and then he could present a marriage to his parents, as well. I thought this over: if I married that boy, and his partner married my girlfriend, then we'd make a double fake marriage. After the fake weddings we moved to Kispest,¹⁵⁹ where Gerdus's husband's parents lived. There was a big common yard, Gerdus lived in one small apartment with her husband, and I lived in the neighbouring one with mine. In the evenings we switched places quickly: Gerdus came over to my place and my husband went over to his partner. Sometimes this caused some complications, for example when somebody lost his or her keys or took his or her partner's keys by mistake, and then we couldn't switch places, but generally it worked fine. Interestingly enough, male-female gender roles got distributed almost immediately in this double marriage of ours: Gerdus cooked for the four of us, and I did the washing for all of us. And the guys just lived their lives. This went on for a while, but after a time there were more and more conflicts. I'd had enough of doing the washing for four people and one day I told Gerdus that this wasn't cool, let's move out of there, away from the guys, because it

¹⁵⁹ A suburban part of Budapest.

just couldn't go on like this. We had to live in hiding twenty-four hours a day, because there were the other residents in the neighbouring apartments and houses and everyone kept an eye on everything. It was a really lousy feeling. We moved after three years. It wasn't necessary any more to continue our marriage on paper. I explained to my husband that we'd be divorced people, it'd be neatly included in our IDs, and no one would ever ask why he hadn't remarried or why I hadn't found a new husband. So we divorced, and that was it.

R: Did Gerdus divorce, too?

MT: No, she didn't, but we moved away and started anew at a new place. Those three years were nice though, they were exciting, almost film-like, but living them wasn't that easy, it never is when you have to adapt to three people.

R: And how did the relationship with Gerda end?

MT: Well, I fell in love with another woman. And when I'm in love, then I simply have to go. You either cut out that feeling and then you don't experience it, or you live and experience it, but then it's better to split up and leave that relationship which you're in at the time, because it's a duality that leads to a schizophrenic state of mind. We split up with Gerdus. We couldn't live together with the girl that I left Gerdus for, no matter how deep our love was, so it ended really quickly.

R: How did you meet her?

MT: At some party. We got together with some people at a party and talked... these things happen really that simply.

R: Did your relationship with Gerda start to pall, or what led to this new love?

MT: I think that this tendency is there in every relationship, but everybody deals with it differently. If you are a bit more open to the world, you won't say that you want to live your life with one person only, but it's easier for you to let in those outside emotions which are there, anyway. Well, I'm this type of person.

R: Are you a basically monogamous type when you're in love?

MT: Yes, and blind too. I go blind. When I met Gerdus, I was blinded. The most beautiful women on earth could've passed me by or sat down next to me... I simply wouldn't have noticed them. When this great love suddenly passed, the next one checked in. And though I really loved Gerdus, I simply couldn't make the two work simultaneously.

R: And why didn't this other relationship work out?

MT: We didn't match, not in the least bit. We annoyed each other so much that it ended really quickly.

R: Were there any male-female gender roles in your relationship with Gerdus?

MT: I think it's a question of disposition. If a man in a straight relationship feels that he can do the dishes or he is capable of cleaning up, then why shouldn't he do that? And if he's absolutely incapable of doing that, then he'll become a guy who sits at home and watches TV, goes to work and comes back home: the supper's ready, the rooms are clean, the children are taken care of and raised, etcetera. If it suits the woman, then this is how they'll handle it in life. It's the same in a gay relationship, whether someone has the urge to do the dishes, the washing up or cooking or anything of the kind. You can't force anybody to start cooking. We were lucky because on the one hand Gerdus loved cooking and doing the dishes, on the other hand I loved cleaning and having things in

order, going about and arranging things in the apartment, gardening. So it wasn't like I was lying in bed and watching TV while she was cooking and cleaning and washing up; we divided these chores nicely.

R: So are you a domestic kind of person? Do you enjoy doing these things?

MT: When I'm by myself I don't really feel the need to have the house in order and cook for myself. But I do when I live with a partner. It's really good to cook something, wait until the other gets home from work and have dinner together. Or do her washing. These are perfectly normal things, I think.

R: Who was your next love?

MT: After this relationship went awry really quickly, I was lonely for a while, so I met lots of girls in that period. I was womanizing; I think that's the right word for this. But I didn't find anyone I could fall in love with. And since there were no clubs or venues apart from the University Café, which was only frequented by guys, you couldn't really meet girls. I didn't want to choose from my circle of friends because that's just so lame. And then I thought I'd put an advertisement in the newspaper. I'd always abhorred this kind of thing, but I thought what the hell, why not. I advertised in *Expressz*. It took several days of thinking hard to get the ad done, I sweated blood during that time because I wanted to write an ad to which every woman would feel the compulsion to grab a pen and respond. After posting the ad it was an unimaginable torture to wait for the responses. It turned out that I'd received nearly fifty letters. I was very conscientious: I answered every letter, I called everyone who asked for a callback, I met everyone who wanted to, I went to confectioneries to have a cake, to cafés to have a coffee, to pubs to have a beer and talk; I went through all that you can imagine. I had nice chats with all of them but none of them turned out to be the one. Among the fifty letters there was one which was so nonsensical that I couldn't really take it seriously, so I just hid it under all the rest; it might be needed in case of emergency... After I'd met everyone it was the only letter left, written by some teacher from a faraway small village. She wrote that she lived in the middle of the forest in a tiny little hut and she went down to the village every day to teach. I replied to her that if my life happened to lead me that way one day, I'd visit her. After several days I received a reply that she was coming to Budapest to settle some business and that we should meet. Not only that; I had to sit in *Írók Boltja* [Writers' Shop]¹⁶⁰ in some comfortable chair, browsing through El Kazovsky's¹⁶¹ album, that's how she would recognize me, and I would recognize her by her long black coat and a little wooden toy hanging out from its pocket. So there I was, sitting in the shop, browsing through Kazovsky's album when I suddenly saw above the pages a black coat coming towards me with the head of a little wooden horse hanging from its pocket. I looked up and I saw Ágota¹⁶². We introduced ourselves and went to have a drink. It happened that for the same evening I'd been invited to some weird underground venue to listen to the concert of a band called *Bútorért* by a dear friend of mine, Mari Bán¹⁶³, who played the drums there. She invited me to listen, so we went, both of us. We listened to

¹⁶⁰ A highbrow bookshop in the city centre.

¹⁶¹ El Kazovsky (1948–2008): Russian-born Hungarian painter, who created expressive works along her personal mythology. She was open about her transgender identity.

¹⁶² Ágáta Gordon, see: Chapters 12A and 13.

¹⁶³ See: Chapter 10.

the concert, talked a lot, and slowly this relationship started off, as well. I visited her at Szatina, because that's where she lived, on a small farm above the village. And I visited her every weekend, because I worked on weekdays.

R: And why was that letter nonsensical? Because of the hut in the woods, or...

MT: The very fact was absurd that I was living in a city of two million, and I was going to date a woman who lived in a little hut in the middle of a forest, taught children in a small village and wrote poetry! I thought that there was absolutely no chance that two people could find each other like that, but I was wrong.

R: What did you write in that advertisement? Can you still recall?

MT: I don't remember its text, though several friends have asked me about it. But I know that it turned out really good.

R: And did you have to use some code?

MT: No, not at all. There was no code whatsoever, only emotion. It wasn't romantic, but some kind of passion burned in it.

R: What did you find captivating in Ágota?

MT: We were quite alike: the way we thought about the world, our mental disposition. Suddenly it felt good to be next to each other. We were already kissing the first evening, there was nothing more than that, only kissing, and she went back with the first train at dawn. But the bond was very strong, I felt it almost immediately!

R: So was this also love at first sight?

MT: Almost, yes.

R: Were you still working at the office?

MT: No, then I already worked in a family business, as a car dealer. My sister asked me, as a book-keeper, to help them with the business part. I was the general manager of a thriving car dealing company, so I made good money, I went to work by taxi every day. But I had to work a lot and it was a huge responsibility; so it burned me out after two years. When I met Ágota, it took me another year to decide to leave my job and the city way of life, and move to her place in the countryside. Of course, there was the possibility of her moving to Budapest. But she didn't have this terrible urge, because earlier she'd moved to the countryside exactly because she'd wanted to realize some hippie-like dream at that farm, in the middle of the forest, far away from the world. So I thought that I'd give up my own city life, which I found exhausting, anyway, and I'd move to her place. I quit my job, my work, I told my friends that I was moving to the countryside and that they should visit me sometimes. I moved and the friends came to visit. They didn't forget about me, they liked being there at weekends or during holidays.

R: If I get it right, when you arrived there, there were the three of you: Nóri, Ágota, and you. Didn't it cause conflicts that the new couple and the deserted one lived under the same roof?

MT: When I moved to Ágota's, her ex-girlfriend, Nórika, lived in the village, too. It's true that the three of us lived in the same house. So it was a source of tension to start with, no matter how we tried to settle this problem. It's also a problem when a heterosexual couple divorces but they can't move apart and the third party moves in. So sooner or later it'll be throwing cups and breaking plates. These relationship systems work the same way for straight and gay couples: a problem is always a problem. As my friends kept visiting me during

weekends, including Gerdus, at one of these weekends she met Nórika, as well. And they fell in love. So Gerdus ended up leaving her job in Budapest at Hotel Gellért one fine day and moving down to Szatina to live together with Nórika. More precisely, Nórika didn't have a house at the time, so they moved in with us and we lived together, the four of us. We had separate bedrooms, but we shared the kitchen and the bathroom all the same. This went on for a while, but after a time all the problems and issues of living together came to the surface so we had no other option but to buy another small house in Szatina, where Nórika and Gerdus could move in. The problems ceased only after they moved out.

R: For you, a city girl, wasn't this change of environment difficult? How could you adapt? What did you do for a living when you moved there?

MT: I think that the reason I could switch so quickly from a city life to a country life was due to the fact that I was so much I love with Ágota. Nothing mattered, we could've moved to Siberia or Alaska or some battered little Argentinian village. But if it's Szatina, then it's Szatina. It took me a moment to decide, it was really quick and easy.

R: What did you do there all day?

MT: Well, look, I moved away from Budapest with quite a lot of money, so we were able to live on that for a while. There was a wooden toy manufacture at Szatina, which Ágota had started earlier with her previous girlfriend, Nóra. But it was just enough for survival, Ágota wasn't teaching any more, she was working only at the day-care centre. When I arrived my city habitus told me that this could be revived, let's do it big-time! I decided to do the sales part. We put an advertisement in *Expressz*, looking for kindergarten teachers for a part-time job in a system of agent commissions. I thought that we could best sell the toys if we focused on the clientele. Today it's called multilevel marketing. Lots of kindergarten teachers applied for the advertisement, at least a hundred, from all over the country. All of them ordered at first for their own kindergarten, then contacted and persuaded neighbouring ones to order as well. But there were just the two of us, and we couldn't fulfil all the orders. We tried to hire workforce from the village, primarily Roma people, but no one was interested, because you couldn't get rich from it. I have to add that it didn't make us rich, either. We simply couldn't find people for the job, though we searched in Komló,¹⁶⁴ as well. And the orders kept coming in, so we fulfilled all that we could, until the accident. After the accident the manufacturing stopped completely, because both Ágota and I got hospitalized.

R: What kind of an accident?

MT: In the summer of 1992 Ágota and I were coming home from Komló by car and another car, going completely disregarding traffic regulations, crashed into us frontally. There were injuries and surgeries; it took a long while for us to recover, and by the time we did, the wooden toy manufacture was completely dead. Nórika and Gerda took care of us: they fed us, bathed us and cooked for us. When we came home from the hospital, neither of us could really move or walk, we could only lie and rest. Ágota's right hand was paralyzed and her hip bone was broken. I had all kinds of internal injuries, liver and spleen, so I was

¹⁶⁴ Medium-sized industrial town in the same region as Szatina.

confined to bed, as well. Until we recovered, Gerdus took care of me while Nórika took care of Ágota.

R: How did you build up your new life after this accident?

MT: It was difficult to start anew because Ágota couldn't work, and I couldn't work, either, because there was nothing to sell. It was then that Ágota decided to start writing her first novel, because she felt the time had come. We bought a Robur, a huge, long car, and we parked it in a corner of the garden. We painted it blue, put a stove, electricity, and panelling in it as well as Ágota's computer which she received from the Soros Foundation. Ágota started to write her novel and completed it, too. We looked for a publisher, and that's how Ágota's writing career started. And I was pottering around the house. We'd received compensation after the accident; from that we renovated the house and built a new bathroom, and we could live quite well from what was left. But writing her novel brought a big change in Ágota's life. We wanted the world to open up for her and for that we had to take steps in several respects. We loved each other very much, but we felt that it was time for us to part. The village was not enough for Ágota any more, she wanted to move to the city and create a whole new milieu. I could've gone with her, of course, but I thought that it'd be a lot of suffering if I joined. So we concluded that it might be better to split up, and maybe later we could be friends or whatever. And Ágota fell in love with a woman who came to visit us with some friends for a weekend. I told her that if she didn't put that woman on a train on Monday morning, we'd have to split up. And she didn't put her on a train. They fell in love, and we split up.

R: And then you left?

MT: I moved back to Budapest and fell into a serious depression. I watched TV for eighteen hours a day, I was really clinical. This lasted until one day in February when my friends said that okay, enough was enough. It was in February 1998. There were already several venues in Budapest then, and we went to Capella, which was a mixed place for boys and girls, and that's where I met Gyöngyi. Later on she became my partner.

R: If I got it right, when you split up with Ágota, you were still in love with her.

MT: I loved her very much, but I wasn't in love any more. She wasn't in love with me, either. We loved each other very much, and that's how we split up: in love.

R: Did you wind up everything that you had there?

MT: I didn't, I just came to Budapest. We thought that if I wanted to have a new girlfriend or a new love, I had to come to Budapest. I lived together with Ágota in Szatina for five years, then for three years with Gyöngyi, and one year all alone. After that I moved to Budapest permanently, and since then the Szatina house has been functioning as a holiday home.

R: So you met Gyöngyi. Who was she, what can we know about her, what did she do?

MT: She was an actress in an underground theatre. I really liked her when I first saw her. She was really drunk, she couldn't even remember me the next day, but I remembered her. We met after the performance and sat down to have a beer and talk. We slowly got to know each other, the months passed by, and I had to return to Szatina because of the garden and the animals. I invited Gyöngyi too, so she gave up her acting career in the city, moved down with me to Szatina and we created a puppet theatre together. We were performing there

for three years: in Tolna, Baranya, Zala,¹⁶⁵ around the area. We set up the props and the settings in our workshop and in the yard, and had rehearsals there: outdoors during spring and summer, and indoors, in the workshop, during autumn and winter. It was really exciting. Then we split up with Gyöngyi, the marriage ended after three years. The theatre moved to Budapest, as well, because she had to leave because of her work.

R: Did you leave, as well?

MT: No, I lived alone in Szatina for a year. It was really strange, because I'd never lived alone for such a long time. It wasn't bad, but living alone is just not for me. Luckily the theatre season started in the fall; then I moved to Budapest, as well.

R: Why did the relationship with Gyöngyi end?

MT: Well, Ágota seduced Gyöngyi, that's how it happened. The sneaky little rat. And then they moved to Budapest. And I was left there alone for something like eight months. I renovated the house, it got a whole new paintjob – so I did lots of things during that time, the whole house received a new design. Not that it mattered much, because everything will be full of cracks after three years. Well, it's an adobe house. There wasn't much chance to keep up the nice, neat, crackless clean walls. Anyway, I believed in renovating after a divorce. That's the way it was, I did it. I wasn't bored, after all. I wasn't afraid, but my heart ached. Maybe it was because Ágota was my best friend, so it really hurt me that my best friend seduced my partner, Gyöngyi.

R: Why didn't you move to Budapest, as well?

MT: Well, because if I'd moved to Budapest immediately, I'd have started womanizing. And I didn't want to. I didn't want to jump into night life and start seducing girls. That was exactly what I wanted to avoid. I rather opted for staying in Szatina and waiting for the right time to meet somebody new. And then, when I went back to Budapest after many-many months, I lived at my sister's place for a couple of months. I was really depressed, much more so than I'd been in Szatina. And then after one or two months suddenly everything was much better. I met Ziliz, and we moved together into a sublet. Meanwhile my relationship with Ágota and Gyöngyi got better, as well. I didn't talk to Ágota for one year, because I couldn't forgive her for seducing Gyöngyi. Then at some point we made peace with each other. It's a quirk of fate that we rented an apartment together: Ágota and Gyöngyi in one room, Ziliz and me in the other.

R: How did you receive the nickname Cilin?

MT: Gerdus called me Macó, I really don't know why. When we lived together, I was Macó for her, and Nórika took that up as well; she calls me Macó even today. And Ágota called me some really terribly frightening name, I can't even remember, it was Cinke, or Minci, or Cinkemincibica; I don't know, I had some really shocking name. Then when I met Gyöngyi, she shortened that and simply called me Cilin. I got this name from her. Then after many-many years it turned out that cilin is a poisonous gas, some nerve gas from World War I. Or is it World War II? I don't think she knew, I think she had no idea what cilin actually was. When it turned out, I looked at myself like that, from the outside, like there you go: I've been called that for long-long years, and then it turns out to be a killing substance... □

¹⁶⁵ Counties in South-West Hungary.



Érettségi tablókép, 1981



1984



1983



1985



“The scenery here has a sort of psychotropic effect on you”

Agáta Gordon and Magdi Timár

Scene: farmhouse near Szatina

R: When did you move here, how and why?

AG: With my then girlfriend, Nóra, we decided in 1986 to move to a farm, to buy one at some place off the map. I specifically wanted to live in South Baranya. One day we got on the train with backpacks and a tent and set out on a journey towards this area. The first stop was Drávasztára.¹⁶⁶ Fortunately we didn't find anything there, except for my former French teacher who said right away that she knew what we wanted. She suggested that we visit uncle Pali in Kisbeszterce.¹⁶⁷ So we travelled to Kisbeszterce and found uncle Pali who told us that he had a farm for sale. The next day he drove us in his hay cart and showed us the estate. Kisbeszterce is behind the hill, about one hour walk away [from Szatina]. The farm looked roughly the same as now. Perhaps there were a bit fewer bushes and weed here, so the house and the stable were more visible. We immediately felt right that yes, this was the place for us! This was what we wanted! We were saving up for the next two years to gather the amount of one hundred thousand forints the farm cost then. It was very expensive and everybody laughed at us in the village for buying this expensive and run-down cottage. But we continued saving up, we bought it in 1987 in two instalments, and we moved here in 1988. We gradually organised everything: we mowed, cleaned up the house, tidied up bit by bit, changed the roof tiles, and paved the path. We lived here with Nóra for three years. Then the next idea was that we wanted to manufacture wooden toys. We couldn't manage it here, because it required using electric machines: a wood plane, a polisher and so on. So we started to search for a small house to rent in the nearest village. And this village was Szatina.

R: What did you have here at the farm?

AG: There was a stable where cows and horses used to be kept, but we reared rabbits and goats. Carriage house and pigsty, and a henhouse on the top. It's placed on the top to prevent badgers, weasels and other animals from reaching them. The chickens used to come up and down on a ladder. The stable was in a relatively good condition, by the way. I can't figure out why it has subsided so soon. Maybe because of the trees, they soaked the roof. It has a much better location than for example the house itself, though: the sun always shines on it nicely.

R: Where did you live before moving to the farm?

AG: We both went to university in Debrecen.¹⁶⁸ The idea of this life program took shape there. Meanwhile Nóra didn't pass her fourth-year exams for many reasons, which was a big problem, because she was a foreign student and she had to return to Slovakia. I slowly succeeded to get my degree and we could finally set out to realize our plan. So I married Nóra off so that she could officially move to Hungary, and we moved here.

R: You married her off?

¹⁶⁶ A village in Baranya county.

¹⁶⁷ A village in Baranya county.

¹⁶⁸ Debrecen: the second largest city in Hungary.

AG: Yes, to a friend of mine. To a good friend who I had known for a long time. There wasn't really anyone else who would be suitable for this. But I also had to pressure him for a long time to take this step. He didn't feel like doing it at all. But eventually he made up his mind.

R: Are you from Debrecen?

AG: Neither of us came from Debrecen. I also went there only to study. We are both countryside kids. I suppose this is a kind of regression. The front porch of my grandmother's, a rural house at the end of the street... I had it in me that I should come here. And of course, hiding, finding a retreat, seclusion. A lot of people wanted to pull out at the time. We talked a lot with our fellow students at the university about this matter, about retreating into nature. But only a few actually did it.

R: What did you do at the farm? How did you make a living?

AG: I was working. I worked hard, I was commuting to Mindszentgodisa from here. It's a village at a half-an-hour walk from here where they have a primary school and I worked there as a day-care teacher. I earned five thousands forints per month in 1988. It was roughly enough for us to buy bread, butter, coffee and cigarettes. I don't remember what we used to drink at the time. I guess we used a cheap coffee mix. It was fine. You could have a pretty good time here. We did a bit of gardening. We had a vegetable garden over there, near the vineyards. We got hold of animals: goats and cats. They made the farm cosy.

R: What relationship did you have with the village people?

AG: Well, none. We didn't live in the village but up here. However, when we were collecting wood or drawing water from the well or fiddling around with something in the yard, we could sometimes see people who were pretending to be just having a walk around. In fact, they were simply curious – they wanted to check it out who were those fools who were able to settle down up here.

