

Social Life in the Budapest Cafés in the 1920s and the Farkas Family Line

In 1925, winter arrived early in Budapest. At the end of November the snow fell briskly in large flakes, making the sidewalks slippery. My father and my mother were heading home from the hospital. My father held my mother's arm firmly; walking ahead of them was our young maid with a small bundle in her arms. My father worried that the maid would slip and fall on the frosty pavement, but my mother reassured him, "She's doing just fine." The bundle the maid was carrying was me, and my parents were on their way home from the Baross Street Hospital where I had been born only a few days earlier, on November 26. That's how my life began—with some anxiety on my father's part.

On the day we left the hospital, my parents, perpetually short on money, were unable to afford a cab. They had a tendency to overspend, so they usually ended up taking a streetcar or a bus.

My mother was an artist and a journalist. When she was about twenty years old, she met the preeminent painter Béla Iványi-Grünwald and ended up working as his apprentice, eventually becoming his friend and associate. My mother's creativity was not limited to painting. During a journalistic career spanning two decades she contributed to several daily papers. She was a reporter for *Ujság* (*The News*), and later had regular columns in *Esti Ujság* (*The Evening News*) and *Függetlenség* (*Independence*), writing narratives on everyday topics, humorous anecdotes, or informative commentaries on women's fashion. She covered parliamentary proceedings as a reporter for *Ujság* and her sketches of members of parliament accompanied her



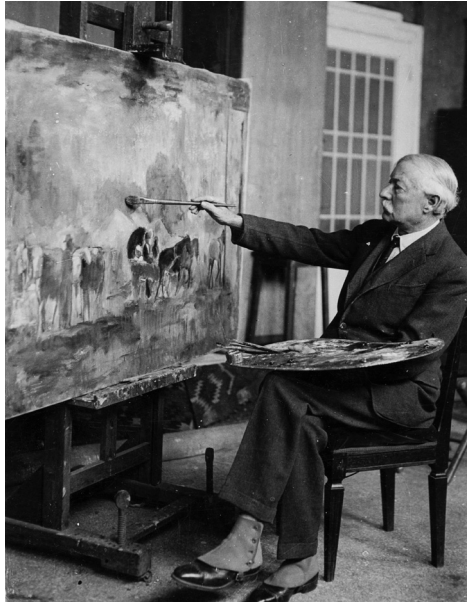
My father and me

articles. Mother had a phenomenal memory, she fought against injustices, and as a proud daughter of a chief justice she never told a lie.

My father was a professional writer and the editor of the Hungarian Radio's flagship magazine, *Rádió Élet* (*Radio Life*).

During their courtship, before I was born, my parents lived a very nocturnal Budapest lifestyle, spending much of it in cafés. Half of Budapest's artists and creative types spent most of their time there. The writers, the painters, the actors had their breakfasts, and their dinners, in coffeehouses. They read the newspapers there and when they couldn't pay the check, borrowed money from the headwaiter. They used each other as sounding boards, cross-fertilizing minds.

Sometime in 1935, Hally Huberman, the Dutch violinist, came to visit my parents and they asked him what attraction he would like to see. He chose the *Café Ostende* because it was there that an orchestra of one hundred fifteen-year-old gypsy boys played violins in bright red uniforms.



Rádió Élet visiting Béla Iványi-Grünwald on December 17, 1928



My mother, Rózsi Dabis, in her studio



Composer Béla Bartók lecturing in the Radio's new studio on January 15, 1934



My parents' wedding photo

Even after my parents got married, they kept frequenting the coffee houses.

They came home late every night, which was an embarrassment to them because they had to wake the concierge up to get in. This cost them an added expense, since he expected to be tipped for this service. One night, after leaving the coffee house, they realized that they had no money for the superintendent to let them in. Along their way on the long walk home, they went into each telephone booth looking for coins that had fallen to the ground through the wooden grates that served as floor mats and separated slush and rainwater from shoes. What most people did not realize was that the grate could be lifted and fallen coins retrieved from under it. Their resourcefulness paid off so well that by the time my parents reached their building they had more than enough coins to tip the concierge.