R: And what about your being lesbians?

AG: They didn't know this term, I think, it wasn't familiar in their circles. I think, we didn't define ourselves as such, either. In fact, we just decided that we loved each other.

MT: Didn't people suspect you belonged to some sect?

AG: They believed many things about us but I'm not aware of them rumouring that we were sect members. But they did speak about two girls living together in the nearest village, Szatina. And it sounded... very suspicious. When we got to know them, it turned out that they were ceramicists and they had bought a small house in Szatina out of a similar motivation as we did. They had been living here for several years.

R: But still, what did the villagers think of you?

AG: Mostly they thought that we were very poor. They couldn't really imagine how it was possible to live without eating pork for example, without having ham and bacon in the larder, or without keeping at least some measly chicken. They thought we were complete idiots and we were going to starve. Besides, it's a dangerous place to live out here – this is what they thought. But it was only strange and uncommon for them, for us everything was perfectly fine.

R: How was the first night that you spent here?

AG: In the beginning I was scared. The forest can make very weird sounds. It can roar awfully loud even from the blow of a tiny wind. It sounds like a

highway. It's incredible what a strong sound it can produce, and this noise covers and overshadows everything. Nothing else can tear through it. After a while you also become aware of how closed this tiny clearing is. It's too tiny. You can't see in any direction from any point. After a while it felt good just to go a bit farther out on the dirt tracks where there was some sort of a perspective: we could see a few hills farther. So in the beginning it was scary, but Nóra never got scared of anything. So I didn't, either. Even though you could be afraid in the house, too: rustling, clattering, small rasps, there was always some kind of a small noise. But you could get used to it very soon, in one or two months. No people and no large animals were coming here, so actually it was a completely safe and sheltered small nook.

R: And what was this building before?

AG: This used to be a grape-press building. It has two tiny, cell-like rooms. These served as our two small living-rooms. One of them was heatable, that's where the kitchen was, with a corner bench. We could spend whole evenings sitting here, being busy with a game of Go, which we played amoeba-style, stuff like that. We had a lot of fun. Down there, that's the stable, it's collapsed a bit. We kept the rabbits, the goats and the chickens there. Tiny, miniature chickens. They were very cute.

R: Did you keep them to earn a living?

AG: We got the rabbits on lease, we got the first ones for free and then paid for everything out of the later generations. The chickens were small miniature hens, really lovely ones. We kept them only for love. They were so cute scratching the ground, and they laid eggs! Which we ate. And the reason for the goats was that I had a book titled "Rearing goats in the village", which had beautiful illustrations showing the goat-rearer transporting the popular goat products to the local marketplace in a small tractor: the milk, the cheese, the goat meat, the legs of kid-meat – and how he made a good living out of that. It had a very cute picture of the kids' 'playpen', too: the fabulous little baby goats hopping around in a fenced meadow. So we wanted to do all this. And we almost did.

R: Almost did?

AG: Well... we had the goats, the cheese, the products, but it turned out to be completely exhausting to rear goats. We had to pasture them all the time. You just can't follow ten goats around, because goats are a rather energetic type of animal: they come and go, roam around, they have all sorts of things to do in the world, they know exactly what they want. And we were just chasing them around and trying to shepherd them here and there. Besides, it was very exhausting to milk them. I had thought that goat milking was a very good thing and goat milk, too. It is really good. And to get this product you just take it from nature and you don't have to give anything in return, this was a pretty genuine and good thing. There was only one problem: the goats didn't like this being done to them. And this caused a lot of suffering. I was crouching at their side and got all stiff and sour before I managed to extract about a pint of milk out of a goat into a small bucket, and by that time the goat had begun to stamp, squirm and balk, and in the end it stepped in the fresh milk with its hoof. I told myself I'd hit it! And then I felt guilty for a week that I'd become an animal abuser, when all I wanted was a peaceful rural life and to accomplish a kind of heavenly goat rearing. So it was hard.

R: But you loved each other and you could be together, far away from the world...

AG: We wanted to hide from the world. At the same time we wanted to realize the dream of some green ideology, organic food and ecology. That is how we wanted to live. But I had to realize in a relatively short time that this kind of isolation caused distress. And we went completely nuts in six, eight or ten months. I noticed after a while that we were yelling more and more at each other, and it was harder and harder to bear this thing mentally. So this led us to start looking outwards, going down to the village and looking for jobs: day labour, sapling planting... We got to know other people and we somehow started forming attachments beyond the farm, too.

R: How long did you live here?

AG: We lived here for three years with Nóra, and then we moved down to Szatina. We kept the house, and there was always a couple who returned to live here. At first, Gerda and Nóra lived here, before we bought the school building for them. Then I came back with Emese, we spent half a year here, if I remember right. Then we left this little house again.

R: When did you get to know Cilin?

AG: In December 1990, and she moved down here in the autumn of 1991. But in the meantime she came to visit me several times.

MT: Every other week.

AG: Let's say. And you came to the farm a couple of times too.

MT: And once I even stayed the night.

AG: Yeah!

MT: I was scared to death.

AG: Really?

MT: Terribly.

AG: You didn't mention that. What were you scared of?

MT: Of those big hooved brutes that clattered on the window with their horns. And the shrieking birds. It was horrific!

AG: Well... You got the full service, we could sleep together and all. I don't see what your problem was.

R: How was it possible to get to know new people while living in Szatina?

AG: There was no way. It was impossible. It was completely out of the question. I was well aware of this, so I prayed a lot to the Goddess to guide a woman my way just one more time in this life, with whom I could do what I couldn't do any more with Nóra.

R: Not any more with Nóra?

AG: Because our relationship had already come to an end. But we stayed close – we still are, by the way. So we were living together in a little mutually protective community, but the romantic relationship was already over. Nóra fell in love with the postman, and I felt the need for a new partner. And as I was praying hard to the Goddess to send a woman my way, my brother came to visit me and brought an *Expressz* newspaper with him... At the time we were already into wooden toy-making here in Szatina and we had to buy machines and wood materials, that's why we needed the *Expressz* newspaper. There were also dating ads in *Expressz*, and it might have been the first issue that contained a column of "Woman seeking woman". I found three ads like that in that newspaper, and when I read one of them I decided to reply to it. And I did.

R: What was in that ad?

AG: I don't remember exactly any more, but Cilin certainly made up quite a beautiful text. Not a conventional thing like "seeking my female body-and-soul mate"; it was much much nicer, friendlier and more attractive. It was an intelligent advertisement. I didn't even think of replying to the others. I saw that this ad was made for me, and that was it!

R: What was the password?

AG: I don't remember the password.

MT: Me neither. It was 18 years ago...

AG: But I knew that I had to reply to this. That this would be the thing that would lead me out of this wooden toy-manufacturing village nightmare. And it almost happened that way. But then we decided to continue with the projects we had started here: we would go on with the wooden toy-making, we would keep renewing the house we were renting, later we would buy it and we would start to conquer Szatina. We were thinking large: we wanted to build a community!

R: How did the first meeting happen?

AG: I described our first meeting in every detail in one of my short stories. How was it?

MT: It was in Writers' Shop...

AG: We met each other in Writers' Shop. Yes. I had a wooden horse in my hand, and Cilin was turning the pages of El Kazovsky's book of paintings. It seemed that we wouldn't run away from each other at first sight. But Cilin played the role of a very blasé city girl. She said that she had to go to a concert and she invited us along. Of course, Nóra also attended our first date because she didn't want me to fall into a trap. We got to know Mari Bán at that concert, too, by the way. Then we all had to go to some local community centre in the suburbs. The Budapest girls made quite a lot of fun of us, poor countryside wooden toy-makers.

MT: Don't tell me, we didn't!

AG: You were all really conceited and all. But Nóra and I hung in there, sitting quietly, thinking something might come out of it in the end. And then I followed Cilin, kissed her and asked when we could meet next. It happened like that.

MT: Yes.

AG: Like that, right?

MT: Yes, it did. You remember well.

AG: Otherwise you wouldn't have suggested we meet again if I hadn't pulled myself together.

MT: Why do you think so?

AG: Well, because you were such a proletar-gigolo!

MT: Not true! The problem was that your jumper reeked of goats.

AG: Well, it was made of pure wool!

MT: It gave off an awful goat-stench!

AG: Did it?

MT: Very much!

AG: Hm... You've never said that, Kitten! I would have taken it off...

MT: Alright, so I'm telling you now.

AG: And you were an arrogant little jerk! But you were pretty. We were young, 27-28 years old.

R: How did your relationship go on afterwards?

MT: I travelled to Szatina to meet her and she also came up to Budapest.

AG: Yes, then we kept visiting each other for a while. It was quite awful. I always had a stomach-ache. Nóra started to complain, because even though she had agreed before that we should seek new partners, she got freaked out when things started to happen in front of her eyes, she didn't feel good about it. She didn't like to see that Cilin and I were starting to get along very well and we were bothered when we had to make programs for the three of us. We wanted to have some private space and this hurt Nóra. We weren't sure about coming to Szatina, of having to settle down here for our life, either. Then Nóra came up with the ideology that "Szatina is an idea!" and we shouldn't abandon such a great idea. And I realized that I really couldn't do this and Cilin realized life was a big adventure, so it was best to give up on her automobile dealer career and join this great idea. The goal was again to retreat into nature. And we did. There were already three of us in Szatina. Plus the two potters. Five!

R: And it grew further?

ÁG: Yes. Gerdus, Cilin's first love, checked in very fast. Since Nóra felt lonely and so did Gerdus, we thought they should meet each other. They met each other. Then somehow the 'Szatina idea' formed in their minds, too.

MT: It's contagious.

AG: Yeah, it is. And then we were six.

R: Did you stay in touch with the potters?

AG: The potter couple always kept a distance from suspicious people like lesbians from the city. We counted as city people. We were also city people in the eyes of the villagers for a long time, no matter that we had already lived here for eight years. We were living together for a while, then we kept segmenting. We bought more houses, we renovated them, we tried to provide separate places for each couple.

R: How did you have the money to do that?

AG: Partly from Cilin's money, partly we earned a lot with the wooden toys. Cilin was leading the bright life of automobile dealers suddenly becoming rich during the regime change in the capital, and she spent the profit she had earned here. Picture this, we were living in Szatina and we drove around in a black sports car in the neighbouring villages! Everybody was terribly envious. Nóra's suitor, the postman, almost peed himself when he saw the car for the first time. He asked if we were going to appear in a helicopter next time. We appeared to be the upcoming, nouveau rich villagers who bought and renewed houses, and so on.

R: Did these house renovations have anything to do with the 'Szatina idea'?

ÁG: Absolutely. We didn't want to leave this village. Moreover, we thought we would buy the whole. We imagined the whole Szatina to become ours, inhabited by mates and friends and ex-girlfriends!

MT: We'll buy all the houses and lands and we'll move in our friends only.

AG: Yes! The 'Szatina idea' was in the pink!

R: Did you still keep goats?

AG: Yes, we did. A new phase of goat rearing got started.

R: Was buying up the whole of Szatina a real goal?

AG: Well, we did have this goal, yes. We were expressly daydreaming about this. All the more, because Cilin's friends and my former acquaintances,

girlfriends and friends used to come to visit. It was especially lively in summers. Everybody came to visit and they had a great time. Then they began to daydream about buying a house, too. There are twenty houses in Szatina! So it didn't seem unrealistic that sooner or later enough people would come and buy them.

R: Who, for example?

AG: Mari Bán with her actual girlfriend, Anna Lovas with her actual girlfriend, her husband and her child, Berendke with her actual girlfriend. Female friends with husbands and children. A lot of people came to see how we were living.

MT: Your brother.

AG: And your sister and sometimes the parents, too. My parents came twice. When they came for the first time, we had that car crash with Cilin. When they came for the second time, I broke my arm. They didn't come again.

MT: Luckily!

AG: I suppose my mother observed the pattern that whenever she came close to me, I suffered some serious injury.

R: So your parents knew that you were a lesbian?

AG: She might have guessed it.

R: What did she guess?

AG: Actually, they must have known everything, because I got caught, they thoroughly read the letters I had written to my love, they even knew the girl, she was a schoolmate. So they must have known exactly, word by word, so to say. But for my mother this matter wasn't digestible. She vowed to stay blind and deaf until she read *Kecskerúzs* [Goat Rouge].¹⁶⁹ It surely wasn't easy for her. After that she had no chance to stay ignorant. She told me later that she found out from the book. Even though I took all my girlfriends home to my parents and introduced them. And they could see what intensity those relationships had.

R: What about your father?

AG: My father also came here. He spent a short time here several times. With my mother, of course. They really liked it, actually. Romantic nostalgia arose in them by seeing the forest, the animals, the small house. It reminded them of their childhood days. They liked it very much.

MT: My parents also came quite often. My sister brought them along.

AG: We roasted bacon and things like that. But they weren't so captivated. Your mother used to say, "Nice, nice, but still, my dear Magdi...!"

MT: Well, yes. I think it was hard for her to accept my moving here in such haste.

R: And why did you leave the farm in the end?

AG: Cilin insisted on moving to the village. And we started the wooden toy manufacturing. For that we had to go down regularly. At the beginning we thought we would only go down to work but continue living here. We didn't sell the animals, either. But after a while we got to spend more and more time down there.

R: When you got to know Cilin, were you still living here but working down there?

¹⁶⁹ Agáta Gordon's first novel.

AG: Yeah, we had already been renting that house in the village, but we were still living here.

MT: Still, this house is so tiny, that three people just can't fit in to live here.

AG: You never wanted to live here!

MT: There are only two tiny rooms. I think this place is too small even for two. For me this small clearing was too tight, with this small stable, with this tiny little house. There were horrible sounds at night, it wasn't comfortable at all, and it was very difficult to go down to the village in winter. I didn't like staying here.

R: What did the villagers say?

AG: Nothing. But of course, nobody asked them. When we talked with a few people from the village, we spoke about completely neutral topics: what time the shop would open, would he bring a gas cylinder, when they were going to Sásd,¹⁷⁰ could we drive their child to the doctor. We never talked about private matters.

R: Never?

AG: Never. During those ten years the word "fag" was uttered only once or twice, when one of the Gypsies got angry with Nóra, who was of a more vehement temper. At the same time, Nóra went to their house or hung out with the Gypsy neighbour for the whole afternoon, sitting on the roadside, drinking and chatting. She was interested in their doings, she helped them a lot and they helped her, too. So she created these relationships where there was also room for a fight sometimes. We kept more of a distance.

R: Didn't the villagers say that it was like mass migration?

AG: They just couldn't follow. If I met a native on the street, s/he called me "Magdi" and s/he called Cilin "Ági"! They just couldn't tell us apart! I guess they thought that these lesbians all looked the same.

MT: Even the policeman in Sásd couldn't tell us apart!

AG: Nobody. We drove around using each other's ID card, driving license and passport, and people had no clue which one of us was which.

MT: If someone had to go to Sásd urgently, she jumped in the car and just used whoever's papers happened to be in the car.

AG: Once, for example, Nóra got stopped by the police when driving her Trabant. They wanted to pick on her. She happened to have been just drinking a beer, so they charged her with drunk driving and took away my driving license from her. Without a second thought. You see? It didn't even cross their minds that she wasn't me, despite having lived here for ten years.

R: If the village had been so small, how could you live without having contacts with the villagers?

AG: We were relating among ourselves. We didn't have conversations with the villagers, we didn't have any common topics.

R: Didn't you have any contacts with them at all?

AG: We did, some sort. At a time there were still children here, so we undertook the task to drive the kids to the school bus going from Kishajmás to Mindszentgodisa,¹⁷¹ until the local government bought their own bus. So that the children don't go by bike or walk early in the morning, we took on the task

¹⁷⁰ A small town near Szatina.

¹⁷¹ Two neighbouring villages.

of giving them a ride to the bus station every morning. And there was a sort of mutual giving help, like bringing a kilo of bread or dog food or gas cylinder or something. You don't start preying on someone's private life if you need to ask favours of them. They could enter our house any time. We had a car and a phone.

R: So you weren't the poor people any more.

AG: No, no, we already belonged to the upper crust. We were practically the upper crust of Szatina, the six of us. I always wanted to return to Szatina with a lot of money. I can imagine how lovely and nice it could be. But there would be a lot to do, it would cost a lot, and we would have to work together with a huge number of people to make this place into a well-running small farm or cooperative. I had to realize that this wouldn't get accomplished.

R: Are you still having dreams about it?

AG: No. I don't remember my dreams at all. Never. Not these, either.

MT: No. I mean, it happens to me very rarely that I dream about Szatina. But those are good dreams, I don't have any bad feelings when I wake up. But I dream very rarely, anyway. It's rare. Still, I like coming back. When the car turns to the side road towards Szatina, it's such a joy...

AG: I think the scenery here has a sort of psychotropic effect on you. Like, yeah, that's it! It has such a character and atmosphere that we were able to believe in it for a long time.

MT: Yes, but this was still at the dawn of our love. On the occasion of our second or third date I came here secretly. I didn't tell you that I was coming.

AG: Cilin! We probably fixed a date, only you lost count of the time while having fun with other chicks.

MT: I missed all the trains. So I asked a taxi driver to drive me to Szatina. I didn't know exactly how many kilometres it would be, but we set out. We left Budapest around one o'clock in the morning and we arrived...

AG: This taxi ride to the countryside cost 7000 forints, and I earned 5000 forints a month. This was our class difference, by the way.

MT: Anyway, I arrived. He put me out at the end of the village, and I started to climb up here to the farm. It must have been half past two or three in the morning. Something like that. And I got lost. It was a horrible, waist-high snow, and I was walking incredibly fast, thinking I would be there in a minute. But I wasn't. The hours passed, morning came over Siberia, and I was still wandering around and around in the forest and couldn't find the farm. Eventually, after a lot of agony, I reached Kishajmás somehow. I descended to the centre through the hills of Kishajmás. I asked a local where Ágota was living, where the farm was. I was chilled to the bone and all. They explained what an awful mistake I had made, and they suggested not to go back the same way but to follow the dirt track to Szatina, since Ágota was coming to work to Szatina in the morning, anyway. And we could meet each other in the wooden toy workshop.

AG: But you didn't do this!

MT: No. I kept on going forward persistently, I pushed myself round and round in circles on the hill again, and around ten o'clock in the morning, half frozen to death, I finally found the way to the farm.

AG: Yep.

MT: Yeah. I wanted it to be a complete surprise.

AG: It was.

MT: I did this for Ágota. It didn't even happen to Amundsen! That's love, right?

AG: A different state of mind.

MT: A different, altered state of mind. Yes.

AG: I was very happy when Cilin arrived. Except that she'd promised to come the previous evening, and I was a bit sad that she had fooled me again.

MT: The partying lasted long, but then I did come eventually...

AG: Yeah, she arrived after overcoming all challenges.

MT: It also often happened that I overslept on the train.

AG: Oh, yes, that happened, too.

MT: And I woke up in the next town.

AG: To tell you the truth, Cilin seemed to be completely unreliable, and then it turned out that she was a hundred percent reliable. Although she never ever arrived on time, not on a single occasion, I had to realize that she was completely reliable. Sure, it wasn't easy.

MT: Yes, I often had to take the postal train, which departed at 1:05 am from Kelenföld¹⁷² and it stopped at 3:00 am in Dombóvár,¹⁷³ where it stopped for one and half an hour, and from there I could get here by the miner train.

AG: I just can't understand why she had to take on all these hardships...

MT: I felt like a hero.

AG: When we got bored with the wooden toys, we conceived a new enterprise, a seasonal one. Dog-walking with greyhounds and bacon roasting for bored Dutch and German tourists who were soaking their asses in the Orfű Lake. We put up posters around the lakeshore and we thought that nobody could have any better dreams than to come out to Szatina, walk over the hills with beautiful greyhounds, then drink some wine and roast bacon in incredibly nomadic and uncomfortable circumstances. And pay us some deutschmarks for all this. We wanted to make a small living out of this.

MT: And what happened? Three families came in a row and we got exhausted. And on the fifth day a complete tourist bus with 45 people rolled over... Then we just denied that this service ever existed. We failed.

AG: It was a good plan though. We walked around on the hillside and the winemakers were all out, kindly inviting everybody to taste their wine. It was all free for us! You could practically come down the hill drunk to the village without us having any costs.

MT: And they walked our dogs for free.

AG: Yes. I had to take them for a walk every day, anyway. In sum, we had to be very creative. And it absolutely satisfied me at the beginning. But I always felt the call to write, which didn't let me rest from time to time. So I started to make a nest. My task was to find a nest where I can create. First this nest was in the house. Where the entrance is now, there was a small closed-down foyer, and we used to enter the house through the kitchen. That served as a working room. But I wasn't content with it. Then I rented a small house in the hope of being able to work there. I went there every day for a half year and made writing exercises. It went awfully slowly. I didn't feel well there at all. Somehow I knew that I wouldn't be able to unfold there, that place just wasn't

¹⁷² A train station in Budapest.