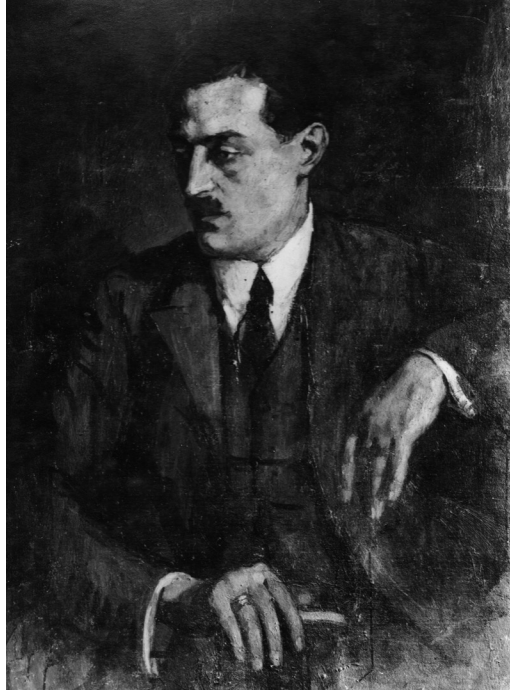
Farkas family, 1926



Portrait of my grandmother, Eveline O'Donnell



Portrait of my mother, Rózsi Dabis (self-portrait)



Portrait of my father, Jenő Farkas

My mother, who wrote a short sketch each week for the daily paper, once asked “Why do people from Pest go to cafés?” in one of her columns. Her answer was:

The stress of life, the noise, the lost connection to nature makes the city dweller touchy and nervous. Some of those urban illnesses, eccentricities, are the spleen and the melancholy mood. From time to time the educated city dweller is captive to gloom. Whether someone becomes a target of this doom is a very individual thing. In a general sense everyone is influenced by the weather. Fewer people go to the theatre in the rain and the jokes of the actors generate less hilarity. If the sky is overcast it is mostly depressing; similarly most people admit that between four and five on a Sunday afternoon they experience attacks of sadness. There are also some who have especially sensitive nervous



My parents at the Budapest International Fair, 1937

systems and whose hearts are anxious for some hardly recognizable reason. Some people are rather sad in the morning, others in the evening. One person feels suffocated in an apartment furnished with tacky items—perhaps just the sight of a kitschy pillowcase or a lattice tablecloth is sufficient—while another experiences mild sorrow when the shadow of a tree is projected onto a yellow wall.

“L’heure bleu,” the blue hour, is in Paris the time of a milk-like foggy blue when people go to the corner of Place Vendôme to chase away their sadness. In London, the five o’clock tea was allegedly invented because the majority of the Brits are downcast in the afternoon and they are able to overcome it at their cozy communal tea times.

Most people in Pest feel their anxiety in the afternoon; thus they grab their hats and head toward the café. A café frequently bears the name of an exotic city or beautiful sea resort. Already at the revolving door the pleasant whiff of the coffee hits one’s nose. When the head waiter notices one’s entrance he will exclaim in a military order: “Filtered café au lait, no whipped cream, to Table Two.” The

illustrated monthlies will rock one into the dream world of unknown territories in this smoke-filled, lukewarm locality.

At times like this, in the cloudy, chilly weather, the café is a sanatorium for the man or woman of Pest.



The first Farkas in the family line that we know of is György, an eighteenth-century landowner in Feldebrő, which is in northeastern Hungary. That's all we know about him; we know more about his son Mihály. Mihály was an attorney, working and living in Huszt and Munkács, towns in northern Hungary and present-day Ukraine, and he was the bailiff of the estate and legal council to Prince Schönborn-Buchheim. Judging from Mihály's correspondence, he had a very busy practice with a large clientele. His wife, born Cecilia Troll, was an attractive young lass.

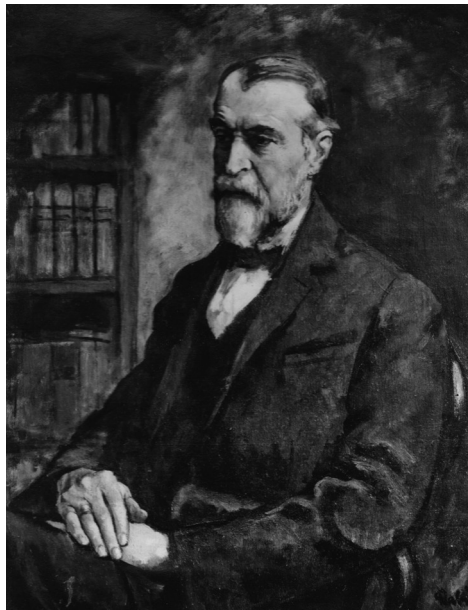


My great-grandfather, Károly Farkas (1805–1868)

Mihály's son, my great-grandfather, was Károly Farkas. A contemporary photo of him (the fashion in those days was to give people you met small photographs that were used like business cards) shows a somewhat balding, round-faced, middle-aged man with a small mustache.