¹⁷³ Dombóvár: a small town in Tolna County, a traffic junction where one has to change trains going from Budapest to Szatina.

appropriate. I realized that I should buy a bus-like thing or a container. Something that I could put out in the yard. I thought that perhaps I would be able to work in there. And then once we went to Pécs¹⁷⁴ and found a Robur¹⁷⁵ there to be on sale. For pennies, actually. They even delivered it here. We disassembled the steering part, it got a panelling, the driver's cabin got replaced with a lovely sofa, and it had a small stove, electricity, desk and computer. Everybody on earth came to help: they put up the panelling, painted, fixed the electricity. After it was completed, I sat in there in every morning and wrote my big work. This period lasted for a half year, as long as the Robur was functioning, after that I was able to work in other places too, I think. That's how it happened.

R: And the manuscript?

AG: It got accomplished in about half a year. I didn't really know what to do with it. But Cilin, who was still my hundred-percent reliable partner at the time, told me she would take action. But who could be the person I would trust, whose opinion was important enough for me, whom I could give the manuscript to review it? I pondered over it a lot. I had to find someone who I would listen to, who could say anything and I would accept it. And then I told Cilin that this person was Péter Nádas.¹⁷⁶ I wouldn't believe if anybody else said that this stuff was alright or that I should give up writing, but him. Cilin found his address, sent him the manuscript, which had the working title *Tribád és Izolda*.¹⁷⁷ Then Péter Nádas phoned me and said, "You are a writer!" I felt uncomfortable. Actually, it wasn't such a nice conversation, because Nádas didn't find the working title as funny as I did. He asked me if I knew what 'tribade' meant. If I knew that it was a swearword. I didn't know. At any rate, I changed the title. That's why it became *Goat Rouge*. Péter Nádas told me that it was very important for this topic to appear in Hungarian literature. He offered to send it to *Magvető Publishing House*, and he did.¹⁷⁸ This was a simple story.

R: Why is 'tribade' a swearword?

AG: Tribade? The word itself means 'lesbian'. This term is more familiar in German, it is more commonly used there. It refers to a special sexual practice. Tribology, for example, is a term in physics, it studies the secrets of the friction of bodies between each other.

R: Why did you decide on the title *Goat Rouge*?

AG: I was waiting for the title. I was waiting for the Goddess to send it to me, because I myself wasn't satisfied with the working title any more. And once when I was walking the goats with my girlfriend on the hills, I thought how cute the goats would be if we applied some rouge on them. Because goats can be really beautiful. And my girlfriend replied, "Okay, we'll buy some cheap *goat rouge*." And I just knew that yes, that's it, the title has finally come! The Goddess has sent it to me.

R: How was the book received?

¹⁷⁴ Pécs: the fifth largest city in Hungary, capital city of Baranya County.

¹⁷⁵ An East German truck brand.

¹⁷⁶ Péter Nádas (b. 1942): Hungarian writer, playwright, essayist. Member of the Berlin Art Academy since 2006.

¹⁷⁷ "Tribade and Isolde"

¹⁷⁸ *Goat Rouge* was published in 1996 by Magvető Publishing House.

AG: Well, the literary circles received me in a way that meant they didn't really have to deal with me at all. So the publisher launched this game that the author was unknown, they had no clue who she was. So my writer image had to be constructed accordingly. That is, not at all. They didn't really give my contact details to anybody. It wasn't easy to reach me, and people had to find me here. However, Balázs Pálfi managed to find me. He was the host of the radio program Self-Identical at the time, and also the first "public fag" who was out as a gay man. He was the only one who managed to find me and travel down here. But the literary world... Because Balázs Pálfi didn't find me as a writer but as a person who was also involved with his passion and topic, only from another angle. Thus he found me expressly for the gay issue. I wasn't really contacted for matters of literature. Literature said thanks, but no thanks. I was told that it was a successful novel. Well, I didn't sense much of this.

R: The novel didn't get published under your real name. Did you or the publisher want it like that?

AG: It was a mutual agreement. We agreed on this point. I thought I needed a pen name in any case. I had several reasons for this. I had to find a pen name. Somehow I wasn't on good terms with my own name, my proper, regular birth name – which I have grown to like since then, by the way. But back then I had to find a name that I would prefer to bear. Also, I wanted to prevent those of my acquaintances who wouldn't be happy about my being a lesbian from having to face it. I didn't want to get revealed publicly and share my confession with people I didn't want to share it with. Yes, there was also something like this in the background.

R: What about your family?

AG: I did take on that challenge finally. That came with the package. But before the book came out of the press, I wasn't quite sure that I wanted to show it to them. I was uncertain. I decided it was better to prepare myself for every possible outcome: there should be a pen name.

R: Could you have had any troubles because of this?

AG: Well, look. A writer is always terribly vain. She will think that okay, there are only twenty people living in the village and half of them are illiterate – but what if they still read it?!

R: When was the novel published?

AG: In 1996.

R: Were you still living here?

AG: Oh, yes, of course. It was published for the Book Week¹⁷⁹ of 1996. We went there to look around, and then we just came home. I kept sitting in the Robur and writing other stories.

R: What happened after the publishing?

AG: Afterwards? Cilin could tell this much better. In her opinion, probably every writer changes her partner after each new book. For what reason? Because writing is such a stress on the nervous system that triggers this. So as the novel got accomplished, our relationship also came to an end. At least the romantic and cohabiting part. We both went on with new girlfriends but in a really close friendship.

¹⁷⁹ Book Week: a week-long book festival and series of cultural events in Budapest, annually staged since 1929.

R: For how long?

AG: I moved to Budapest in January 1999, then Gyöngyi also moved, after a few weeks Nóra sneaked up after us, and sometime in December 1999 Cilin also followed us. Yes. She carried things on here alone until then.

R: Who is Gyöngyi?

AG: Gyöngyi? This story is already recorded, it's written very well. I wouldn't like to stretch it here, it happened as follows: *Goat Rouge* got finished, then came the divorce, which set a domino effect going. I divorced because of Emese, and Cilin found a new girlfriend in two weeks. That was Gyöngyi. Cilin and Gyöngyi fell deeply in love with each other; they founded a puppet theatre and moved to Szatina. They started activities here. And tension started to grow in the friends' circle. At any rate, it was the second rotation in Szatina. Gyöngyi – Emese – Cilin – me – Nóra – Gerda – the potters, this was a community of eight people already, who had wider circles of friends and attracted even more holiday visitors. It seemed to us that the conquest and settlement of Szatina was on the right track. Except that it was really hard to hold a community of this size together, especially as we couldn't handle stuff too well emotionally. We didn't have group therapy sessions, we didn't talk about our isolation stress or other personal problems. So our group began to disband and implode. Yeah... Probably, Cilin would say that it was me who exploded this community. It might have been so. But probably it had to explode.

R: Why you especially?

AG: Because I was somehow more mobile in terms of relationships. So I never thought that we were supposed to last till death us do part. I divorced relatively fast from Emese, for example. That's when Gyöngyi came into the picture. Cilin and I got into a brutal split, and a really cruel triangle formed. It was educational to live through it, though. So what we were doing was completely insane. It ground us up physically, see? On the one hand, I'm in a very close and deep friendship with Cilin, she loves Gyöngyi, and on the other hand I get involved with Gyöngyi. In fact, their relationship wasn't too harmonious and it wasn't really a romantic love relationship but rather a very good friendship and working relationship. My arm got broken, Cilin's knee got dislocated; Gyöngyi could handle the story relatively well and could manipulate us. The most beautiful part in the story was that I loved Cilin with all my heart, and every time we talked both of us were always convinced we were being honest with each other, we treated each other with love and care, we were good friends. While it was obvious that... It's not so easy to forgive me for taking away her girl.

R: So she knew that you were involved with Gyöngyi?

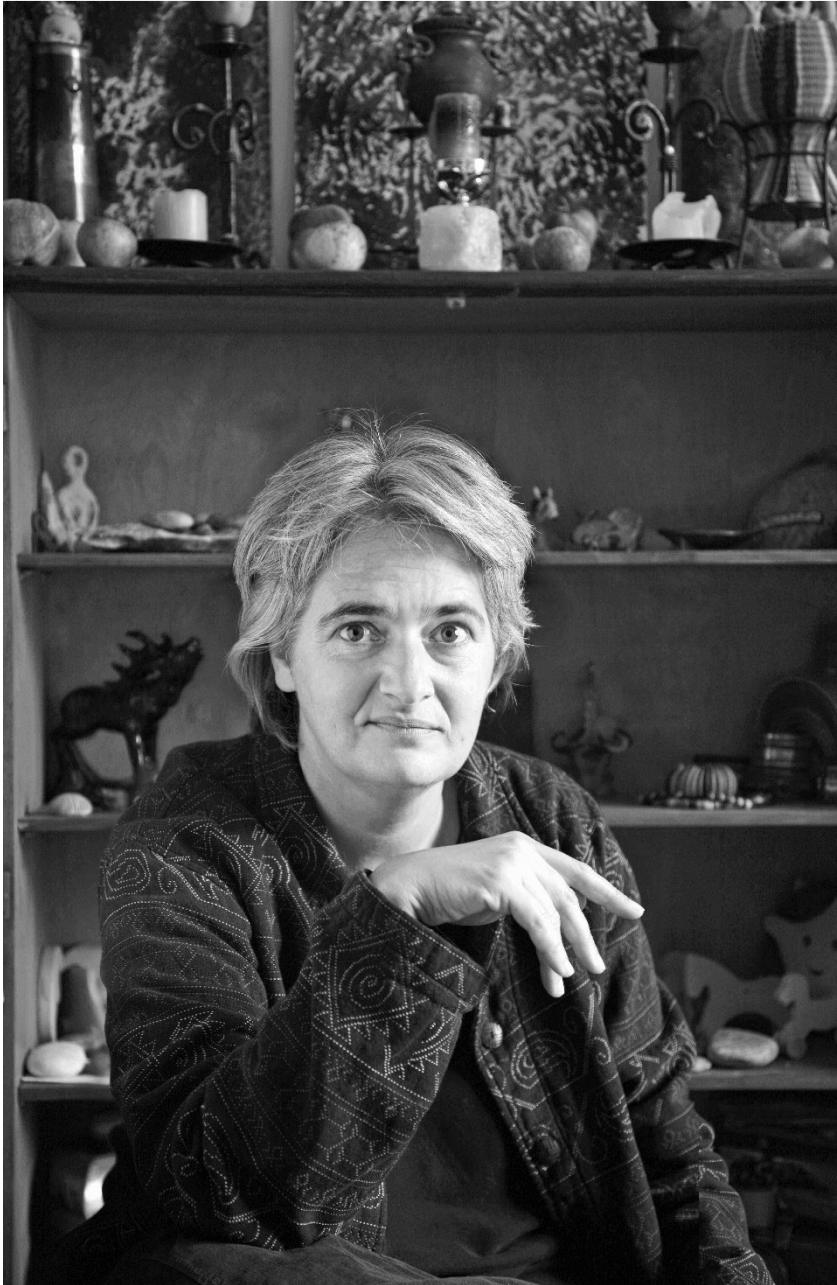
AG: It came to light quite soon. It was in the last few months that things got a bit too complicated. Then I pissed off to Budapest. The question of what Gyöngyi would do in this situation remained open: would she stay or would she follow me? And what would Cilin do next? Then the gang got together again a few months later. But that happened in Budapest.



Szatina, 1991, fotó: Gordon Agáta



Szatina, 1991, fotó: Tímár Magdi



“I define myself as a lesbian folk writer” Agáta Gordon (b. 1963)

R: First of all, tell us why we are meeting here in Café Central.

AG: Because this is the café in Budapest which hosted a women’s literature program called *Irodalmi Centrifuga* [Literary Centrifuge], which Kriszta Bódis¹⁸⁰ and I started to organize more than three years ago. I thought it’s a place with a nice ambience. We got to like it, because we were welcome to be here many times. It’s also the scene of another important period, another path in my life.

R: Where could you have gone four years ago?

AG: Yeah... yes, that’s a good question. Four or five years ago perhaps to *Tilos Rádió*. I ran a lesbian program called *Zártkörű lányok* [Exclusive Girls]¹⁸¹ for six years together with Balázs Pálfi. It was a good hatchery, many things have grown out of it. That was the place where, for example, Zsuzsa Forgács, Kriszta Bódis and I started to plan the first and greatest and most complete and largest – these are Zsuzsa Forgács’ expressions – women’s anthology about sexuality, titled *Éjszakai állatkert* [Zoo at Night].¹⁸² And that was the place where we started to plan the Literary Centrifuge, which didn’t have a name yet, but we knew we wanted to talk about women writers, women’s literature and women’s issues because those were the things we were interested in. We felt that this topic was in the air, it began to thrive and it was drawing more and more attention. Of course, we thought that we were disadvantaged as women in literature. And... I don’t really know, this may really be the case. We believed that there should be a place where we would give space to other women, we would be curious about texts, women writers, each other, we would read each other’s works and have conversations. And there didn’t seem to be another place like that.

R: How do you identify yourself as a writer? Do you call yourself a writer or a woman writer?

AG: Sometimes I define myself as a lesbian folk writer. I like this definition. This is why I’m wearing this thin silicon bracelet or the Anjou lily, for example. I think that folk writing has gone out of fashion somehow, folk writers have disappeared. It seemed for a long time that it was a bit awkward to be a folk writer, there was no reason to be that any more: folk culture had merged into the big universality and multicultural transitions, there was nothing left to do. And lately we could realize that it was running like an underground stream in the period when it really didn’t have any importance. And now we can count the small surviving sprouts that are still carrying on with it. Like Pál Závada, for example, with *Jadviga párnája* [Jadviga’s Pillow].¹⁸³ This is folk literature, only it sprouted quite a few decades later. I think of him as my colleague and I’m very glad not to be lonely in folk style. In folk lesbian literature my predecessor was Erzsébet Galgóczi, who did this and lived her life at her own

¹⁸⁰ Kriszta Bódis (b. 1967): contemporary feminist writer, documentarist, psychologist.

¹⁸¹ *Zártkörű lányok* [Exclusive Girls]: A radio program on *Tilos Rádió* focusing on lesbian women, started by Agáta Gordon, then taken over by Anna Lovas Nagy.

¹⁸² *Éjszakai állatkert* [Zoo at Night]: An anthology about female sexuality, with works by 33 female authors; edited by Zsuzsa Forgács, Agáta Gordon and Kriszta Bódis, published in 2005.

¹⁸³ *Jadviga párnája* [Jadviga’s Pillow]: a novel by Pál Závada, published in 1997, an important piece of contemporary Hungarian fiction.

pace – as she could at the time. That she isn't able any more to acknowledge this kinship is a painful point in this story, but it still means a lot to me. This is my own label and others don't really know what to do with it. I have the habit of inventing such labels. This 'folk lesbian' label sounds funnily retro style: a pair of terms that don't match. But if I say 'fanatic feminist', it also sounds quite funny. Perhaps this exaggerating marker relieves the plain feminist from the bad taste attached to her. Or if I say 'sub-European', it's also hard to handle. Well, these are the identities a lesbian may find if she doesn't have fifty-, sixty-, seventy-year-old colleagues and fellows in lesbianism, if she cannot see role models to follow, she cannot see what directions can open up before her as an ageing lesbian.

R: Why did you leave Szatina? What happened?

AG: I have had to put this story together many times. First of all, I had to try to reconstruct it when I had moved to Budapest. By the way, this happened in January 1999, so nearly ten years ago. I expected to be able to last here for about two or three years. At any rate, I began my life here by visiting *Tündérhegy*¹⁸⁴ where the well-known psychiatry institute worked. There they receive people having psychological problems, or rather people having life crises, for group therapy sessions. They have an intake procedure, you can go there and tell them your problem, your pain. And then they may take you in. When I moved to Budapest from Szatina in January 1999, our small community was just about to explode, for which I'm to blame in many respects, of course, but where there's abeginning, there's an end, too. For me it had its end there, and it was very hard to bear this detonation, even if it was partly me who had caused it. And I felt that it was awfully hard to get integrated again in these systems that operated in the city. I was 36 years old and I was exactly where I was at the age of 18: I suddenly found myself in the capital with a backpack, and I had to search for a rent, some job, something to hold onto, so that I can have a new start. *Tündérhegy* gave me help with these, and it was very good for me to take part in a group therapy. Because in Szatina – if I peel off my personal responsibility – the reason why we couldn't function well and smoothly together was that we didn't pay attention to each other. This tiny women's community was overburdened with anger, bad feelings, denial, and all sorts of emotions that we didn't deal with, didn't talk through, didn't know what to do with them. So there it was a point of revelation: *Tündérhegy*, group therapy – look, so you didn't know what you needed and what to do?! Here it is, this is what you should have done!

R: How did the group therapy help you?

AG: The group therapy was very good because I met my 'therapist'. This woman held the most effective group therapy sessions and she later became my therapy trainer. This happened when I discovered that group therapy methods were so effective that it was worth learning its methods and modes of operation and form groups later on. I did a three-year-long training course with this same woman, my therapist, and I learned a lot. I was asked at *Tündérhegy* how my life had brought me there. And then I had to tell the story, that there was a tiny

¹⁸⁴ Psychosomatic and Psychotherapeutic Rehabilitation Department of the National Medical Rehabilitation Institute in Budapest, located at *Tündérhegy*, a suburban part of Budapest.

village in Transdanubia:¹⁸⁵ twenty houses, fifty people, the hills, the farmhouse, the forest, the beasts... fear and horror... And that one day in Szatina, when I was living alone in my house, my mother visited me. That was the second time she visited me there, so she knew about my circumstances. What kind of relationships I was in with which girls, which girlfriends, how things were circulating among us. When she visited me for the first time, I had a really severe car crash with my girlfriend, Cilin, and I was in hospital and in the middle of recovery. When she visited me for the second time, I couldn't afford to do that again, so I simply slipped on the icy road and broke my arm... After all that my mother didn't visit me any more. Anyway, I always say that I was receiving warning signs that I should leave the place. One of them was breaking my arm, the other one was when during my afternoon nap with a broken arm and severe flu, the basket of wood in front of the tile stove caught fire, and I woke up unable to breathe because the house was filled with a terrible smoke. So I just let things burn around me. When I told people this at the group therapy session, they were listening with a kind smile and I still didn't understand whether these were really the reasons to leave. At any rate, the story sounded fine like this and it offered a full and complete explanation. I had to leave because I was starting a new phase in life, I had new things to do in life and I had to find them. *Tündérhegy* gave me mental help with this, here in the city. But I needed some practical help, too. They told me, "Go to work! Find a job!" That didn't make me too happy.

R: Did you eventually search and find work in the city?

AG: I did search and I ended up employed in a prison. To be more exact, and I would like this to be written down: I belonged to the Ministry of Home Affairs, and I worked as a tutor in the Institute of Criminal Observation and Psychotherapy for a while. After *Tündérhegy*, this work structured my days, like the job searching before. It was very hard. I had tried to find work as a literature teacher or as a tutor in a dormitory. Well, these didn't really work out, and I was quite scared of them, too. The prison was convenient for a while, but I thought in the meantime that I had other callings. My honorary father, Balázs Pálfi, who hosted the gay radio program Self-Identical in *Petőfi Rádió*, invited me for a co-anchor, and then he kindly handed over half of the showtime of his gay radio program, Instead of Soap Opera in *Tilos Rádió* to the girls. This was a very friendly gesture, to divide the showtime in two and say that girls were of the same importance. We don't usually get things just like that, so it was a really lucky moment.

From then on, I had some stable points in my life. One of the stable points was that I had to go to *Tilos Rádió* every second week, on Wednesday afternoons, and talk about something for one and a half hours. I had to prepare for these, invite guests – it was a good thing, it wouldn't let you sink completely. The other stable point: I had to go once a month at 10 pm to the Hungarian Radio for the program Self-Identical, where on Balázs Pálfi's side, events of the gay subculture could be discussed, you could talk with callers about their thoughts on the whole issue, how they perceived gay people, what problems they had with them. And the third stable point in my life was my training group where I hoped to become a group leader one day, and then I would have a new life

¹⁸⁵ A region of Hungary West of the River Danube.

phase when this would be the most important thing for me. With these things my new environment, my new kind of life that I had to take on, began to fill up. And Szatina and the desire to return started to fade away.

R: Did you have a relationship at the time? How could you find a community?

AG: Yes. You could spend two months at *Tündérhegy*, and then I had to find a rent where I could move with Gyöngyi. Our little triangle in Szatina eventually ended when Gyöngyi decided to move to Budapest. I moved in January and thought I would let things turn out as they should, let Gyöngyi decide, let her be free to choose the path she wanted to take. Her decision grew final by May, and my stay at *Tündérhegy* was also over. The psychologist I was seeing for individual therapy also said, "it seems we have done all we could with you here, so now follow our advice and start a new life." One of my group mates offered me her small flat to rent. So it seemed that the story came full circle. Gyöngyi moved, we rented the small flat, and everything started to roll on its own track.

R: What were the steps you took in your lesbian coming-out process?

AG: *Goat Rouge* was published in 1996. The publisher thought – along with me, that is, with my agreement – that Agáta Gordon was a pen name, so we didn't release any information about it. Still, Balázs Pálfi somehow managed to investigate where to find the author who was publicly out as a gay person like him. On a nice summer day he came to Szatina, with a small scarf on his head, and he brought a recorder, a microphone and everything. We took a walk around the village, then over the hills, he asked his questions, and somehow we became friends. So when I arrived in Budapest, he took me under his wings. It was a very generous thing for him to do, and I think we can work well together to this day. Taking me under his wings meant he gave me a regular occupation which strengthened my identity, partly my lesbian identity. Many years have passed, exactly eight if we count from 2000, during which several generations became strong enough to come out as gay people. At the time we were still in the middle of this process.

I have received criticisms about how I am out as a lesbian after publishing a novel which is openly about this issue. Surprisingly enough, mainly from lesbian girls, who disapproved of me publishing it under a pen name. So I'm not actually out? That's an interesting question. I thought, of course, I am! That name is also related to me. But with Balázs, in the live radio shows with callers I had to be out on a different level. If, for example, one of the callers said, "I think all the faggots should be gunned down!", Balázs would reply, "I'm a homosexual, and Agáta Gordon who's sitting next to me is also a homosexual. Do you think we should be gunned down, too?" To this most of such callers couldn't say flat out, "Yes, you should be", but they started to stutter and stammer, "well, no... no". So this coming-out process lasted for years, and you could get used to it. Balázs often called himself a 'public fag' and said that this was his mission. This is a real social role to play, since, if we take into consideration that about the 10% of the population is gay, we can figure that every family is affected. I don't mean nuclear families but families of several generations. And when he, Balázs Pálfi, says "I'm a public fag", he takes on the negative connotations attached to this role. And he tries to merge this into his personality for the sake of achieving a better outcome. And I had to do the same at his side.

R: Did you succeed?

AG: Sure. I'm not the female version of Balázs Pálfi, but a female 'public fag'. I think I just went with the flow of events. I don't know how conscious Balázs was. Probably it's better to do this in a team of two than alone. And he did find regular partners. Those who came as guests to the programs, either to Exclusive Girls, or to Self-Identical, had come to terms with this issue, and they could say, "Yes, I'm a gay person and I do this and that." Or they said, "I'm not gay but I see their efforts and I'm not bothered, I get along with them." Balázs was guiding me kindly on this path, it was good to have him on my side, and he already had an orientation that he didn't feel ashamed of, didn't want to keep it secret, didn't want to hide. So I could just walk along with him in this role.

R: So *Goat Rouge* was the turning point.

AG: This is still quite strange for me, and as the years pass I can look back less and less far in time. It's true that *Goat Rouge* was an important boundary or event in my life. I thought that I would become a writer in the future and I would write important or good or interesting things about some topic. And I was preparing myself for this. I didn't let myself submerge in a regular, proper woman's or human life. Let's say, moving to a decent small town after graduation, to a proper high-school, leading the life of a decent teacher there, doing this or something else, following a time-tested and well-working path of life. But my writer call didn't let me take this path. I needed more freedom and time for catching up with myself and figure out what I really wanted to do. To experience it and make it conscious, to understand more or less what it means to be a lesbian. What am I going through, what relationships am I able to have and with whom can I have the kind of relationships that I can learn from and give something to others? It turned out very quickly that I can have such relationships only with women, but whether I could write about this was uncertain. I rented a small house in Szatina; I went there every day and started to write all kinds of short stories like I was supposed to. I invented characters. The characters weren't necessarily lesbians and I tried to write about men, as well. But I got bored of it, it was very hard, exhausting, and I had to realize – and this is what literature about writing also suggests – that there is no other way, you have to write about what's yours, what you have experienced, what you know about, what belongs to you. And so I had to realize that I couldn't write about anything else, I had to write this lesbian story. But I didn't really feel like it... I thought that it was too difficult to look back and recall every detail, and to peel off all the negative knowledge of this topic that could be experienced. Or that could be heard of. And after I realized that I had to write about this, that this was my topic, my fate, I found the place to do it. I built a nest behind the stable, and as soon as it got ready, I sat in there and started to put this story into words.

R: Did you recognize your being a lesbian the same way as your protagonist?

AG: An autobiography always has some fictional or adjusted parts. Perhaps I became conscious of it a bit earlier than in the novel. I already heard this inner voice at age fourteen, saying that what I was feeling towards one of my girl classmates was love. After the voice pointed it out to me it was quite clear that it was that, indeed. And so this was to be my path. So these were strong feelings, desire, love and a sense of belonging. And this shaped my moments: she was a classmate, we were going to the same school, she was sitting two

desks away, and we spent all of the breaks together... I think that these kinds of meetings can be very intensive at age fourteen. So why did I need another ten-something years to figure out that I could write about this? Perhaps because there is really a huge pile of things weighing on this, which you must transform in order to be able to speak about it. Then one meeting followed the other. Loves. At the age of 14-18 one falls in love every half a year, every two months, or every week, again and again, and these were reassuring emotions: being with women was allotted for me, this was what was important for me. Then and later on, as well.

R: Did you share this with anybody?

AG: It is a very lonely thing to realize this, and I couldn't really share it with anybody. Actually, I had nobody to share it with. Not even with the girl I was in love with at the time, not even if we had a very intimate and close friendship that gave me a lot. Because it would have been a scary and negative thing. I tried to find reference points. The place where I could look for them was obviously the library – I write quite a lot about this in *Goat Rouge*. You couldn't really find any positive information. The encyclopedia entries seemed to be correct and exact definitions of what a lesbian was. Now it's clear, of course, that lesbianism meant what was in the entry only for the person who wrote the entry. And I can have my own thoughts about it. It's hard enough to get even to the point where I can believe that I can have different thoughts about these common and cemented prejudices and superstitions than the majority does. So these weren't useful sources of information. Maybe the best source was a novel by an American woman writer, titled *The Group*, the author's called Mary McCarthy. It is about the life of eight American girls who were studying in a very elite college how to become 'übermensch' white women. One girl out of the eight chose lesbianism, and as the story is proceeding, she returns and the other seven meet her again, and they say, "Oh, God! The one who was the most beautiful and the richest among us has chosen this life. Oh, should we feel sorry for her? Should we envy her? Should we be happy for her? Or should we just look aside and accept the situation?" And then I could see that such a direction did exist, but I couldn't actually think of a community, of the possibility of meeting a lot of other girls who would feel the same way.

This was a great lesson, for example, learned from the training group of *Hättér's* helpline operators, in which both gay and straight people participated. It started with a basic self-help, awareness training, and almost all of us related how awfully lonely it was to realize this, to feel this preference, not to be able to share it with anybody, and to think, "Oh my god, I'll never have anybody to share it with!" Or what it means to have or have had a gay relationship, you loved someone, and it was a deep secret. So this lonely feeling is very strong and it can last very long. And now, when, let's say, we go to an *Ösztrosokk*¹⁸⁶ party where there are three hundred girls in their teens or twenties, whom we, older ones, don't know personally, we can be glad that they might not have to experience this lonely period for so long.

R: Did you fight against your own emotions, your lesbianism?

¹⁸⁶ *Ösztrosokk* [Estroshock]: Women-only disco since 2004. Parties are organised once or twice a month, they are frequented especially by young lesbians.

AG: The idea that I should fight never occurred to me. I always fought, with all my might, to win the love of the girl I loved and to have a real relationship with her. I always fought only for this. No, I didn't go against it. I didn't think that I would be able to overcome this feeling or that I should overcome it. It never crossed my mind. Yes, it took away an enormous amount of energy and less would probably have been enough, too, but I had real relationships. I had girlfriends who could accept this. My early partners weren't lesbians but teenage girls who were looking for themselves and could love me and could accept a lot of things. Women tend to accept many things.

R: So you had straight girlfriends, as well?

AG: I had relationships where it was declared that "yes, you are a lesbian, but I'm not". And then it lasts for a while, then the two tracks start to diverge, the scissors open up, the heterosexual girl matures, follows her own orientation, gets married, gives birth – and I keep to my own track. By the way, the ideology of evolutionists about gay people is so beautiful. Evolutionists have a theory of alliance. They say that gays are born because not everyone is supposed to reproduce, not everyone has to pass on the genes of the race. There are more than enough people to pass on the genes of the race but they need help – and lesbians are very suitable for this. Gay boys and girls can support straight people in many ways, they have their own tasks. And I believe in this, although this theory of alliance hasn't been promoted in wide enough circles yet. I'm sure it's a mission and a path. In some respects it's more difficult, in others it's easier. As professions become feminised, they can become a bit 'homosexualised', as well. I think the teaching profession is like this. Because it's a mission. It's the mission of gay people. And it's a hard mission, because prejudices are on the level of paedophile theory.

R: Don't you miss having a child?

AG: I don't think it was a really big issue for me to give up on this. Perhaps I've never seriously felt the need for having my own biological child. With one of my girlfriends we daydreamed about becoming foster mothers in a nice country house. We would adopt eight to ten children and organize a community. Because this functions only if there is a community life: a football team, a basketball team, slicing and buttering the bread together for dinner, regular discussions of where we are heading and what are the things to do. I had thoughts of this, for example. My girlfriend with whom I was daydreaming about this said that she wasn't ready for it yet. And I felt that when I turned sixty I may not be ready for this, either. So this plan got cancelled. It would have been very hard, anyway, since it's not as simple as to just declare that I, Agáta Gordon, as an adult, self-supporting human being integrated the society, want to continue my life as a foster parent from now on. The question of who with, as a single parent or as a lesbian or as what... would come up. There are many roles you can't take as a lesbian. So things would have to be tampered with, you would have to lie or keep things in secret. I think it's not so easy to bring up a child that besides living my own life I would also want to create some acceptable administration around it. It's a difficult thing to shoulder, and there are only a few who actually do it, while perhaps there is a demand for this activity.

R: What was your mission?

AG: There are many directions and possibilities. When decided that I was interested in women's literature and my goal was to promote women authors, I shifted my focus from a gay view to a wider view. Being a woman means belonging to a minority and so does being a woman writer, but it's still a significantly broader space than being gay. So I turned towards the majority, but I could still make use of the particularities that I had learned as a member of a smaller minority – for example in *NANE* where they help abused women, or in *Háttér* where they run a gay hotline. I think that organizing work is my mission: to gather people, to give them opportunity to present themselves, to interpret, and to help the people who get into personal contact with me, who I play on the same stage with, so that they can show what they have. At the same time I also have my own path to follow, made up of writing and complex art activities of sorts. And the outcome is a second novel, or *Literary Centrifuge*, or taking part in women's anthologies, or some community artworks like *Nők Magyarországon* [Women in Hungary], Évi Fábrián's photo album where I wrote texts with Andrea Heves for the portraits.¹⁸⁷ Or that I thought again after twenty years that it might be a good thing to write poems and I wrote a poetry book containing gendered reinterpretations. Or the website of *Literary Centrifuge*, where women writers and poets can talk about what it feels like to be a woman in Hungary, how they feel in their situation. It's a bit of a national analysis about where we are mentally at the moment, where women are, what directions are needed.

R: How do you see your place, your role in literary life?

AG: I had to realize after a while that I must follow my own path. I represent a minority in literature. Moreover, an extreme minority. I don't mean 'extreme' in the negative sense here, but as a marginality that is smaller in numbers than groups usually are. Therefore I can't assume that I should take some revolutionist central role, but rather follow my own path. My own path includes *Literary Centrifuge*. Kriszta Bódis, my partner host, deserves immortal praise for this, because she accepted this co-worker relationship despite the fact that it raised a bit of negative suspicion against her: why does she work in literary programs with a lesbian woman? She handled this very well, she didn't mind. I never heard back any fellow woman writer saying, "Sorry, I don't want to be appear here, I'm not a lesbian writer." This rather appears on another level, under the label 'feminist'. You can hear more often that "I'm not a feminist, but..." or "I have nothing against feminism, but..." People imagine the feminist woman as a fanatic, an activist, who is probably a lesbian or she is suspected to be, and she is a man-hater and very radical... so a person whom many people can't accept. Women can't face not being accepted. Only very rarely. *Literary Centrifuge* has a mailing list, for example; we send information about articles we post and about the program every week. Almost every time we get one or two e-mails demanding, "Please, take me off the list!" "Take me off the list immediately!" Well, this is a bad feeling. As if she'd been kicked or threatened. But no, I think they are more likely repressing some kind of frustration. At these times I just take them off the list very calmly; but I don't think that what I'm doing is wrong, or I am wrong myself. I'm aware that this is a new direction.

¹⁸⁷ A portrait album of 88 Hungarian women, published by photographer Évi Fábrián in 2007.

R: Don't you think that the lesbians segregate themselves in small communities?

AG: No, I don't think so. But this is where we end up, this is where this mental track leads us. It leads us into a small community from the state of really stressful loneliness: we form small cells. To what extent they grow strong, how they can generate bigger units... we are just entering this stage of the process. It's enough to observe the festivals. I have participated in every gay festival: the first one departed from one of the cinemas to Vörösmarty Square – this was a rather quick little march, with everyone wearing sun-glasses, ski caps, whatnot. Balázs Pálfi gave a speech about gayness, then we dashed off to Capella Bar, if I remember right. At the ninth one it seemed to be a good idea that the march ended at Buddha Beach from Heroes' Square. But there we got herded into these rundown factory buildings. True, it was on the Danube bank, which is beautiful... There I could see what an enormous crowd we were. There were about twenty-two stalls where NGOs distributed information and fliers, mostly about gayness, and the show was really amazing: it encompassed a wide range of activities, from the presentation of the work of gay Hungarian fashion designers to lesbian singers' performances. We could see that there were a lot of us, and that we were a colourful, diverse, congenial bunch. By comparison, the tenth festival was really threatening, with more police protection and also more hostile voices. Not to mention this year's pride¹⁸⁸ – everybody knows what that was like – like a brutal rape. The attacks hadn't been as violent before. Instead of feeling that we were a strong community and could all get along with one another, our basic experience at the eleventh march was the feeling of terror.

R: How do you think an older lesbian would like to live?

AG: She would like to lead a spiritual life. I think that this is age-specific, and of course, you don't have to be a lesbian to have some spiritual inclination or motivation in your life. When this grew in me, I began to notice that women around fifty, at the peak of their mental and physical energy, would very much like to do something or to receive some knowledge, guidance or mission. Heterosexual women even more: their reproductive period is over, the children have already left home, the husbands have other things to do or they have left already. They simply long for deeper spirituality. They either educate themselves about it with the help of esoteric studies, books, literature, or they invent their own version. Perhaps lesbians tend to do it even earlier, since most of them don't go through a reproductive phase, they don't have twenty years burdened by that. So people crave for some mission in life, I think.

R: What do you think the future will bring you? What is your current mission?

AG: My mission has been determined by the Goddess in the last one to one and a half years: the Goddess sends me knowledge that goes through me and I can write it down. This knowledge appears in a definite aesthetic form: pictures, ideology and a lot of other things belong to it. The Goddess, of course, would like to do it in a missionary mode, she thinks I'm a channel who can not only write it down but also propagate it. She is a bit mistaken at this, I'm not so good at that. But it's her who gives orders, so I'm trying. It's very important to approach social problems from women's perspective, to seek solutions from

¹⁸⁸ Budapest Pride, 5th July, 2008.

women's direction. For burning issues like the problems of Gypsy people or the world economic crisis. I believe that it would open things up if women could actively participate in finding solutions. This is my mission, yes. To convey this women's knowledge.



1973



1985



Szatina, 1997, fotó: Bozzi Vera



Szatina, 1997, fotó: Bozzi Vera



Irodalmi Centrifuga Bódis Krisztával és Láng Júliával, 2008, fotó: Györe Gabriella



**“I have a number of identities and they support each other”
Anna Lovas Nagy (b. 1964)**

R: When did you realize that you were a lesbian?

ALN: I have always been interested only in girls. Girl games, girl company, girl sculptures, girl paintings, female protagonists in films... Everything related to girls or women. I knew I was a lesbian, although my 'lesbian career' started only after my divorce. At age ten I was turning the pages of the Dictionary of Foreign Words and I came across the entry 'lesbian', and I knew it was about me. I read the definition and I got enlightened on the spot: what I was suspecting about myself was an existing condition. It was deeply comforting for me that what I was thinking and feeling could be covered by a common definition.

R: When did you have your first relationship with a woman?

ALN: I had my first girlfriend when I was ten, she was a very beautiful, shy little girl, and I would walk her home every day after school. Her mother worked night shifts; she left the dinner out on the table to warm up. On cold winter evenings we often used to slip in the bed made beforehand and we played under the cover. So I figured out quite early what this was all about. I wasn't in love, I considered it a friendship and her a playmate. In primary school such playing around, petting and kissing exercises would happen. The first love came into my life at age fifteen, when I was taken into state care: I fell for the night nurse, and this emotion lasted for seven years. She was thirty years old and gorgeous. I didn't hide my feelings from her. And she as a scholar explained to me how this sentiment was in accordance with childhood sexual development, that it was a completely natural thing at my age, concomitant with life in childcare, and that once I stepped into adult life, my sexuality would get normalized. At these times I always assured her that she may think so but I didn't want it to get normalized, for me it was a perfectly fine condition. We had excellent conversations, and she resisted for a long time. Then I got married and my child was born, but we still kept in touch. It was her I wrote my first poems to, drew my first pictures to, as an illustration of ourselves. After seven years it seemed that it may come true. We reached the starting point of a physical relationship, we were in bed, kissing, but when we were about to go further, I fled. I realized that after seven years of longing it was completely impossible to sleep with someone, because it was already coated in so many dreams, ideas, desires and whatnot, that reality simply couldn't outdo it.

R: Was she also a lesbian?

ALN: No, she was straight. Well, yeah... I think people are fundamentally bisexual, or at least there are encounters when the boundary between sexual orientations becomes permeable. I suppose there are other straight people as well, who when feeling loved, allow themselves to cross to the other side, but these are only short visits. When she considered me adult enough, she was willing to fit this romance into her life. Or I don't know why she made this decision, but my flight turned into a big embarrassment, and it reassured her of my not being a lesbian.

R: Did you tell your female friends that you were a lesbian?

ALN: Since I was continuously saying that I was a lesbian, I didn't have a big, confession-like coming out event. Obviously, it was so evident for me that it

didn't even occur to me that others could think about it differently. At age ten I was convinced that all girls were like me. When I was chatting or fantasizing together with my female friends about sexual matters, our imaginations completely collaborated, so I didn't suppose it could be different. But of course, I didn't get into intimate situations with girls of really chaste or religious bigot upbringing in the first place. When I got married at age seventeen I left the childcare home and I became very isolated. The childcare home mates whom I had something with, disappeared and I found myself in an empty space. So I made sure to tell everybody that I was a lesbian, so that I would be recognized by a lesbian if I ever came across one. I told my husband too, but I don't think he took it seriously. Perhaps he also hoped that I would grow out of it over time. On the other hand, it was hard for them to reconcile my girlish appearance with the lesbian stereotype in their minds.

R: You mentioned that you were in state care as a teenager. Can you tell about your family?

ALN: My mother was a dancer, then a prostitute; my father is unknown. When I was six months old, my mother found a very poor family, and I was brought up for money in their home like a pig on lease. She paid monthly a fee after me, and she left the country when I was four. She was offered a foreign contract, and she left for Italy to dance – and to hustle, I suppose. Of course, everybody – in the childcare home, and later my husband – said that this was why I became a lesbian, or rather that in their opinion I wasn't actually a lesbian, I was only "in a state of maternal deprivation".

R: What do you think about this?

ALN: As I see it, everybody has a family, and even in the best families messy stories can happen, so everybody has injuries, everybody has gone through some sort of a trauma. It's irrelevant why someone becomes a lesbian. It doesn't matter any more whether I have become a lesbian because of some genetic streaks, or, say, my hypothalamus works differently, or because my mother left me. There must be a reason why I feel better in women's company, but if I had been attracted to men, I would surely have chosen the men's company. After a while it makes no sense at all to search for the causes. Either I turned out like that, or I was born like that. I'm just like that.

R: Have you heard about your mother ever since?

ALN: A few years ago I got a phone call from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I was told that my mother was hospitalized in the St. Margaret mental health institute in Marseille, and I should bring her home and take care of her. But I decided not to do it: she left me at age four, and I wouldn't want to bring home a complete stranger. Still, I called her on the phone, and she told me in broken Hungarian that she didn't want to come home to Hungary.

R: What were your foster parents like?

ALN: On the one hand, they were very poor, and on the other, very poorly educated. My foster mother came from a poverty-stricken peasant family and my foster father was an ethnic German shoemaker's youngest son. So both of them came to live in the capital without a penny on them. These two poor people met each other, got married, and made children. As a conservative, old-fashioned type of man, my foster father insisted that the woman's place was in the home, but it was very hard to put food on the table every day for two adults and three children from the salary he made as a locksmith. So my foster mother

took on all kinds of odd jobs, like doing the laundry for the rich neighbours, or looking after children for money. This was how I ended up in their home for 24-hour child care. When my mother departed, these charitable, deeply catholic people didn't place me in a childcare home. It's another matter that I felt very uncomfortable among them, so at age fifteen requested to be taken into a childcare home. Since then I have been going my own way.

R: Did your foster parents know that you were a lesbian?

ALN: Yes, I think they totally got the picture. I used to bring my girlfriends home in my primary school years, and my foster mother opened the door on us several times, then she pretended she hadn't seen anything. She also opened the door on me when I was masturbating in the bathroom, and then again she pretended she hadn't seen anything. However, after these incidents she developed a passion to open the door on me, until I discovered that the key of my older brother's room also fit into the bathroom door lock, and I smartly prevented her from opening the door on me again. As an adult, I visited her, in the year before her death. My foster mother appeared to me as a scary person in my childhood years: I remembered her as a huge woman. When I visited her – we hadn't seen each other for nearly twenty years by then – I saw a shrivelled old woman who was whining about how terrible this was and threatening me with God, saying he would punish me unto the seventh generation, my children too, and their children too; all of us would suffer the grim consequences of my lesbianism. I told her that it was not like that and that it was actually not really necessary for us to discuss it, because I was just fine with it, it's only that I felt important to tell her. I also explained to her – not reproachfully, but clearly enough – how much harm her cruel lovelessness, her emotional blackmailing gave me: “you will only get a kiss if you are good”, „you are much worse than our own children”, „you are useless”, or „your mother was a slut and you also will be a slut”. If people force this on you in your childhood, you will be weighed down by a huge amount of frustration, and you will end up feeling that you are a pile of shit, not a human being.