He wears the attire and boots of a Hungarian nobleman, giving an impression more of a gentleman farmer than of the attorney and judge that he was.

But Károly Farkas was in fact also a gentleman farmer. He wrote a number of articles on the economy and during the revolution of 1848–49 he was a member of the new Hungarian parliament, which held its sessions in the town of Debrecen. In March 1848, Lajos Kossuth named Károly Farkas first secretary in the Ministry of Finance, an appointment that lasted one year—as long as Kossuth's government. After the revolution was crushed, he became sub-prefect of the County of Pest, then chief prosecutor of Buda, and served as a judge in several county courts. Károly Farkas's marriage to a noblewoman, Elsa Bakody, produced four children: two girls—Josephine, whom we called Aunt Zefin, and Aliz, who died in early childhood—and two boys. The older



Portrait of my grandfather, Miklós Farkas



My grandmother, Eveline O'Donnell, as a young woman

son was Róbert. The other son was Miklós, my grandfather. Miklós had a commanding appearance and a strong presence. He was tall and thin and, after getting married, sported a well-trimmed beard. He eventually became president of the Land Credit Institute, a position he retained until he retired.

My grandfather married late. He was thirty-eight years old when, according to the family history, he attended a ball where he asked Countess Eveline O'Donnell to dance. They ended up dancing together most of the night, but dancing more than two dances with the same partner was strictly against the unwritten rules. At the end of the night, my grandfather felt that he had compromised the young lady by spending so much time with her; he was thus obliged to ask for her hand in marriage, which he consequently did. If Eveline had

thanked her partner after a couple of rounds of dances and returned to the table where her parents were sitting, this marriage might not have come about. Maybe shrewdness kept Eveline dancing with my grandfather, or simply her ignorance of the breach of etiquette. Wittingly or not, she was in command. My grandfather could not thank her for the dance and escort her back to her table without her explicit request; that would have been interpreted as an insult to the young lady. My Grandmother Eveline was fourteen years younger than her soon-to-be husband, but at twenty-four she qualified as a spinster.

Around the time that I was born, when Grandmother Eveline was about fifty-five years old, she had a serious thyroid operation, after which her doctors suggested that she spend as much time in the countryside as possible. Thus began her life in the country. Her parents had already passed away, leaving her a vineyard at Órszentmiklós, where she now began spending her springs, summers, and falls. She would supervise work in the vineyard, discuss life with the local people, and sell wine to workers returning from the factories at the end of the day. This lifestyle was quite unusual for a countess.

My grandfather was ill at ease in Órszentmiklós, because there were few amenities and no cultural diversions. There was no run-



Prince Charles de Ligne (1766–1814)



My grandparents, Eveline and Miklós, playing chess as I watch

ning water; one had to draw water from a well and carry the pail into the house. The only brick oven was in the yard and it was used for baking big round loaves of bread. The range in the kitchen was fueled by a large pile of vine shoots. Lacking electricity, my grandparents used candles and kerosene lamps (interestingly, called *petróleum lámpa* in Hungarian).



Lounging at Őrszentmiklós: Grandmother Eveline, Grandfather Miklós, my father, and I

The image of Grandfather Miklós with a walking stick is etched in my memory, since he was frequently photographed holding one. Some of these, with their finely carved ebony handles, looked like ordinary walking canes, but in fact contained daggers, stiletos with blades made of the finest Spanish Toledo steel, that could be rapidly unsheathed. In those days, such armaments were a part of a gentleman's attire, just as brass knuckles were in the lower segments of society.