R: Was your foster father the same?

ALN: I had a good relationship with my foster father, he was a sensitive man and he appreciated my creativity that showed signs in my early years already. But when he gave in to alcohol, we completely grew apart. He died when I was ten, and I felt huge relief, because he beat up his family every evening, and I was terrified of him.

R: You are saying “his family”. Does this mean that he didn't beat you up?

ALN: That's right. I was the foreign kid, and foreign kids are not supposed to be beaten up.

R: Who was close to you in your childhood? Who could you talk to?

ALN: I always had good relationships with my literature teachers and I always had one or two female friends of my age who I would hang out with all the time. They helped me through the hard periods. After I met Gábor Lovas, my husband, I went through a big intellectual transformation. So I had a sort of intellectual homecoming. For example, since he was also a Jew, I could start cultivating my own culture. All in all, the intellectual environment that I entered through him made me take off at the speed of light from where I had been before. This is why Gábor Lovas was so important.

R: How did you meet him?

ALN: We used to play chess together in *Belvárosi Café*. We had an age difference of thirty years. I married him when I was seventeen, and I gave birth to my daughter when I was nineteen. We lived in unthinkable poverty, because my husband, as much as he was a man of a great intellectual capacity and a generous and talented cosmopolite, he was addicted to gambling: he played cards and chess for money and gambled on horses, he played slot machines, and all the money he made just vanished like thin air immediately... Therefore we lived among very poor circumstances with my child. On top of that, I suffered most from living in isolation again, since we were renting a place in the countryside. My daughter was seven when we divorced. As I see it, mothers with small children are very vulnerable. It's hard to divorce when you are uncertain of yourself, anyway. Long time had passed by the time I became self-supporting and figure out ways to make money on my own. My own maturing to an adult and my daughter Flóra's maturing to school age coincided. We were growing up together – those seven years were a very precious period for us.

R: Did you have relationships with women meanwhile?

ALN: I made attempts. When my child was one year old, we moved to the capital and rented a place. And I recall being so desperate, longing so much for a woman, and wanting to belong to someone so badly, that I prepared about fifty posters at home, and one night, after putting the child in bed, I sneaked out to the street and plastered around Oktogon.¹⁸⁹ The poster said I was a young, 21-year-old mum with a small child, and I was unable to find lesbians, anybody should feel free to come up, I would warmly welcome every lesbian. When I went down to buy milk next morning I found all of them ripped off. It was a terrible trauma...

R: Did anyone come?

ALN: No, nobody. In the same year a magazine was launched (*Négy Évszak* [Four Seasons], edited by Béla Abody), in which partner seeking ads were posted for the first time – seeking friends, seeking girlfriends, seeking penfriends –, very unobtrusively, very tactfully, but still using phrases from which the people addressed could figure out what they referred to. With that the situation relaxed a bit, I could finally date women. But since everybody was neurotic at the time, it was really very hard to communicate. About who wants what, who likes what, and whether we matched each other at all. I was a flat broke, shockingly young mum with a child, moreover, a messy woman inside-outside, so... I wasn't an attractive choice. I have to admit that. I was totally nuts: too much booze, too much desperation and depression, things like that.

R: What kind of ads and code words could pass?

ALN: For a longer time they didn't even accept "Another Love". There was the "seeking a female body-and-soul mate" and the favourite slogan, *similis simili gaudet*¹⁹⁰. Later things became more refined and I had some dates but I didn't have any relationships. I made acquaintances but not relationships. I made attempts though. But it's like with children: it's not enough to put two children of similar age together to make friends. It doesn't guarantee anything to let two lesbians go close to each other, that in itself won't make relationships. It has several components, not only physical attraction. Some intellectual

¹⁸⁹ Oktogon: a highly frequented crossroads in the centre of Budapest.

¹⁹⁰ 'Similar is happy for the similar' (Latin).

intimacy should emerge before you are able to get into bed together. It was desperate that I couldn't meet any soulmates. I tried to map the social networks of the people I met, but since this was a very paranoid period before the regime change, it was hard to do that. If you had a date with someone you had met through a personal ad and you asked her about her previous relationships, everybody closed up immediately, since they felt very vulnerable. I suppose gay guys felt the same. Those night places where you could go out at all – and I didn't know any other but the University Café yet – were frequented by much older people than me, and even they said that they were just having coffee. I tried the University Café twice and I failed both times. I was so child-faced, it must have been terrifying for them, a young woman looking like sixteen enters and wants to have a girlfriend. They must have been freaked out.

R: What were they scared of?

ALN: Maybe of police harassment? I think in the 1980s the older generation still had vivid memories of the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties when homosexuality was still a criminal offence. And no matter that the law tended to show a bit of leniency towards women, if this got out about someone, it surely made her life much harder. It's not easy today, either, but back then it was life threatening: you couldn't be out either with your family, or at your workplace, or anywhere. I wasn't making a decent living. Besides I was a risk, having the vehemence with which I was dashing towards women, yearning for knowledge. I must have seemed to be an agent or an informant, or I don't know, although I was just trying to make my way in the world. To find my own group, my channels, my community of women, but I did this in such a wild boar-like manner that must have been terribly frightening.

R: What were you living on?

ALN: Before my child was born, I worked in arts and crafts: I made glass jewellery and I earned quite well. I stopped doing it during my pregnancy, because glass jewellery-making is a dangerous occupation and our rented apartment wasn't suitable for it, either. During pregnancy I developed extra fears, I was afraid of bursting glass almost like a phobic, since I had suffered quite a lot of injuries before. From then on the economic ground slipped out of my feet, and in fact, I was completely dependent on my husband till my child was three years old. True, I did start to produce textile toys, so I could have made some money with that, but since it was my husband who sold the stuff I had sawn, the money ended up in his pocket and then his gambling addictions swallowed up all the income.

R: Were you separated?

ANL: We weren't separated yet at the time. When my child reached the age of three, I had enough of this lifestyle that was leading nowhere; I saw that I couldn't make a step forward in any direction. On the one hand there was the economic dependence: no matter how hard I worked, the money I made never got back into my hands; on the other hand I was afraid of being on my own with my child. I had never ever lived alone for a moment before. We were relatively close to the regime change, and I wanted to get a divorce. Based on Gábor Lovas' promises we agreed on trying it one more time, and on making an *aliyah*¹⁹¹ to Israel – presuming that this would help him cut off the strings

¹⁹¹*Aliyah*: the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel.

drawing him in and back into gambling. This would be a complete environment change, and the child would benefit from becoming a speaker of two or three languages, and finally, that's the Promise Land, isn't it! So the three of us left for Israel, but it went awry.

R: What happened?

ALN: Right on the day when we arrived in Israel, I met a woman whom I fell in love with, and my husband became more and more neurotic and depressed, and he was suffering from a terrible homesickness. I was 24 and he was 54 – it's very hard to change your life at that age. Separated from my friends' circle which I had worked hard to build up, I also felt that the umbilical cord was cut off again, and I was back to square one, having to start making friends again from scratch. I just saw that I wasn't capable of it. No matter that I had this love relationship with an older woman, she would never come out publicly or in front of her children. I felt that I had to come back home. After staying in Israel for half a year, going to school and learning, I got acquainted with a Hungarian (heterosexual) couple, and we left together for France. I had planned to return to Israel in a month, but I formed a few passionate relationships on the way, and we somehow ran out of money already in Egypt. This guy, whose girlfriend I got involved with thought that we, the two women, would prostitute ourselves and that would bring a good income. Well, I was quite surprised – this shows how naive and childish I was at the time –, since I truly believed that they had invited me along to travel around together for a month, out of pure friendship. I told my husband before the departure that after three years of motherhood I deserved a month of holiday, and my husband accepted it. So we toured around the Middle-East, we stayed in hotels in different places and took off without paying, but in Cyprus it turned out that hotel staff there was not as gullible and jovial as in North Africa, and from there we couldn't get anywhere. Finally we managed to get back home with the help of the Hungarian state.

So I arrived back in Budapest, filled up with experiences. My husband got into such a panic that he came after me with my child in a week – wearing only a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. This was at the end of September. By that time my resolution about getting a divorce had strengthened. It was around that time that I put together the picture in my head: I can't ride two horses with one ass, that is, I can't have a functioning lesbian relationship while having a dysfunctional marriage; we can't all live together; I can't subject women to the scenes we are continuously generating; and on top of all, it's not good for the child. Obviously, it is better for her to have a happy mother than an unhappy one. By age 24 I began to get ideas about how I should change my life, but I couldn't do it at the time.

R: Why not?

ALN: We didn't have a place to live, any clothes to wear, since we had moved all our stuff to Israel – our books, music discs and pictures as well. And we definitely didn't have a penny on us. We had to start from scratch again, and it took a few years again to get up on my own feet. Gábor Lovas found a studio with kitchen in the 8th district, and I started to work in arts and crafts again. The political or psychological pressure on people eased up, the regime change happened, everybody was in a state of euphoria, and the social networks began

to run. The organization *SZETA*¹⁹² stepped out of invisibility, and I became one of its employees, I directed the shelter for battered women and children in Pécel.¹⁹³ Meanwhile my child started school. Friendships were made, night clubs opened – even though information didn't flow smoothly. Space opened up for me, which improved my emotional state a lot. Before that I had spent years without seeing, smelling, holding a woman – or a man, because after my child got conceived I didn't want to any more. Maybe once I hooked up with some guy after drinking a lot of beer, but this wasn't a pattern for me. The women I finally got acquainted with found it hard to believe that I led a virgin life in marriage, living in a tiny studio but not having sex at all. And we didn't, there was only tension between us, building up excessively, making us yell at each other.

R: What happened in the years after the regime change?

ALN: When the world finally opened up for me in the nineties, it turned out that there had been secret meeting places in the eighties, as well, but I didn't know about them, so I was a decade behind the others. When Homeros Lambda, the first homosexual association was founded, it was announced in the television. It made a big stir that it was allowed to be founded at all. They were given permission by the Ministry of Health – the foundation of associations was under a different regulation back then. I remember, I was desperately phoning the Ministry from the *SZETA* office, begging for contact info, a phone number, an address where to go. I remember how I had to explain myself to at least thirty people, starting with the old lady who picked up the phone in the call centre, that yes, I was a lesbian, looking for the address of Homeros Lambda Association, or a person I could contact, because yes, I was a lesbian... I got incredible responses! "But seriously, are you really a lesbian?" "Why are you looking for them?" And I had to reply again that I was looking for them because I was a lesbian... And then the thirtieth person gave me a phone number, that of Lajos Romsauer's... And I did call him! He sounded a bit suspicious, as well. Someone with a high pitched, child-like voice petering out from anxiety telling him that she was lesbian, and would love to meet other women, and was there a way to do that, and whether the members of the Association were only boys or were there girls, too? It turned out that they had started to organize parties, and that's how I ended up in the bar called *Sarokház* where there really were women.

From then on relationships were formed. You could discuss things much more openly, you could ask questions! It was not Jenny-in-the-Closet kind of women who were gathering there, but those who had known those places for at least ten years already. They were mostly in their thirties and forties, and some young people with a past, unlike me, in my twenties, who flew as a fresh bird into this amazing world. It was a strange period but very inspiring.

R: What gay programs did you attend regularly?

¹⁹² *SZETA: Szegényeket Támogató Alap* [Poverty Reduction Fund]. It was founded as an NGO in 1979 and functioned illegally till 1989, supporting poor people. According to state-socialist demagoggy, poverty did not exist in Hungary. In reality, a lot of families with many children, especially Roma people, were living in poverty. *SZETA* was considered to be the most important organisation of the illegal democratic opposition in the 1980s.

¹⁹³ A small town near Budapest.

ALN: For example, Pink Picnic was launched in a forest in the Buda Hills – the track was marked by pink crepe paper-ribbons tied on tree branches. A string quartet played classical music, men and women were moving around, eating, drinking, everyone was happy. The event had such a charming ambiance that would have been unimaginable before. It was organized once a year, I attended maybe three times. In *Sarokház* there was a party once a month, I think, so house parties had an important role. Phone numbers got exchanged, and we would drop by one another's places to drink beer or wine and chat. There were a few icons, persons of great influence, like Ildi Juhász, who ran a cinema and regularly organized parties in her cinema, the *Ipoly*. The programs of Homeros were for a mixed audience, while [the *Ipoly* parties] were attended only by women, which was a special experience. After I befriended Ildi, she invited me to her house parties as well, and I had the opportunity to get in touch with many people through her, since she was a proto-lesbian in the community. And the company grew and changed fast at these parties. There is a special dynamics very characteristic of gay social networks: as new relationships form, the different friends' circles meet and merge. This pattern was easily traceable at these house parties. Someone brought along her new partner, and suddenly a new company that was unheard of before appeared. Like a spreading ink stain: your circle of acquaintances was and is increasing, and as you are aging, you get to know more and more such circles, such gay 'sets'. There must be 'sets' that are still unknown for me. For example, I have heard that there is a company situated at an economically unreachable height, all exclusive and unapproachable. I've never met them. There is the circle of politicians, and there are multiple 'sets' in the art world, too. However, perhaps gay communities are the most democratic ones, where the passage through different social groups is much wider.

R: Did you also organize house parties?

ALN: Rarely, because our studio was thirty square meters. I used to cook for my friends at Jewish festivities and I held birthday parties, but not as monumental ones as Juhász did, who had a much larger place.

R: Did you have a serious relationship?

ALN: When I finally came to end my marriage, my husband moved out, I became self-supporting and my child grew somewhat older, I finally managed to have a steady relationship. It lasted for nearly seven years; when it started, my child was eight, so it spanned over her primary school years. This could happen thanks to really changing my ways, undoing the superfluous frills around me that my husband and marriage meant. When that was over I met Márti, who was a member of *Hättér Society*, and through her I got involved in the movement.

R: Didn't you take part in it before?

ALN: It's a very important question when you can actually be an activist. As long as you are tied down by bringing up a child, by being in a very tight relationship, as long as mere self-maintenance takes all your energy away, you can't really be too much of an activist. I mean, there may be people who manage to, but not me – it didn't even cross my mind that I would manage. Then my child was almost a grown-up, she was coming and going almost on her own in the world, and my very tight seven-year-long relationship came to an end, as well. The next one wasn't very long, but long enough to give a new

push to my life, and so I joined the movement. There was also a gay-Jewish company, *Keshergay*, with whom we used to celebrate the great Jewish festivities. This was a novelty for me, as well, and I thought it was a special Hungarian invention, and how great we were to invent such wonderful things. This also steered me towards the gay movement.

R: What kind of voluntary work did you do?

ANL: On the one hand I was a helpline operator, on the other hand I took part in the organization of the gay festival. That's how I got involved. At the time the tension between gay men and lesbian women was building up in *Háttér*. We did agree on many issues, but we also had different goals and different convictions. Since in *Háttér* men were in the majority, and – as it tends to happen in mainstream society, too – they tried to realize their own ideas, rupture came about. The need to found an independent organization was born and gained strength in the lesbian community. In 1999, ten years after the regime change, a small bunch of us founded *Labrisz*. Most of the founders – the hard core, so to say – came from *Háttér*.

R: How did your daughter find out that you were a lesbian?

ANL: My daughter has always been more attached to me, from early age. She loved her father, of course, but she has always had a more intimate relationship with me. When we got divorced, questions came up: who was the cause of the whole divorce, how was it that her mother was living together with another woman. These things must be difficult for a little girl to comprehend, they are very very complicated. My child is 100% straight, so I would like to dissolve the stereotype that the children brought up by gay people will become gay, as well. But I really can't say we were in an easy situation. When she was ten she tried to marry me off to my favourite gay friend, while we were living together with my girlfriend. So the poor child had such a big chaos in her head that I thought we must talk. When I explained her the situation, she got terribly upset. I tried to ask her what I should do to comfort her, should I stay with her or what, but she said, "No, take the dog for a walk!" So I took the dog for a walk, and by the time I got back an hour later, it seemed like everything was alright, she had pulled herself together. But a period of at least half or three quarters of a year followed, during which she just asked small things, step by step, she tried to figure out things in tiny bits. And I kept getting surprised by the things she was afraid of. Her worst fear was that her friends wouldn't like her any more because of this. She was terrified by the thought of being an unwanted child, conceived accidentally. She was scared of what would happen if it came to light in the school that I was a lesbian. I had to explain all these, to reassure her that she wasn't an unwanted child, that I actually married her father to have her, because as a young mother I thought that this could only be done by a mother and a father. And slowly and gradually all these questions were put in place – so much so that it eventually became a kind of 'high jump bar' which her friends were supposed to jump over. Flóra announced, "My mother is a lesbian", and those who accepted it were allowed to be her friends, but those who acted horrified or repulsed were written off right away.

R: What is your relationship with your ex-husband like?

ANL: He died when my daughter was seventeen, so I don't have a relationship with him any more.

R: And at the time around your divorce? Or when he found out that you were a lesbian?

ALN: It must have hit him hard when I announced after becoming pregnant that I wasn't going to have sex with him any more. I think that's when the penny dropped for him and he realized that he had really made a mistake. It must have knocked him down. But he said he loved me and he wanted to live together with the child, so he stayed in the marriage. In fact, it was always him who held onto it: when I was already heading out, he still clung to it with tooth and nail. Besides, he was an emotional blackmailer and thirty years older, so when I made attempts at quitting the relationship, he kept trying to get me to pity him, saying he was a poor sick old Jewish man, so I shouldn't leave him! So I ended up having a bearded little son along with my little daughter, and this was a bit too hard for me. I didn't want to care for a thirty years older little son, I had my own life to live.

R: How do you identify yourself? Which identity of yours is the most important for you?

ALN: Mother, artist, lesbian, Jewish – I have a number of identities and they all support each other, making up a watertight bastion around my inner self. I think they not only support me but protect me, as well. My fundamental identity is 'artist', so my primary identity is that I am a creative person. I think that whatever happens to me, any kind of sorrow, trouble, grief, my primary means of self-expression is my hands, the thoughts expressed in the material, the drawing or the written text always protect me. Spending half a year in Israel meant a lot for my Jewish identity. I learned a lot there. After we came home, I took my child to Talmud Tora from age three, because I believed that identity was something one could lean on, that identity meant community. When she grows older she can quit it or choose something else, but identity has a great importance. Unfortunately, the gay Jewish community, *Keshergay*, has disbanded, but I've heard recently that some people would like to revive it. If it happens I will obviously be there.

And how much of an activist I am? I was a founding member of *Labrisz* in 1999, then I quit. I'm too autonomous, for me it is very hard to be a loyal activist, which is similar to party loyalty. There are many issues I don't agree on with the movement, or I didn't agree back then, but the movement is changing, as well, so sometimes we are closer, other times we are more apart. When a decision which I can't identify with is made, it is very hard for me to swallow it. The pattern is that I join some movement, I get enthusiastic, I believe it will advance things, and then I get disappointed with the movement. As long as I can believe in and trust what I'm taking part in, I can mobilize a great deal of my inner power, but as soon as it seems to be exhausting itself or doesn't move in a direction that I can identify with, I quit. And this pattern doesn't only characterize my participation in gay or lesbian causes.

R: When you quit *Labrisz*, did you have a steady relationship?

ALN: Yes, I moved to the countryside for five years. This coincided with quitting *Labrisz*. When this period came ended I returned to the capital and began to search for my old acquaintances, so I got pulled in the movement again. That's when Agáta Gordon, who was the editor of *Literary Centrifuge* contacted me to ask whether I would take over the radio program *Exclusive Girls*. So I became a program host and editor and I had to reattach myself to the stream with a

thousand strings: broaden my knowledge, get informed about current topics, know what was happening in the gay scene, in the movement, in art and in the world in general. This way I got back in the movement, if not as a member of one of the associations, but still in a constant proximity. I'm in touch with everybody and I talk with everybody.

The movement Joint Forces against Violence was formed after those horrible, cruel atrocities happened at this year's Pride.¹⁹⁴ *Angyalkommandó* [Angel Squad] is a spin-off of this movement, or rather its small baby chick, its child: the artistic expression of all the resistance that the *Összefogás* movement represents. Although Angel Squad is a faceless action group, I'm also in it, because I think that as long as the situation is like this in Hungary, we need an Angel Squad to awaken people's conscience and to immediately raise exclamation marks, to point out that this can't be allowed, this is intolerable.

R: So you have political consciousness...

ALN: You read newspapers, listen to the news, and if you have just a little bit of conscience, you can't ignore what's happening. If you call this political consciousness, then I certainly have a political consciousness. I wouldn't go into politics though, because politics corrupts the soul and the sense of morality, as it forces you into compromises of party politics. I will always remain in opposition. So I prefer to be the person who wants to draw attention to what is not working well. This is proper civic activism. As much as I can't swear party allegiance even to such a small association as *Labrisz*, I'm also completely unfit to make any kind of political allegiances. And I don't intend to, either.

R: Do you like working in the radio?

ALN: Sure, that's a nice, lovable activity that gives me a lot of joy. I meet new people, I hear new thoughts of people I know or don't know. I have to keep myself well informed about what's happening in the world, and it's an inner duty as well. I think my life would be lesser without the radio job. In the old days, when I was working at night, I was listening to the radio all the time, my ears were continuously engaged with the radio. When I eventually got the opportunity to engage my mouth with the radio, it made me really happy.

R: And what do you think the future will bring?

ALN: Like a good pioneer, I live by five-year plans.¹⁹⁵ By age thirty I planned to have my own apartment where I could live with my daughter, and I made it. By age forty I planned to find the everlasting relationship of my life. I didn't make it, but my current relationship has the potential to be that. Sometimes I lag a bit behind, but I always, always, have my plans. Now I'm writing a book.

R: What do you want to write about?

ALN: About women. I think it would be a shame to let my many experiences and memories of women be lost. I not only want to write about love but also about the struggles of the women I know with their femininity. Struggles with motherhood, society, their workplace and their lovers. And about what an entangled lot all this forms: I'm a mother, a lesbian, a woman, but sometimes I'm rather a guy, or I'm not a guy at all, because I have 100% XX chromosomes,

¹⁹⁴ She refers to the Pride March of 2008 in Budapest.

¹⁹⁵ The state-socialist economy was regulated by so-called 'five-year plans', programs for economic development designed by the National Plan Bureau, based on the recommendations by the highest level party bodies.

and this conflicts with my being a lesbian... I think this material is waiting for me to explore and record in writing, and I am able to do it. I am able to synthesize it – in a readable form.



1984



Farsang, Eklektika Kávézó, 1998



1999



2004



“I feel I’m also part of the game”

Csilla Bíró (b. 1966)

R: Where are we now and why did you choose this spot?

CSB: We’re at *Szóda Café*. It’s run by some old, dear friends of mine. I stick to the places where I’m a regular – I come here a lot. A lot of *Csajka* events have been held here, down in the basement, and also up here where we’re sitting.

R: What is *Csajka*?

CSB: The term “*Csajka*” has several meanings. It’s Russian for ‘seagull’, it used to be the name of a big car, and it’s the abbreviation of *Csaj Kocsmasport Akciócsoport* [Pub Sports Action Group for Girls]. It started a year or two ago. During the summer of 2006 I was on holiday with my girlfriend in Greece during the World Cup. Everywhere we saw people watching the World Cup. That’s when the idea was born. We thought it would be great to organize a women’s table tennis championship that would run according to the same system as the football championship. We managed to organize our first event with the help of *Szóda*. It was quite a great success – at least a hundred women showed up. Since then we’ve kept organizing pub sports events every other month. The point isn’t so much the sports themselves but to spend time together on Sunday afternoon. That includes eating, drinking, smoking, as well as playing and getting to know new people. Games are very important, and I’m really into them myself. This is a much better way for women to meet each other, even though there are other places for that, like the lesbian parties at the end of the month. The problem with parties is that there are too many people, it’s really loud, and meeting someone is really random. If we form teams by lot, first they have to introduce themselves, and then they play together for 10-20 minutes – that gives them a better chance to have a conversation, to enjoy themselves, and to play and win too. *Csajka* isn’t a night-time event or for partying, though it can turn into that. It’s something to do in the afternoons and a good way to play and get to know each other.

R: Are these events exclusively for lesbians or for women in general?

CSB: All the matches are ‘for women’. It’s like the difference between insects and beetles: you have a larger category and a smaller category within that. It’s 90 percent lesbians who come to play, but that’s because those are the forums where it gets advertised. But anyone who wants to can participate. I have a funny story about that, actually. During the arm-wrestling championship it happened that a young man came by and saw the sign about the women’s championship. He told his wife, who was a mother of two and a mountain climber, and she won the championship in her own category. She enjoyed it very much. She didn’t know what kind of place she was coming to, she didn’t know what type of event it was, but it all turned out great: not only did she win the match, but she also had a great time. A woman is a woman, regardless of what other identities she has.

R: What age groups are represented?

CSB: It ranges from 18 to 55. There’s a wide range, 30 years or so. We like that. Right now we’re sitting at the spot where that event took place – imagine a bunch of ladies cheering over there. We organized the event over there on the stage in a ring, and you could bet on who would win. The atmosphere was great; everyone was shouting names. There was also a *Csajka* event at LIFT

Festival: it was a betting game, we projected female cover images from men's magazines of the thirties, forties, fifties and sixties. The point was to guess when the cover image was made. Whoever guessed the closest was the winner.

R: How do you have time and energy for this?

CSB: It's who I am, honey! You don't have to have energy, just love of the game.

R: Is this what you were like in the past too?

CSB: I've always loved playing cards. Ping-pong has been important for me ever since I was a child. I learned to play on the playground from little Gypsy kids who were really good at it. They were six to eight years old, and I was ten. I'd never had a ping-pong table, I bought one recently. I used to live in a house facing a square, so all I had to do was walk to the other side. There was a stone table there, I learned to play on that. There used to be playgrounds everywhere, and every playground had a ping-pong table. These days there aren't playgrounds or ping-pong tables any more. So-called 'mass sports'¹⁹⁶ are scarce, where kids go outside and don't just sit around but can actually play something. I've always liked board games too, and also ball games. My grandfather tried to teach me to play chess, but without much success. I'm not a chess-player type, I prefer other games. I've lived in Budapest all my life. I'm from Budapest, and I've always lived near Kálvin Square. I had to move five years ago, because the building was going to be demolished. I didn't want to leave the neighbourhood, and I was lucky. I've stayed in the same area where I grew up as a child; I've only moved a block away. I'm a local patriot. I haven't moved abroad, either. I've stayed here in the neighbourhood. Everything keeps me here. If I get back from somewhere after a week or a month and I see Kálvin Square, I feel like I've come home. I'd gladly try living in Canada or somewhere for a half year, but it hasn't happened. I haven't been anywhere for more than a month at a time, which I regret. Maybe I'll have the chance sometime, I don't know.

R: Besides your interest in games, what were you like as a child?

CSB: In elementary school I was the class clown, always making everyone laugh. In high school I was very much a party girl. Those who could keep up with me would join me. Later I met some people who had the habit of going out together. I've always had a big group of friends. Sometimes the group formed around me, other times I was the one to join. I enjoyed being with them. I graduated from high school in 1985, and then I worked as a prop manager in a theatre. That was my first job – it was pretty laid-back and interesting. I first got involved in theatre in high school by taking part in amateur acting groups. I was glad to get into theatre, because I'm a night owl, I can't wake up early. The kind of shift that works for me is when I start at two in the afternoon and work until 11 at night. I got into the theatre world, it lasted a year, and then I ended up at the state-owned Film Company, in the set-up department. That was the first time in my life I worked in an office – and hopefully the last. Later I interned as an assistant film director. I still have a couple of friends from the film industry. And at the same time, I met a girl who played in the film, and she's one of my oldest, dearest acquaintances. I met a

¹⁹⁶ 'Mass sports' (*tömegsport*), the organized sports activities of children and young people was ideologically and financially supported centrally in the state-socialist regime.

lot of people through her. Hány Wine House on Bródy Sándor Street, which is still open today, was really popular back then. Everybody who was alternative, who just liked to go out at nights and have fun went there. The place stayed open until two or three in the morning, which was really late in those days. In the eighties almost all of the bars and clubs closed at 11 p.m. or midnight. There weren't any other clubs where all the young people who wanted to go out late at night would go. That's where I met Szinike. She was a musician, and I met several other musicians and artists through her. This was a new group, nothing totally alien to me, but suddenly the number of people around me jumped, my groups of friends grew, and the world sort of transformed. I fell in with a totally new, different crowd.

R: How old were you at the time?

CSB: About twenty. Szinike and I were together for two years. When I was 15, I was already going to all the clubs that existed then. There was *Ráday Klub* in Ráday Street, where *Trabant* and other so-called alternative bands performed. These weren't generally famous bands, but they were very well known in certain circles, so a lot of people attended their concerts. We didn't have cell phones and internet yet to get the information, so the news got around by word of mouth. Everybody who was interested would know about it and show up. *Kampec's*¹⁹⁷ music wasn't new to me – I had heard about them already, I knew the band, just not Szini. She initiated, but nothing was clear-cut. I liked girls, but it was a totally new thing to be courted by a woman. And then we ended up getting together. Even as a kindergartner, I felt different, and then when I was a teenager, I had a rough period from ages 11-12-13. I always had friends who were a little older than me. When I was 18, I was surrounded by people who were 25 to 30. I always looked for the company of older people. When I was 11 or 12, I had serious thoughts about what I was feeling, it was interesting but actually I didn't have anyone to talk about it with, just myself – who else? The girls in my class would say, "Oh, that guy in Class B is so good-looking!" I had some suspicious urges, but not like "That's trendy, so I'll try it out." The trendy thing seemed to be girls falling in love with boys.

R: Did you try it out?

CSB: Of course.

R: Was it a success?

CSB: Well, I managed to try it out.

R: Did you fall in love with someone?

CSB: No – not with a guy, I mean. But when I was eleven I thought I should try out the 'normal' thing to do, since everybody else was doing it. They all liked boys, so this had to mean something. Later it turned out that it didn't really mean much to me. When I realized that something different was going on and I was certain of it, I was fifteen or sixteen.

R: What did you think at the time? What term did you use for yourself?

CSB: The whole thing felt very interesting, dangerous, exciting and furtive to me. But I wouldn't say it drove me crazy. I was just as crazy as all the other teenagers. I thought about the subject and did a little research on it. What classical literature can I mention? In *Nana* by Zola there are some hints that the female main character has some kind of relationship with another woman.

¹⁹⁷*Kampec Dolores*: alternative rock band in the 1980s, where Szini (Ildikó Szineg, Chapter 9) played.

Very faint hints. I remember that. It's an absolute classic, well-known piece of world literature. That caught my attention. I used to read a lot when I was a teenager, and when I came across some hints referring to this, some uncertain small details about two women being together, it always caught my attention, and I knew it interested me for some reason. I fell in love for the first time when I was sixteen. And then I knew; that was it. I could be kidding around trying to date boys and I did kid around for a while, but later I realized there was no point in fooling myself. At that age, of course, you don't think in quite such mature terms, but I recognized that there was no point in playing around. I don't know what term I used for myself at that time, but I've used the term buzi (fag) since then – to provoke myself and others.

R: Isn't that an offensive term?

CSB: The opposite is also true. A lot of people find it offensive when used about them. They don't like the term, and it's considered a slur. But Szini said she used the term, too – let's laugh! Let's laugh at ourselves and others. In that context it's not offensive. You need to have some self-irony – that's why I usually use the term.

R: Did you tell your first love that you were in love with her?

CSB: I didn't have to tell her – it was obvious. We got along very well, we were close friends, and later we ended up together.

R: Were the feelings mutual?

CSB: To some degree they were mutual, yes. The whole thing was secret and crazy.

R: Did you talk about this with each other?

CSB: Only a little. Instead, like all teenagers, we wrote poems and listened to music.

R: Who was the first person you came out to as a lesbian?

CSB: There was a girl I went to school with, I'd known her since I was little. When I was 18, I told her. She took it strangely, or rather jealously, I would say. That's the word that comes to mind when I think back to it.

R: Why was she jealous?

CSB: Because of the situation, the fact that I was a very close friend of hers but still the idea hadn't even crossed her mind. She was upset because she hadn't known, or hadn't expected it of me. That I was in love with someone who was a woman but it wasn't her. We stopped being friends for a year and a half, but after that things went back to normal.

R: When did you tell your family?

CSB: When I was around 22. By then I was already living with a girl. As I remember, the way it happened was they asked me, "Why is this girl always at your place?" "Why does she sleep there so often?" And that just provoked the response out of me, I shouted it out. I didn't tell them, "There's something I'd like to tell you, let's sit down and I'll tell you something exciting" – I just blurted it out.

R: Had they suspected?

CSB: They must have suspected something, that's why they asked those questions. At the beginning they took it as a tragedy – "What will happen to our only daughter?" and so on. They obviously weren't very happy about it, but as the years and decades passed, their negative and overprotective attitudes faded. It wasn't easy. Twenty years is twenty years, but luckily it turned out

OK. They couldn't deal with it for several years, I didn't talk to them about this part of my life. I moved out of my parents' house when I was twenty, but we would see each other every week or two. We avoided the subject; I didn't want to provoke them by bringing it up. But when they brought it up, after a while I got over the difficulty of it and started being able to answer their questions any time.

R: Was the girl you were living with a turning point in your life?

CSB: As the first woman I lived with, yes. She wasn't my first love, but she introduced me to a large company, so in that respect I can call her a turning point.

R: What did she mean to you?

CSB: She was only a couple of years older than me, but mentally she was much more mature. I loved her way of thinking, I found it very entertaining. She didn't entertain me as a cohabitant partner – if she had been just a friend, I would have still enjoyed myself a lot in her company. And also in the company of the people I met through her: a cohort of artists, musicians, all sorts of people who used to visit these places. You could have conversations with them about art and go out with them to clubs. It was quite an eye-opening change for me. I wouldn't say I'd ever been much of an introvert, but that was when I got acquainted with a lot of people.

R: Did you do something from them?

CSB: Photography. That's where my love of photography came from. I had regularly gone to see exhibitions and films before, but here I could get in contact with the real filmmakers. Before I was just a viewer, but now I could actually talk to them. That was the difference, the added benefit.

R: When did this happen?

CSB: Around 1986-1988.

R: The end of communism was approaching...

CSB: At the time there were three or four clubs where such people – my friends and lots of other people – could go. There was *Tilos az Á*, there was the short-lived, but very memorable *Egocentrum*, as well as *Hold* and the *Bercsényi* and *Ráday Clubs*. There was *FMK*, where now *Kogart*¹⁹⁸ is. It used to be a place with concerts and theatre performances – a favourite gathering place for those people. It got closed down, unfortunately.

R: Did these places serve as lesbian meeting spots at the same time?

CSB: They weren't any lesbian places at all, but people came by from every periphery of society. If they showed up, it wasn't weird or noticeable. Because that crowd – which is also why I think I enjoyed their company – were much more open and accepting. If they knew about me or Szini or anybody else, it was completely indifferent for them. That wasn't the important thing.

R: Were there any places for lesbians to meet?

CSB: To tell you the truth, I didn't really care. I had a partner. I don't know whether there were any. I don't think there were, because I would have known about it. I didn't have an urge to go and search for places like that, to meet women, because I had a partner.

¹⁹⁸ *FMK: Fiala Művészek Klubja* [Young Artists' Club], a place founded in 1960, giving space to 'tolerated' young artists and alternative rock bands in the 1960s-1980s. It was closed down in 1998. Currently Kogart Gallery and Restaurant is located in the building.

R: And when you didn't?

CSB: That didn't happen.

R: Did you go from one relationship to another?

CSB: There were breaks in between, obviously. A year, a year and a half. But now that I think about it, I've always had someone.

R: How did you meet your partners? How did you find them?

CSB: We would just find each other. At the theatre, concerts, those sorts of places. I've definitely been lucky, because finding a life partner is a big struggle for many people. Not for me. Sometimes I met someone through friends, or through their friends, but somehow I've always had someone. I've never been seeking a partner.

R: Have you ever made a mistake?

CSB: I don't think so, since I've always had long-term relationships. It can surely happen that you make a mistake, but you realize that only later. I've never faced complete rejection, like going over to someone like, "Nice to meet you, my dear lady, I'm the one for you, what do you say?" and she says, "Go to hell!" That kind of mistake I haven't made. It has happened that something didn't work out and that's why it ended. But I wasn't the one looking – they would find me.

R: Were you a central figure in your group of friends?

CSB: The group of friends I was talking about earlier were in their thirties, and I was in my early twenties. In that respect I wasn't really a central figure, but I was in the sense that I was everywhere.

R: What were your workplaces like?

CSB: After the Film Factory, I tried to find work which gives more freedom, you don't have a boss. Like selling books and newspapers. In those days, every underpass was packed with people selling stuff. On one hand it was terrible, but on the other hand, you could easily buy books and everything on your way somewhere. So my then girlfriend and I started up a small business, and we sold books and newspapers. We earned some money from that, and then we had the daring idea to open a pub, the *Zanzibár*. It was a rash idea, because neither of us had ever drafted beer in our life. We came up with the idea in the abstract, and finally we found a place to rent, and then we opened the place. We kept it open for nine gruelling months. The reason it was such a short time was that rent was too high. It was crazy expensive. If we had thought about it seriously beforehand, we wouldn't have even taken the first step.

R: Was it a good location?

CSB: No, I don't think that's the reason it was expensive. It was near Harminckettesek Square. This was in 1991-92, just after the end of communism. *Tilos az Á* was still open, *Egocentrum* was too, and they were all close together. One was on one side of the Körút,¹⁹⁹ and the other was on the other side. This caused a sort of migration of customers, where people would go from one place to the next on the same night, and finally choosing a place to stay. Several hundreds of people would stop by at each place each night. Our pub was next to Horváth Mihály Square and had a very diverse crowd. Prostitutes would be working on the street three or four meters away from us.

¹⁹⁹ The Körút is a major avenue in Budapest which forms a semicircle through the downtown region and connects Buda and Pest.

They used to drop in for a coffee, and even the pimps came in, and they would meet our usual clientèle, which was a bit different. Everybody would do their own thing, and sometimes they would bump into each other. Sometimes those encounters didn't end up too well.

R: Did it serve as a lesbian pub?

CSB: Not at all. It had the same customers as *Tilos az Á*. Once the idea came up that Monday should be for women, but it didn't stay. Maybe because we couldn't really announce it anywhere; there wasn't anywhere to spread the word. We did tell some of our friends, but that wouldn't have been enough to stay in business. So it didn't work out.

R: You've alluded to some conflicts happening in the pub. What happened exactly?

CSB: When cultures meet, it can be really exciting but also really dangerous. There was a girl in our circle of friends who took a liking to one of the pimps. They got to know each other and talked all night long, so the guy thought she was his. In the end the girl got scared about what might happen to her, so we hid her in the kitchen and locked the door on her. In his search for her, the guy vandalized the pub. No matter that there were thirty people there – professionals and artists – that guy trashed the place all by himself. The other guests ran away, and we put everything back in order. There were squabbles. When someone can't handle another person's attitude, because it's unfamiliar to them. An Arab stands a meter from you and feels safe. A European stands twelve meters away. Not knowing about cultural differences causes problems. Besides all that, it was a pretty vibrant period.

R: Did the owners know what you were renting the place for?

CSB: They knew we were renting it as a pub. It was a pub indeed, we didn't lie to them. It was a pub with strange hours: we opened at ten p.m. and closed at five a.m. In those days there was no place open that late, even though communism had been over for a few years.

R: Were you ever reported to the police?

CSB: When a lot of people would be standing in front of the door, we would get reported, yes. There are always problems with neighbours, but that wasn't why we had to close. We couldn't afford the rent they charged us. I don't mind, because the nights got to be too much. We were open every night – it was a very hard period, we were young, around 25-26 years old. It was a tough business. The interesting part is – and I'm still surprised by this, even after sixteen years – that we were open for only nine months, and people still remember us. That's suspicious. Something was always happening there. Later, after the pub closed, a slow-down followed in every aspect of my life, including finances. I had to figure out what work I could do. We moved to the countryside, where we taught for a year and I worked at the local pub.

R: What did you teach?

CSB: I'm a general teacher, I have a degree without specializations. I looked after children in the afternoon daycare, and I worked in the pub in the evenings. It was an interesting change for two years.

R: Where was this?

CSB: In a small village near Budapest.

R: Why did you go there?

CSB: Because the mother of my then girlfriend lived there, and we could get work. It wasn't the happiest period. Earlier I said I'd never left Budapest for more than a month – I did, actually, though we came back for weekends. Apart from that, I got into a totally different, unfamiliar environment. I wouldn't say it wasn't interesting. Until then it had been nightlife in Budapest pubs, and then a totally new environment.

R: Did people in the village know that you were a lesbian?

CSB: Nobody ever said what they were thinking. I can't tell you whether they knew – nobody ever said anything. Maybe they guessed, I don't know.

R: Did that cause you any problems?

CSB: No.

R: Have you ever suffered any atrocities because of who you were?

CSB: It has never happened that anybody would have pointed out that my hair was shorter, or offended me, or called me names. Neither the neighbours, nor at the workplace. And I worked at a place where it would have been hard to do it. Or else we were on our own. Particularly in the Film Factory it wasn't relevant at all. I have encountered atrocities only from the part of strangers, but I can't recall their faces and I can't recall any concrete incidents. Either I replied "so what?", or I got a bit worked up but moved on. I have hardly ever responded.

R: Did you intentionally seek out places where the atmosphere was freer?

CSB: Yes, I sought out places that were somewhat freer. But I needed luck too, to get into that workplace, to have the chance to start up that very business. In that respect it wasn't something conscious on my part, just being lucky.

R: What happened after life in the village?

CSB: I got back to Budapest. "What a beautiful little life" – there's a song Szini sings; that's the refrain. It has two meanings: first, "Fuck, what a hard little life we've had." And the second is that life can actually be beautiful...

R: What did you do after leaving the village?