At bedtime, my grandfather would sit by my bedside and ask me which story I wanted to hear. My request would inevitably be for a story about his travels in Italy. One evening he told me about a night at a little tavern by a roadside. Just as he was about to blow out the candle to go to sleep, grandfather took one more glance at a portrait hanging on the wall opposite his bed. Scrutinizing it more closely, he noticed that one of the painting's eyes had a hole in it, through which a real eye was watching him. He suspected that a



Grandfather Miklós with a walking cane sitting on a bench with Grandmother Eveline and my father



My father and Grandmother Eveline

gang of robbers had set a trap for him. He quickly dressed, pushed a chair under the doorknob of the entrance to his room, and sat in front of the painting in an armchair staring into the eyes of the portrait. (In Hungarian, when you look straight on, defiantly at someone, it is called a “wolf stare.” The fact that my grandfather’s name was Farkas, Hungarian for “wolf,” was quite apropos.) All night long, until dawn, he kept this vigil, his revolver on a table at his side. I haven’t the slightest idea whether this farfetched-sounding little story ever really took place, or whether it was only a figment of his imagination for the benefit of my entertainment. Either way, I never tired of hearing it.

My grandfather loved my mother very much, and the feeling was mutual. One summer night, my parents and Grandfather Miklós were sitting on the long vine-covered porch of the house at

Őrszentmiklós. As they were tipping and chatting my grandfather noticed that my mother's wine glass was frequently empty. He was so amused at the speed of my mother's consumption that he secretly nudged my father to keep on refilling her glass. Mother was oblivious to the secret cabal between them, but in spite of it she held her liquor and stayed self-possessed.

A few months before Grandfather died, he had dinner with my parents in the city center, as they often did. As they parted, my parents looked back in amazement at this dashing figure, my grandfather, in his eighty-third year, walking on foot toward his home on Röck Szilárd Street without even the help of his ubiquitous cane.

This cane, while not necessarily functional, served on at least one occasion to make a point. In March 1919, a short-lived communist "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" or "Commune" seized power in Hungary and faced an attempted counterrevolution, which became known as the "Revolution of the Ludovica." It was instigated and organized by the cadets at the Ludovica Military Academy. By this time, my father, who was about twenty-three years old, had been discharged from the army, but as a student and reserve officer he



My father in the trenches on the Russian front during the First World War

was recruited by his former army comrades and other university students to participate in the uprising. Ultimately, their uprising was crushed and those arrested, including my father, were called before a Bolshevik revolutionary court.

Following his military trial, my father disappeared. His parents checked all the prisons of the capital to no avail. In desperation they presented themselves at the headquarters of Ottó Korvin, the head commissar, to get information on their son's whereabouts. Somehow, they succeeded in getting in to see the commissar himself. Korvin must have tried to make up some excuse to cut the visit short, whereupon my grandfather slammed his walking cane down on the commissar's desk, which was an incredible, if not an insanely mad, insult to the commissar. My grandfather got away with it, although he failed to learn where his son was.

My father was in prison in Vác, awaiting his execution. One of the prison guards had in fact already showed him which of the gallows in the courtyard would be his: "The third gallow in that row is yours, Farkas."

Thanks to the intervention of Italian Colonel Guido Romanelli, a member of the Allied military mission, the Communist Commissariat cancelled the execution of my father and of the other prisoners. By the time the train returned with my father from Vác to Budapest, the Romanian army had occupied the city. The Reds had been beaten by the Romanians, and that was the end of the 1919 communist regime.

On his way home to Pál Street, my father ran into his good friend Ottó Tábornszky. By the time my grandparents came home from their futile search for their son, they found the two friends seated at the dining room table. Standing empty before them was a long line of fruit compote jars, the only edible items in the whole apartment.



The life of a child is full of mysteries and misconceptions. One of mine involved a mythical character "Quasi." I kept hearing Quasi this or Quasi that. During heated disputes in the Farkas family sentences would often start with "Quasi." "Quasi insinuated that I lied." "Quasi pretended that he couldn't hear me." From these statements my mind conjured a mythic personality, one who constantly interfered with the life and the peace of my family. It was a great relief



My father, in uniform, with his mother, Eveline O'Donnell

when I learned that this Quasi was just a Latin expression meaning “as if,” “as it were,” or “just as,” and was used in hypothetical comparisons.

In another instance, when I was six or seven years old I was reading Gyula Pekár’s book about the history of Hungary, specifically about the death of King András II, when I came upon an illustration of the king lying on his deathbed. Below it was an inscription that read: “King András returned his spirit to the Lord.” This sentence gave me considerable consternation: Why did King András return his spirit, what was this “spirit” that he returned, and who was this mysterious Lord?