CSB: That was when the first open-air clubs started to open in the summer. The biggest was *Ráckert*, in *Tabán*.²⁰⁰ It was the first place frequented by a huge number of people. It had started up in the previous year and was opened from the first of May till the end of September. Five to six hundred people turned up there every workday, and even more at the weekends. That's where I started to work in summer, around 1996. I worked from autumn till spring in *Libella*, and the next summer again in *Ráckert* – I worked through two seasons there. It was a turning point. I already knew how to draft beer – that was after *Zanzibár*. I enjoyed it; I could meet and talk to a lot of people, it was crazy fun. I loved doing it, but it was very tiresome. These two years passed more or less like that, working in bars.

R: And then?

CSB: After that we sold CDs, but I left something out: I delivered newspapers and handed out flyers. It was also a difficult period and lasted almost a year. I didn't really have a boss then, either – I decided when to start the day, and I finished when I thought I'd worked enough already.

R: Did you have any contact with the lesbian community?

²⁰⁰*Ráckert*: a very popular open-air bar in the 1990s-early 2000s at the bottom of Gellért Hill, in the public park called *Tabán* in Buda.

CSB: At that point not at all. But you still hear stories, of course. If you live outside Budapest, that's a huge problem, there are much fewer opportunities there. Obviously there were some, but that wasn't the nineties yet. From the start of the nineties you could meet people. By running ads, for example, written coded. I didn't do that, I didn't pay attention to those things. Since I always lived with someone, I wasn't interested in meeting anyone. Also, there wasn't really any place to go. I don't know exactly when Angel Bar opened, but it was the first one, between Blaha Lujza Square and Keleti [Eastern Railway Station] in an inner courtyard. Maybe it was in the middle of the nineties. That was the first place for guys and girls to gather in an obvious setting. Before that, I'd heard once or twice about a place called Pink Bowtie, a restaurant at beginning of Üllői Street. But I didn't know much about those places, and I wasn't really interested.

R: And when did the first place for women only open?

CSB: *Café Eklektika* was the first. I even worked there when there were larger parties during its golden age. It marked a huge change. Was it about eight years ago? Communism had long ended, and there were 200-300 women at the first larger lesbian parties. A lot of people came from outside Budapest – you could see faces you'd never seen before. People came out of their hiding places. It was amazing to have everyone in the same place.

R: Did you know anything about the gay rights movements at that time?

CSB: I knew about them, and I was even involved for three days, but then I quit. Back then it was the Rainbow Association. I didn't quit because I didn't agree, just because I'm not really the activist type.

R: Why do you organize the *Csajka* events?

CSB: It's my hobby. I've met a lot of people in these circles, too, but I think of them the same way as my other friends from very different circles. I met a lot of women at the events, parties or anywhere I've worked. I got to know many people, which made it easier to realize my hobby and organize championships within the community. Where people check the internet to see what events there are. Bringing fifty to a hundred people together, recruiting them from the community. It helps to be able to target a specific community. I would advertise it to anyone, but this way it's easier and I know the women anyway, and enjoy myself in their company. I feel I'm also part of the game, but I don't think anything else is important besides letting the women spend Sunday afternoons together. The point of *Csajka* is to let the women get to know each other through playing sports and games together. That's the 'benefit' of it.

R: Looking back, how do you see your life?

CSB: I think it's been exciting. If I were given the choice to be born again, I wouldn't want to be someone else. I've thought about that a lot. Maybe it would be easier, but compared to what? I don't want to cite statistics, but the rates of divorce etc. in straight marriages are terrible. I don't think it's easier for women or men or anyone who doesn't have a different attitude toward life. It's hard for those women and men who can't meet people, because they don't have the opportunity. But that's hard for everyone else, too. If I were born again I don't think I would choose the easier path, because I don't think that the other path is any easier.

R: Do you think there are lesbians who had a harder time accepting themselves than you did?

CSB: Of course, a lot go crazy because of it. A lot spend their whole lives lying. To themselves, to their families, relatives, neighbours, co-workers, everybody. We don't know how many dimensions exist in the universe, but we have only this one. As for what comes after it, I don't know, I don't want to go into that. But in this only one where we are everybody should try to live a life where they don't hurt other people, but they also don't let others hurt them. This isn't an illness, it's just what it is. What the genetic side of the story is, what medicine has to say about it, is not clear even today. It is what it is. You have to live with it and not live someone else's life or struggle to measure up to others' standards! Be happy – that's what you should strive for, nothing else. If this is the life you have, try living it as you want to, as you enjoy it. Don't try to live according to other people's expectations, lie because you're afraid your neighbour will look askance at you. That's his life.

R: Does everybody know that you're a lesbian?

CSB: I don't usually introduce myself like, "Nice to meet you, I'm so-and-so, and by the way, these are my personal preferences," but if someone asks me about it, then I say, "Yes, that's true." Now, at my age, that's what I say. There might have been moments when they didn't ask about it and I lied and said, "Yes, my husband-to-be", etc. I'm not saying this never happened but luckily those days are long gone.

R: Did you really lie to someone about being engaged to a man?

CSB: I'm sure it happened. But there were very few situations like that, thank god. I can't recall the specific incident, because I don't remember it. But I'd be lying if I said I never had to tell lies like that.

R: Why do you think it was easier to accept who you are later?

CSB: Everyone's different. Some people are extroverts, others are introverts. Some people can't start a conversation, because it's not in their habit. Some people sit anxiously in a corner and wait for someone else to find them. Obviously, no one's going to find them that way. And other people just walk over and say, "Listen, I like you, do you want to meet tomorrow?" Obviously, they're the ones who have more of a chance to actually meet someone. But it's already something if you sit down and try to talk. It's a matter of personality.

R: Among your acquaintances, was there anyone who needed more time to accept herself?

CSB: If there was anyone who really struggled, I didn't know about it. It did happen that someone would be like, "Jesus, what's wrong with me, how can I live like this?" A lot of people don't accept themselves and stay in the closet – but that's their problem. Why? Because of the neighbours? Because of whom? The neighbours should live their own lives! Parents should also live their own lives. Co-workers should live their own lives. I know there are people who stay in the closet, but when they die, it's over. If the world ends, what's it worth? For whom? They're just making it hard for themselves by doing that.

R: Did you have any girlfriends who were in the closet?

CSB: No, I haven't met the conflicted type. They all took it in stride.

R: Why did you hesitate about doing this interview?

CSB: I didn't think I actively participated in the eighties. I didn't really care about it, and I didn't seek out that kind of company. Now, if I go out I see a lot of people I know, but in those days I didn't. I also thought it wouldn't be

interesting because I've been lucky, and I've always had a partner. I'm not an activist, either. That's why I didn't think it'd be too interesting.

R: So you've never had any difficulties finding a partner?

CSB: Maybe I will in the future. This is just how things worked out. I remember there was a year or a year and a half – that was the longest period when I didn't live with anyone. And by living with someone I mean living with someone. Not a one-night stand, or two-nights stand, or a week-long fling.

R: Have you ever found a partner in the lesbian community?

CSB: I wasn't part of that specific community. So I've never sought and never found a partner in that community. Throughout my whole life I've met women in pubs or the theatre world – totally different environments.

R: But did you date lesbians?

CSB: No. My first love wasn't a lesbian, either. I was attracted to girls, not lesbians. Which, as we know, is a wider category, including the other one.

R: Were there any physical signs for identifying lesbians?

CSB: It wasn't written on them. If I was looking at someone because I liked her, I didn't care whether she was this or that. I didn't even start to wonder, "Is she, or isn't she?" I either liked someone or I didn't. But then there weren't as many signals in appearance as today. Every era has its own fashion, trend, how lesbians look, what fashion they wear. There are a lot of differences, but today women are much easier to recognize by these signs. In those days I didn't pay much attention to it. We might have come across a few people we'd look at and think, "Oh, she's got to be," but I can only remember a few cases like that. Of course, I also noticed when someone was like me or seemed to share my interests in that respect, but that didn't necessarily mean I liked her. Just because someone's 'like that' doesn't necessarily mean I like her. In these communities, like in any other community, you can find all aspects of society represented – in terms of education, wealth, etc. I've never chosen people based on what they like, what groups they belong to, but on how much I like them.

R: Haven't you ever thought of opening a pub for women?

CSB: Yes, I have. But you can't make a living from that in Hungary. Women obviously have less money. There are six to eight smaller or bigger bars for guys, plus the saunas – but there aren't any bars for girls. There was once a pub that went out of business. *Bárcsak Bár*²⁰¹ was open for two years, but it had to close down. A pub in Hungary, in the capital, can't stay in business with just female customers. That's how it is. First, on the social level, women have less money than men. And then, in addition to that, their dating habits also differ from men's – I don't want to go into detail about how these things work exactly because I don't know the details, but it's different. When it comes to men, one buys a drink for the other, they drink, and they spend more money. At the same time, thank god, there are more and more events for women; there isn't a single month any more when there aren't any events for women. There's a demand for places like that, but filling up a place with fifty to a hundred women every night just isn't feasible. At any kind of major women-only event, 400-500 people show up. There's a demand for *Csajka*, too – if fifty

²⁰¹ *Bárcsak Bár* [If Only Bar]: A women-only bar opened in 2005 by two women.

to a hundred people show up on a Sunday afternoon, it's worth doing. They want to play, they want to talk.

R: Is there anything that was different in the parties of the past compared to those today?

CSB: I'll tell you what I've noticed as a big difference: the visibility of young people. There are many many young people, and I don't know if it's a fashionable thing now, or if, thank god, gay people can just come out more easily these days. I already knew when I was 16, and obviously these 18-year-old girls also know. They're free to go to these places, to meet their own age group or whoever they want. They can do that. We couldn't. That's a very big difference.

R: Among your friends weren't there any young actors or artists?

CSB: The people I hung out with were in their thirties, older than me. Almost everyone was a decade older than me. I was the young one, and the only one. Now you can see 200 eighteen-year-olds at the same place. That's the difference.

R: You mentioned being part of a gay organization for three days – why couldn't it engage you?

CSB: Politics doesn't engage me either, and a lot of other things don't, either. There's no particular reason. I'm not an activist type, I've never been, but it's not because I'm not sensitive to social issues. I simply wasn't interested. Just as I wouldn't be interested in a community just because it's made up of women, or just because it deals with a certain issue. It's people who interest me, not groups. Within a group I certainly find a couple people who are very interesting, but I'm not interested in the group itself, and neither in the ideology.

R: You've never been interested in feminism or any other movements, either?

CSB: No, neither those.

R: Have you ever felt that if you went abroad, you would see something different, something that you don't have here?

CSB: Whenever I can, I go abroad on holiday for a week or two. In the seventies I went to West Germany, where obviously you could see different things. Many of my friends moved abroad, and many of them stayed there, but a few came back. Everyone said it was totally different. Those who have stayed abroad are much more relaxed. As for those who came back, I don't know why they came back – maybe they were homesick, or they thought that maybe they would be better off here after all. Those who still live abroad seem to be doing better emotionally. They don't fret. One of my acquaintances came back to visit after a year and didn't understand where she was. The neurosis that surrounds you at a club, on the street, on the tram, everywhere and anywhere, day after day. We're so used to it that we don't even notice. My friends in Berlin or Amsterdam, in the West, in London or wherever get a shock when they come home for two weeks at Christmas.

R: Looking back, do you have any wish in your life that hasn't been realized, something you still want to do?

CSB: What do you call that flying stuff? (*Waves arms in an arc motion.*) Yeah, sky diving, I want to try that someday. And I wish people didn't have to feel, as far as their livelihood is concerned, that the world might fall apart any moment. It's not up to me, unfortunately. I don't know what I could do not to feel like that. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer people know.

R: Anything else you wish for?

CSB: A nice little bar with a revue show! Where you can eat, drink and smoke, and sometimes the girls put on a cabaret show. It would be great to start a place like that in, say, twenty years. I would enjoy it. I would lie on a sofa and enjoy the show. That's what I'd like.



1990-es évek eleje, fotó: Szilágyi Lenke



“I’m going through passages”

Andrea (b. 1968)

R: Can you recall your first encounter with the ‘gay world’?

A: I remember the first one because it was very memorable. I came to socialize with the gay boys in the old times. Not accidentally, since the girls weren’t visible anywhere. The idea just came up in my straight friends’ company to continue the evening at some other place. One of us knew the central gay bar of the time. The idea was to go there, so we did, a group of four or five girls, I think. The boys didn’t come along for some reason, perhaps they got tired, or they didn’t feel like entering such a place.

R: So you entered as an outsider, as a straight girl?

A: I did. But I’m a very sociable type. And regardless the milieu, I focus on nice, interesting people... Obviously, we all wanted to have a good time, and there was a chance for this at that place: love, fun, openness, similar interests.

R: Where was this club?

A: In the middle of the then-called Felszabadulás Square,²⁰² the University Café. And I didn’t really know any other places. The boys mentioned a few smaller coffee shops, like *Diófa*, *Muskáti*. Quite a lot of these places have similar names to this day.

R: When did this happen?

A: About 23-24 years ago, so around 1986-87. I left my parents’ home at age 18. I clearly remember this, and then this great liberation came. When I was standing there facing life not quite as an adult, in my rebellious period, a bit rootless, the familial feeling of it was just what I needed.

R: So at the time the gay world wasn’t your own lived experience.

A: I literally enjoyed the warmness of it.²⁰³ The friendship, the warmness. Not from the perspective of sexual identity. What’s more, I resolutely insisted at the time that if any same-sex inquiries were directed towards me, my male friends should avert them for me. Because, interestingly, these inquiries didn’t reach me directly, but through the boys. In those days it didn’t happen yet that someone would just come up to me and get straight to the point – everybody acted with more caution. The club had very few female regulars. I remember four or five women, and there were two more women among the staff members. They were together, anyway. So I felt fine and safe. After the boys were sure that I didn’t intend to convert them, they didn’t understand why we, straight girls, frequented the place, what we wanted. One of the girls was very much into conversion though, or rather she would have been, but she was the first to drop out. The boys told her “no, thanks”.

R: So it was curiosity.

A: Yes. We laughed a lot, chatted, we simply had a lot of fun. It was a friends’ circle, and after a while individual stories also started to be revealed. For example how the guys lived their private life. Emotions, loves, break-ups and all were also storming there. We became part of it, whether we wanted to or not. We ended up going there on a daily basis, as if we were going home.

R: Were there regular customers?

²⁰² It is called Ferenciek Square today.

²⁰³ The word ‘gay’ (*meleg*) in Hungarian means ‘warm’.

A: Almost everyone was a regular, there were hardly any passers-by. I remember that sometimes tourists or passers-by dropped in to buy cigarettes. All eyes focused on them, so they glanced around timidly and exited immediately. It was a quite closed community, by the way.

R: What was the size of the place?

A: It was large, roomy even from a present-day perspective. We went there for about two years. One night my resolution weakened in an early hour.. But no big identity change happened to me, and there was no big revelation, either. It was simply by basic curiosity that worked. It was a good reason though that the woman had wanted to get closer to me for a long time, and she approached me very politely and very slowly. She was never pushy... so I had no reason to decline her advances when the dawn hours arrived, I didn't feel like going home, all my friends had already left and I was bored, and she precisely sensed when it was the right moment to approach me in a friendly manner at the counter. So we started to talk. I told her that I wouldn't mind going along with her, but she shouldn't expect anything smart from me, because I had practically no clue about what to do, I was all ignorant. She replied that this didn't matter at all. This was my first very good experience, because I saw that I made a person very happy. In a relationship with a same-sex person. It made quite a huge impact on me.

R: So it ended up as a relationship?

A: Sure, a three-month long one – in which I think I can really say that I was treated like a queen. This was why I found it so hard to quit the relationship. It was me who quit. There were other reasons why I couldn't admit to it.

R: So this was your first one.

A: This was my first one. And I remember that I had a one-year pause after this.

R: Did you have relationships with men meanwhile?

A: I did. I don't remember having one at the same time, rather before and after. My next steady relationship with a woman started after about a year. I didn't have any casual affairs during that year.

R: And when did you feel that – if it happened at all – that turning towards women was developing into a definitive orientation or interest? Did you have this switch of sorts during your second relationship?

A: I think I did, because the beginning phase of the second one was quite stormy... I was around twenty-one or twenty-two, and these nice gay boy acquaintances of mine wanted to fix me up with a girl. Or rather the other girl expressed her strong desire to find a girlfriend. Our friends were really into this matter, and I think we managed to get together for the third go. We had always got stuck somewhere halfway, mostly I did, it didn't work out. Then one day it happened at one of the boys' places. We met there in person, the boys withdrew politely to give us some private space, and, if I remember well, it turned into a nine-month long relationship. Exclusively. I mean I didn't have any relationships with men meanwhile.

R: Did something change in you then?

A: Well, yes. This was her influence, I think, because she had this orientation from the start, and she still has it. She didn't swing both ways, and lived it out with all her might, so, of course, it rubbed off on me, as well. It wasn't a boring relationship. So this world opened more wide before me then...

R: Did it cause any conflicts or struggle for you?

A: No, not at all. Not even for a moment. I'm a curious type, I'm open to get involved in anything, so probably that's how I got into this, as well. So far my whole life has turned the way I wanted it. I have tried everything I have wanted to, but what I don't want to I wouldn't try for love or money.

R: Did this second relationship engage you in lesbian socializing, as well; did your world open up in this sense, too?

A: It did. In this sense, too. Some of my then girlfriend's co-workers, acquaintances and friends knew about her identity, so we had these close friends' get-togethers.

R: How much were you out in front of your larger environment in this period?

A: I always come out with everything, I've never had any reservations.

R: Didn't you have any bad experiences in your environment, before or around 1990?

A: No. I've never sensed this. Why would I have? The thing is not written on my forehead.

R: But what if it had got out?

A: Only those could have found out to whom I revealed myself. I was neither hiding it, nor showing it off. I thought – and I still think – that everybody has a private life and a public life. Private life is a private matter, it's in the name, and I don't usually wear any outer signs that could reveal this. I like girlie T-shirts, but these could be worn by anybody, it doesn't have any particular meaning. I don't attach signs on me – I've put this one on for the sake of the film shooting, because I like it very much, it's beautiful. (*She shows her labrys axe shaped pendant.*) I've never behaved flagrantly.

R: But there can be situations where private and public life overlap, when one has to consider what to say or not to say.

A: Do you refer to situations where the topic comes up in a mixed company, and whether I fall silent, or ...?

R: Or when you are in a semi-private company, do you say that you were here or there with your girlfriend?

A: If that's the case, my girlfriend and what we do together is none of their business. If it's necessary I explain that you should form a negative opinion about something or someone only if you know the person and his/her life well, but even then you shouldn't necessarily do that, or if you do so, you should refer to your own life rather. I have always reacted very sensitively to expressing negative attitudes towards any minorities.

R: Did you have a stable job in this period where the question of coming out would come up?

A: No. This somehow has never been a problem for me. Now I'm smiling because I recall that many times I went on sick leave for my girlfriend's sake, since I preferred her to the job... and sometimes it was touch and go whether I could keep my job or not.

R: What kind of jobs did you have?

A: I had all sorts... from manual work through office manager to bookkeeping jobs – without any qualification in them. I got into positions where I could learn a lot. I had workplaces where I could play hookey, and there were workplaces where I couldn't. So it happened that I was fired, but if we got indulgent in our love life, I rather put the job behind, and usually it was worth doing it.

R: Did you have a moment in your life when, inspired by personal encounters and experiences, you felt like wanting to organize a community space for women? What came out of that and how far did you get with it?

A: Some kind of girl-oriented line started to get organized during the University Café period already. We used to visit the apartment of Lajos Romsauer, the founder of Homeros Association. Information came and went there, but in an absolutely boyish milieu – I was practically treated like a boy, too. I used to hang out with my male friends, that’s how I turned up at his place, too. Once Lajos handed me over some letters written by women, and said, “Andi, you girls try to do something with these, because I can’t help them.” Obviously, most of them sought his help in partner-seeking issues. The point was that we should start up something, because there was a demand. There really were no such services back then. Everybody seemed to be more or less satisfied by knowing some other women, having get-togethers, picnics, going to see films, meeting in private, having conversations, and that was all. Romsauer put me in touch with Judit,²⁰⁴ and we started brainstorming about what we could do right away. We were very enthusiastic. One of my first ideas was to put up ads and organize meetings at one of the public places well-known by gays, in Club ’93 Pizzeria, since we were personally acquainted with the owners there. So at the beginning we tried to gather people there.

R: And how did it turn out?

A: There were a couple of gatherings for a small bunch of people, but it couldn’t... It was clear that nothing would come out of it.

(Judit Szabó joins in the conversation.)

R: Then you tried to find another place for the same purpose, and if I’m not mistaken, this was *Óvegylet*.

A: *Óvegylet* had quite a strong foreign support. They organized trainings and all sorts of actions like distributing condoms in clubs, for example.

JSZ: Yes, they had an office with a complete infrastructure, and their main goal was AIDS prevention. Quite many women came to that place. I don’t remember what caused this breakthrough.

R: Did the women know about it from ads?

JSZ: No, not then. Maybe it started up because of Rainbow Society, which was being founded at the time, then because *Háttér* got founded, as well. The mixed-membership association called Rainbow Society for Gay Rights was founded in 1994, but it didn’t get registered. Then the mixed association *Háttér Society* was founded and it got registered in 1995. I recall that women were coming to their events, and then we needed separate events for women only, and *Óvegylet* offered us space for that.