My mother’s grandfather Károly Ecker lived in Kőszeg, next to the Catholic church. One part of the house was occupied by his hardware

store and its enormous basement served as the store's stockroom. My great-grandfather would go on various business trips, on one occasion venturing as far as the United States to procure items for his store. Among the objects he returned with was a Smith & Wesson six-shooter that I inherited in my early teens. I cherished this revolver, especially for the carved notches in its handle.

Of course, most of the time Great-Grandfather Károly's business trips were more local in nature, primarily to Austria. He was still single when once, on his way back from Austria, he ran into a blizzard. With visibility close to zero and the road impassable, he sought refuge in a mill. The miller helped him tow in his sled and put his horses in a stable. He was invited to join the family for dinner. At the table he met Anna Kindl, the sixteen year-old daughter of the miller. After dinner, the family gave lodging to their weary traveler. The following morning, after the storm had passed, he thanked his



My mother and I on the Castle promenade

host for the shelter and the hospitality—which had been generous, for leaving with him on his sleigh was Anna, the miller’s daughter. The couple arrived in Kőszeg at noon and went directly to the parish priest, who performed the marriage ceremony immediately, despite the canonic requirement for three marriage ban announcements. This prerequisite, which should have taken place over three consecutive weeks, is intended to give an opportunity for outside objection or decrying of relevant information about prospective spouses.

Anna Kindl, now Mrs. Károly Ecker, gave birth to two children, one of whom was my Grandmother Róza. Kőszeg is a small Hungarian town on the Austrian border that stays cool even in the summer, likely due to its proximity to the Austrian Alps. Kőszeg serves as a transition between Austria and Hungary—in its flora and fauna, its architecture, and its populace. I have a vivid recollection of one summer vacation there with Grandmother Róza when I was five years old. Grandmother would take me down to the town swimming pool in the wee hours of the morning when the water was still so cold that not a soul was around. It made me miserable.

On one of my visits to Kőszeg, Grandmother Róza took me to a nearby forest where a unique tree and its setting had become a tourist attraction. The tree’s trunk was so enormous that it took about twenty adults to form a chain around it. The surrounding ground was covered with wild strawberries and colorful cyclamens. We gathered some strawberries and in the woods we searched for various edible mushrooms. On our way back, we passed small fords and rivulets that ran between the hillsides.

I have very little recollection of my grandfather Antal Dabis, aside from the fact that he had a mustache, like most men in those days. At mealtimes a glass of water was always at his side. He drank it at the end of his meal, and it served him well as a mouth rinse. When I was five years old, Grandfather Antal had a gallbladder operation. I saw a small jar containing his gallstones; they were all yellow and the size of hazelnuts. Shortly after that operation, he passed away. The greasy diet back then made some people walking gallstone factories.

My parents and I once took a journey to Zebegény and Dömös, two small villages nestled just before the bend in the Danube. Zebegény is on the northern shore while Dömös is on its southern side. At Zebegény we visited Baroness Vilmos Dőry, whose maiden name

was Elizabeth Karácsonyi and whom we referred to as Aunt Erzsi. Her villa in Zebegény had its own story.

After Aunt Erzsi became a widow, she took to traveling. On one of her jaunts on the Danube, as she was returning from Austria on a steam cruiser and delighting in the scenery, she noticed a unique bend into a horseshoe-like projection in the river at the point where Nagymaros and then Zebegény came into her sight. She made a mental note of a spot on a hill that she deemed the most romantic. Afterward she went to the village of Zebegény and had a villa built on the land she had selected.

I was about eight years old when we visited Aunt Erzsi. From Aunt Erzsi's villa a steep path led down to the shores of the Danube. After lunch my father's cousin Julia Aggházy and I descended the steep slope. From the shore, we were able to see a group of people camping Indian-style on a small island. These people called themselves the Indians on the Hungarian Danube. Their organizer was Ervin Baktay, a writer along the lines of Paul Brunton. Baktay wrote about Tibet, India, astrology, and the mysticism of the Far East. The small group of nature lovers surrounding him would spend their vacations together on this little island playing Indians. They wore moccasins and feathered headwear and rode in canoes.

Around the age of seven or so, I became hooked on stories about North American Indians. I was eight years old when I stepped into the wondrous world of Karl May, whose books sold over seventy million copies in twenty-two languages. He wrote of the most incredible adventures of the North American Indians in the wilderness, including an Indian chief called "Winnetou." In Zebegény, I couldn't help but think of those Indian stories I had been reading about. I was thrilled by the sight of the war-painted natives in their canoes.