R: How did women get informed about this?

JSZ: They were members of the two associations. And there were friendships between boys and girls. They brought each other along, there was a whispering campaign. We wrote or they wrote, and they came by. This club worked for one or two years, every second week or rather monthly. If I remember well, after a while we had thematic events, and sometimes boys participated, as well. I mean, for example one or two boys dropped by and then we were talking about, say, coming out.

²⁰⁴ Judit Szabó, see: Chapter 4.

R: Like later at Labrisz Evenings.

JSZ: Yeah. Just like that. *Óvegylet* had a back room.

R: The first Labrisz Evening also took place there, in 1996.

JSZ: Yes. This was a transition towards *Labrisz*. At that time quite many future *Labrisz* members were present.

R: The story of Labrisz Evenings is a bit different though, since it started with us producing the ancient, xeroxed Labrisz Newsletter there, and first we invited the women who subscribed to the newsletter for a personal meeting, which was organized by Bea Sándor and Judit Hatfaludi.

JSZ: Yes. I think it happened like the club started to wear out, and then the newsletter followed, so the community got revived again and it turned into *Labrisz*. So it didn't transform into *Labrisz* organically, but certainly many future *Labrisz* members were there. The club was quite a thoroughfare.

R: Was it mostly activist women who attended?

JSZ: Not only. The same as you can join a Labrisz Evening now. Gay boys' female acquaintances came by, for example, the contacts of *Óvegylet*, acquaintances of those who had attended one evening and passed the word to their friends that this program existed.

R: Approximately how many people attended these events?

JSZ: Well, that room was quite packed sometimes. Twenty to thirty.

R: Were these facilitated discussions?

JSZ: For example Gazsi²⁰⁵ did facilitate one, but I don't remember any of the girls doing it... Perhaps Bea Sándor... She was certainly present, but how much she had a leader role, I don't remember. Judit Hatfaludi was there as well, and the others who edited the newsletter together. So there was a group who had wanted to create a women-only association for a while. There was quite a debate on the matter whether there should be a separate women-only association besides the mixed one.

R: Can you recall these discussions? What kind of arguments were made for establishing a separate association?

A: I guess, the same ones that may occur now, as well. For example in the case of a club: some people want to be separate in a more exclusive circle, and others prefer being mixed. I guess it was the same at the time, too.

R: Yes, but I don't mean entertainment only, but also issues of advocacy.

JSZ: I think this wasn't the issue then. That was rather *Labrisz's* cup of tea later. Back then the struggle was rather about creating opportunities for finding partners. We advertised it in *Homeros*, and I think it was every two weeks that women could phone in. So the main point was partner seeking, and when *Óvegylet* came into the picture with its office, these few people got transferred there. Then the movement boomed in multiple dimensions, our numbers grew, and our discussions became thematic. Partner-seeking matters became overshadowed. By that time you could run personal ads in *Magyar Narancs*, so it wasn't that important any more.

A: That reminds me, by the way, that we had founded a dating agency with a guy earlier. One of my friends told me that he wanted to start up a dating agency for gays, and what if he was handling the boys and me the girls. I found

²⁰⁵ Zsigmond Gosztony: leader of the gay hiking group called *VándorMások* [Wandering Others], formed in 1991.

it a good idea, so I tried to find out how he pictured this, how much it would be a business and how much a charity work... My friend Ervin is truly a man of heart, so I had some doubts about how long he would be able to endure the work, because I thought that if he wanted to do it as a business, he would probably die of starvation. And I was right, the agency didn't last too long, but we did it with great enthusiasm and lots of people were interested. In my opinion the main problem was that we couldn't properly separate the gay partner-seeking profile from the rest. Therefore some people who quite disturbed the work got involved.

R: Did you stop being involved in these community organizing experiments in the mid-nineties, or did you make other attempts? And when gay NGOs started to work, how much did you participate in them?

A: I remember that I was present at the beginning of *Háttér*, in the first two years. I tended to lose myself there and spend less and less time at home – I might not even have had a workplace any more, since I was so deeply indulged and there was suddenly so much work to do. At the beginning it didn't really have an official image; we had to lay the foundation stones: who we were and how we would work together when the thing took off. At the very beginning, when there was hardly anything but history around us and we were looking for a place with Laci, I was still there. Then, when the organization was actually founded, I don't know where I was. But later I worked for it on a daily basis for about two years. I was a helpline operator, I participated in the trainings, I enjoyed it a lot and I was very enthusiastic. We were furnishing the place; I carried or got several pieces of furniture carried in from out of use supplies.

R: Did you have any more encounters with community organizing matters later? Or did you resign and live your lesbianism in your private life?

A: I dropped by the movement occasionally. When *Labrisz* was founded, and there was something called Pink Flamingo, I went to have a look what was going on.

R: The *Flamingo Circle*.

A: Yes. Something that today's eager youth most probably doesn't know anything about, since it happened yet in the ancient times: Ildikó Juhász from the the circle had a cinema in Ipoly Street. This is an important point in our history, around 1987. She used to open the locked door to her friends in the evenings. If the acquaintance brought along someone who wasn't yet acquainted, we let her in, as well. Thus the company grew like that, but we kept it to about twenty people. This was a friends' circle getting together regularly; I remember that there were some people there every night. Depending on who had free time when.

R: It seems to be an interesting transition phase.

A: We were twenty when we were going there with my second girlfriend, whom I mentioned before, and we were the 'little ones' taken under the aunties' wings. We got involved later, we weren't invited for the opening yet, I think, we somehow ended up there. It ran like a house party, it was rather exclusive. It wasn't announced anywhere, I'm sure it was just spreading around among friends. However, some of our gay male friends showed up here as well, I remember, so they weren't excluded but this place was considered to be women-only.

R: And later there was a certain place called Pink Bowtie.

A: Yes, that was Ildikó's place, too. The cinema was closed down, and this restaurant was her new headquarters, so the thing went on with the same character, on certain evenings. So there were only gay women there. It was also interesting that women from the artist and theatre world also showed up in this circle, and we were amazed by it and we liked it a lot. What I missed later, for example, that these women didn't dare or didn't want to come.

R: Can you name some of them?

A: No. But believe me, it's true! I could show you photos if we were just the two of us.

R: Did you have foreign experiences with the lesbian world either at the end of the eighties or later?

A: It was rather the foreigners that come to us... I wasn't lucky enough to go abroad.

R: Where were they from?

A: For example, when we were going through the breakup procedure with my second lover – which was based on mutual agreement, and we are still close friends, so it wasn't much of a procedure – we got involved on a triangle situation with an American girl, but not for real, it was just that the girl couldn't decide which one of us to get together with. For a while the three of us we went out together. Because we loved each other with my ex-partner, and she loved us... it was quite an interesting situation. And then, I think, it was me who made the decision that I wanted to stay alone for a while, "I wish you to be happy together". And they really were happy together for seven years. I really liked that girl, and we enjoyed hanging out together. Then my ex-partner 'monopolized' her, so we couldn't meet any more. This was, for example, an important foreign relation, which I like to remember. Then one of our... artistic contacts guided a French lady to us, since they didn't have enough capacity to chaperone her while doing art work. Then we spent weeks strolling around with this French lady and went to Vienna every weekend. This was a great experience, which I also had with Dóri, my second partner. I remember there were exactly four places that we used to visit in a row during the night. There was one called Frauencafé, where girls, aunties, ladies performed ballroom dances, and we watched them rolling and spinning around. This was a café-type place. I also recall a place called Smiley Bar where they had boys-only and girls-only nights, and maybe mixed ones, too. I remember the white, half-transparent curtains and a very beautiful, angelic milieu. There was also an alternative club called Zone Club, with a group of very alternative-style regulars, all kinds of interesting girls regarding their looks, I mean their outfits, make-up and haircut. There was a fourth place as well, but I can't remember it any more. This is another foreigner contact I can recall. And there were some more through the boys.

R: Did you have any relationship with people living in the countryside?

A: Among the boys there were a lot of rural guys who had some big troubles at home because of this. And we started to explore the countryside, this was a big trend at the time. Trend?! Well, I don't know what to call it. If there was a male couple we paired up with them, just for the show. And then we went to visit each boy's parents in the countryside. I have several decade-long relationships of this sort. These relationships have proved to be quite steady.

R: How much did you frequent Angel Bar? They also had women-only nights

from time to time.

A: When a new place opened its doors I always went to see it. There were very few places where I went regularly, since mass drunkenness and fights didn't attract me too much, and I somehow tended to run into them from time to time. But I had my curiosity, so I usually went to check out the new places. There were more than one Angel Bar, I recall three of them. One was on Rákóczi Road, it was a huge basement system. I liked it. Except that one evening I was badly hooked on a lady's figure all night long, she was dancing alone all night, and I told the person sitting next to me, "Look, isn't she gorgeous...", and he said, "That one, over there? That's a boy!" "Are you serious?! I'm yearning for her all night long and she turns out to be a boy?!" He was one of the transvestite performers, and his image was mastered perfectly. And there was that famous or infamous bar in Szövetség Street. That place was well-known. And the third one... I can't remember, although I've just talked with someone about it, and the street where another Angel Bar was located was mentioned. The place I really liked was the predecessor of Alibi Bar, it was called Heaven. It was on the corner of Ó Street and Jókai Street. It was also a mixed club. Very familiar, cosy, friendly. Nobody tricked you at the counter, there wasn't too much smoke, you could hear each other speaking, the shows were pleasant, and everybody was in a friendly closeness with everybody. So it was a very pleasant place.

R: Can you recall how much the management of your everyday life, your social life or your working life was affected by your attraction to women, or your attraction to women, too?

A: As long as I lived with my family, this part of my life didn't really exist. So it wasn't really disturbing at home, or rather... When I moved away from home, my relationship with my second girlfriend had already started. I moved – I like telling this story, I'm proud of it – because my mother took the phone out of my hand when I was talking with my girlfriend. So I moved out next day. So I did have my assertiveness, very much so. Obviously my people at home couldn't be informed about the details. I don't know how much they suspected, what they thought.

R: But your mum was suspecting something if she took the phone out of your hand...

A: No, my mum said that the phone wasn't made for talking for hours. I replied that it was Dóri who called me and I believed that I could talk as long as I liked when nobody was waiting for the phone. My mum tried to manage the family within a quite stern system of regulations. She was partly right.

R: Do you think that she sensed something of the character of this relationship?

A: That wouldn't have been a problem, this matter wouldn't have hurt her or caused her trouble. Neither did it cause any problems for them later, when it became all clear. You could clearly get it from their signals that they didn't wish to discuss this topic in detail. I would have liked to talk about my private life with them, but it was obvious that they didn't want to. They tried to be tolerant, to look understanding and accepting. But I shouldn't bring this in their everyday life!

R: Did it affect your choice of job or workplace?

A: To have a gay-friendly job? There was no such thing at the time.

R: And I meant your friends by 'social life'...

A: It definitely affects my social life – we increasingly spent our free time with

my own circles. We didn't really like being together in straight company where we had to pretend that we were 'just friends', not girlfriends. Still, we had situations where we were outed, like when our straight female friend said, "There's surely more between you two than a simple friendship". We asked, "Why do you think so?" "Because Dóri touched your hair in a way that plain female friends never do."

R: So your friends were not let in on this?

A: It wasn't always necessary. I didn't have this 'coming-out by all means', like, for example, I would demand respect for this at my workplace. The assessment of my work shouldn't be influenced by this! However, it's also important that it wouldn't have to be a secret! These two principles balance out very well.

R: Has there ever been any tension because of this?

A: I didn't want to get others worked up on this, but they shouldn't annoy me, either, by criticizing us, I wouldn't tolerate that. But it wasn't really an issue. I didn't bring my private life into spaces where I felt that it wouldn't be appropriate to do so. But if I had thought that it had to come out for some reason – like, say, my partner would have come to pick me up at the end of my shift –, I wouldn't have told her to wait for me at the next corner, because I would have humiliated both her and myself with this. If a situation of this sort had emerged, I would have taken up the challenge, of course. But even today I don't walk hand in hand on the street so that we prove something to each other; and to prove something to others is unnecessary. I am who I am, anyway.

R: Do you remember situations when you came out to someone who was important for you? If yes, what did you say and how did you say it?

A: Only one of this sort was needed. I don't remember more, actually. This is also about what I have said, that it simply didn't matter. I didn't have the urge to do it. We lived this within our friends' circles, where we could do it and the others had similar needs. And where life wasn't about this, this matter was irrelevant. There was only one story, which was a disturbing one: my head teacher in high school was a very influential person in my life. I think about her with great affection to this day, she helped me a lot... perhaps she wasn't aware of how I felt about her. We had a very close friendship, and this began to disturb me, since I'm like that. I was afraid that somehow my fondness for her would flip over into something else. This feeling made me insecure.

R: This was in the years after graduation?

A: Yes. But she helped me a lot after that, as well. In job hunting, in finding a place to live, since I had left home. Once she even let me stay at her place for a few months. I respected and appreciated her a lot, and I still hold her in high esteem today. She is a woman of great knowledge until this very day. I was afraid that this love would grow so big that it would turn into something else. I didn't know how to solve this, both to hold on to her and to escape from her, and quite a huge tension built up in me. She felt that something was wrong and started to ask me what the problem was. I said I wouldn't tell her. And so she said, "listen, Andrea, if you don't tell me, I can't help you." I told her that I still wouldn't. At her third attempt she told me that if there was something at the background that I couldn't come out with, she couldn't help me. I asked her what she was hinting at. And then I think she mentioned drugs as an example, "or something like that". Huh, I saw then that I would get into big trouble if I

didn't come out, so I asked her to give me two days, because I was freaked out. I got the two days, but I was still very much afraid, I remember. And at this point a helping hand came by. She had an Italian friend who was studying to be a journalist. She was a very smart woman. She could ask questions in a way no one could. My teacher asked me whether I felt it would help me if someone else was present at our conversation, because her friend may be able to ask better questions and that might help me.

R: Did she ask you in Italian?

A: No. English was the common language, but my teacher taught Italian and English, so they understood each other very well.

R: So the whole thing passed off in English.

A: No, they talked in Italian with each other, because this was the most simple for them... I didn't need to use English, because I received the 'results' in Hungarian.

R: I've just wanted to ask what terms you used when you told her.

A: Hungarian words, mostly. She tried to make it easier for me when she could. But I received so direct questions that I couldn't beat about the bush. So I said, "Well, the truth is that I have a girlfriend".

R: So you didn't say you were lesbian but that you had a girlfriend.

A: I didn't, since... I'm not a lesbian. We didn't clarify this at the start. So I've never been lesbian, I've been bisexual all my life.

R: Does this mean that you need both women and men in body and soul, or that you are attracted to people and it doesn't really matter which gender they are?

A: Rather the latter. If one isn't there in my life, I have or I can have the other, too. This is not a bad thing, in my opinion. My affection is... human-centred. What's better is that I practically have double chance to find a partner this way. I can love any kind of living creature very much. I don't separate them and this doesn't cause me any problems.

R: And is there any difference in what they give you?

A: Absolutely. Completely. You can't compare them. I can think of them only in separate chapters.

R: Can this be grasped somehow?

A: Well... I'm trying to write these things down and I hope something will come out of it. This is a wonderful great world, very complex... but it's much more difficult with women than with men. It's exactly the complexity that makes it beautiful but also difficult. It gives me a task that interests me and engages me. I think the whole thing is as ambivalent as I am myself. So I can't explain it in a few sentences...

R: And why is it more difficult with a woman than with a man?

A: Because women are much more complicated. They can often be very troublesome... So, what's the beauty in it, the curiosity, is that they are more subtle, and that's exactly the difficulty, as well. What makes them more attractive also makes them harder to handle. For example, a man expresses or shows me in a more unambiguous way what he wants, whereas I have to think, figure things out much more with a woman. And the truth is often the exact opposite of what they are saying. And you have to figure it out. I can think with a male brain, and when I'm talking with boys, it goes like: "Oh, yeah? So you think the same? So that's it!" And when we have a 'boys talk' it often turns out

that we have similar problems – with women, for example. We help each other with that, as well. With the women I discuss how difficult men are in some cases. I enjoy this, and I'm completely honest in both directions, so I have never pulled a trick on anyone in this matter. I come out straightforwardly with this at the beginning of every relationship, so that the other person has a choice to say yes or no knowing this – and I don't swing teams, anyway. If each partner agrees to swing, then it's fine, but not behind the other's back. Rules are there to follow (that's why they exist), and it's not so hard to follow them – it's easier to live like that, to put it simply.

R: So you don't keep contact with the gay world any more, you don't attend these places?

A: No. Not at all. With a few people, of course, but not too often. I'm not following the events any more. To be honest, my personal reason for this is principally that I have resumed, reviewed my life, and I think that my past didn't add to my life in a way that would turn it into a desirable direction for me. So I thought I had to change my ways, that this wasn't the ultimate direction. And even though it looks like I'm 'going through passages', despite that I'm not in such company any more, I can have a lady partner any time, and have room for that in my life. I mean, I come across them, there are a lot of opportunities. Even in the old days, when I still kept contact with these circles, I didn't seek partners there.

R: So you feel that a great change has happened?

A: Yes. Absolutely. Completely.

R: Towards a heterosexual orientation.

A: Well, practically saying, yes.

R: Was this a conscious decision?

A: Well, listen. Things have built upon each other. As I was withdrawing from this, more and more of that came. I reviewed my life and I found that I had gained too much pain and sorrow from my dyke past. And I knew that I had mingled – and some of us who didn't have this as an *a priori* determinant thing had mingled – with them because we were looking for love, warmth and friendships. It seemed that there was a greater chance for fulfilling this need there, because perhaps the outside world looked too harsh.

R: And now there isn't such a great need for this any more?

A: I think many are still looking for it and find it there. But besides the few good things, I found a lot of bad and hurtful things in it, I didn't expect either my friendships or love relationships to turn out the way they did. I said to myself that I was not going to struggle any more for these relationships, because everything got stuck at some point... Obviously it takes two, so I don't blame anyone for this. Let's say that this line didn't work for me. It failed. I found my groove elsewhere, in other ways, in other circumstances. I was able to progress more, to achieve results more easily, I have more opportunities. I wouldn't even say that I emphasize my feminine side more – I rarely put on make-up, and dresses with plunging necklines and high heels are not major elements in my wardrobe. So it's not this that I use to make my way on the other side, but somehow I can make myself better understood. I think lesbian women have to tackle many things that cause all of them too much trouble. I would highlight jealousy here. As we know, in the gay world emotions can be really intense. I experienced many times that we were either on the ceiling,

flying high in the sky, or hedge-hopping, falling down into the abyss. It was very difficult for me to find people who were able to sustain a healthy balance in the middle of the road, which wasn't dangerous, scary or annoying...

R: Is this more intense within the gay community because things often happen within one circle?

A: No. In my opinion these people are much more sensitive.

R: But you were just saying that you didn't meet your female partners within this community.

A: Yes. Women who are not so gay are simpler, let's say it like this. They approach this matter in a more simple way, they don't make such a big emotional fuss about it. They integrate it into their lives, they are mostly bisexuals, as well. But there are some who later turn towards this direction. I had a girlfriend who was still married when we started dating, but soon her husband disappeared from the picture, she completely 'joined the other team', and this bothered me. She wasn't the one I wanted any more. For me it would have been better if she hadn't got involved so deeply in the gay world, because... Then we started to get together with the same eight people every week, and the thing narrowed down for me somehow. Of course, I was happy that she had found friends. And for her, this was how this world opened up – quite late, unfortunately. Well, that's all. I went through a lot of changes, for sure. Who knows what will come around? Now I'm living a rather heterosexual life. I can put it like that.

R: And you are fine with this now.

A: I'm fine. Absolutely fine.

R: You mentioned that you're making notes, writing things. What sort of writings are these?

A: Things are written about multiple themes, and one of the writings is about what we are talking about now. I hope that when the work gets in shape or completed, it will be exciting enough. I'm starting to mature and settle down now. I will grow a bit older, put my bottom down, and then I will be able to write more. And perhaps shoot films, as well! A bunch of screen-plays have been swarming in my mind for a long time. Maybe I'll have the backup for it, and then they could move on, too.

R: What kind of films?

A: First of all, I think of exciting ones. I'm not really thinking of documentaries but rather feature films. By the way, my mind works like I make exposures about things, perhaps only as much as a film scene or frame, and it might happen that a whole different story will be born out of it, which usually doesn't resemble its original version. Suddenly an impression comes, just what I needed, and it starts rolling in my mind, and a story is born. It happens that the ambience of a scenery conceives a plan of a scene, and then a film starts to roll on my internal screen. I'm quite a graphomaniac, too, so I've made many kinds of writings in the past few years in various genres, about various topics. Some of them are of a documentarist style, there are poems, essays, and there are some novel directions, as well. Now I'm taking some of my poems to a dear friend of mine. I made this promise to her years ago, and this venerable poetess friend will review them and tell me her opinion, which I'm craving for. There is still a lot work to do with them. Basically, you must have a bottom to sit on for this. No matter that your brain is working if you aren't able to sit still. I'm not

able to sit still too much yet, but I have slowed down. And if I can sit still more, I will be able to write more. I have plenty of experiences, I can talk long, even till morning... Should I stop? Really, I have so much to tell that when I sit down with friends I have to watch out to let others talk, too. Because it's not nice if I'm the only one talking. But now, this topic gave me a chance...



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