



# **Popják György: The Autobiography of George Joseph Popják**

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Minden jog fenntartva!

# ORIGINS:

I was born on 5 May 1914 in Kiskundorozsma, only a few miles from the second largest city, Szeged, in Hungary. My father, also a George, a civil engineer, a graduate of the Technical University in Budapest (Műegyetem), was then the municipal engineer of Kiskundorozsma. My mother, née Maria Mayer, was an elementary school teacher. My paternal grandfather (also George) was a prosperous builder and architect. He designed and built the Lutheran "New Church" in Szarvas, where in the cemetery his tombstone, a miniature Cleopatra's needle, is still standing.

I knew very little of my maternal grandparents as I never met them. Grandfather Mayer was the chief bailiff to Count Pallavicini, one of the richest landowners in Hungary. My mother was the third of his five children by his first marriage. His wife died when my mother was nine years old and, because he was soon to remarry, his children were scattered among relatives. So it came that my mother was brought up and educated by one of her uncles, József Várhelyi, a Catholic priest, who in time became an apostolic prelate and titular bishop and a very influential man in Szeged and the Catholic hierarchy in Hungary.

To me, he became Uncle Józsi (Józsi bácsi), translated into English, just Uncle Joe. I mention him here because not only was he my mother's mentor, but also because he was to play an important role in my mother's and my life during my teens.

I always regarded myself as Hungarian, though like many others born in the Danubian valley -- I am of a mixed ancestry. The Popjaks were Slovaks from the region near Bratislava, the former Hungarian city of Pozsony.

Our name originally was spelt without an accent on the "a" and means in Slovak "a strong priest". The change of a to á (aah) was made in the birth certificate of my grandfather, no doubt by a Hungarian registrar because the sounds of "o" and "a" in any word are incompatible in the Hungarian language. There is no sound in English equivalent to the Hungarian "a"; "o" and "á" are all right. It is probable that one of our ancestors was a priest from the period of the reformation. This is borne out by the fact that the Popjaks were Lutherans. I am the exception because my father, to marry a Roman Catholic, had to give an affidavit that all his children will be brought up in the Catholic faith. In addition to the Slovak ancestry, I can also add Hungarian, Tyrolian, Polish, and Croatian among my ancestors.

This mixed ancestry led to an embarrassing moment in 1949 when, in London, I applied for a visitor's visa to the USA. On the form that I had to fill out, I left the entry "Your ethnic group" blank. The lady who scrutinized my application kept on repeating "What is your ethnic group?" and finally in exasperation "Well, what are you, Sir?" In my mind, I quickly went through my ancestry and I gave her my answer "I am a mongrel." The lady blushed and said: "Oh, Sir, what was your father?" and I replied "He was a mongrel too." At last, she laughed and asked me to explain; I did. By her summing up she decided that I was a "Slav" and that was how she completed my application form. Yet, I am a Hungarian, just as anybody born in the USA is an American.

I was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, but it was only in my teens at the gymnasium that I received teachings of the Catholic church, although my mother taught me the elements of the catechism. The translation into a Catholic environment was at first bewildering. I was nearly eleven years old and I have not yet been to a confession nor to communion. By the dicta of the Catholic church everyone should make confession at least once a year during Lent and partake of communion before Easter. The

priests of the gymnasium took very good care that all the (Catholic) boys conformed to the rule.

During Lent, we had spiritual retreats which ended with a great litany at which one of the priests (usually the eldest) chanted in higher and higher cadence "Peccavimus, injuste aegimus, aniquitatem facimus, miserere nobis", to which we responded similarly. After the litany, the classrooms became the confessionals and we lined up at the door of any one of our favoured (or dreaded) father confessors. To make sure that all of us confessed, we had to leave our name and class number on a piece of folded paper in a box at the foot of the father. These "ballot papers" were carefully counted and woe to anyone who dared not attend.

# CHILDHOOD:

My childhood was far from the ordinary. When, after the first World War, the Versailles Treaty (the Trianon Treaty for Hungary) was signed, we lived in a village, Vajsika, in Bácska (now Vojvodina), which became part of Yugoslavia. At that time I was already in elementary school and could read and write in Hungarian. However, by the dictates of the Versailles Treaty, only those minority children whose father and mother bore Hungarian names were allowed to continue in Hungarian schools. (This law is reminiscent of present-day Quebec). As my father's name was Slovak and my mother's German (Mayer), I was compelled to move into a Serbish school. Suddenly I found myself surrounded by kids whose words I did not understand, nor did I know the Cyrillic alphabet either. She consoled me: "Do not worry, we will learn it together."

Not that it would have mattered much to be allowed to stay in a Hungarian school beyond a few months, as we moved soon (end of 1920 or early 1921) into Serbia where, of course, there were no Hungarian schools. In our peregrinations through Yugoslavia, the first stop was Pristina in Kosovo, where I was sent to the first Serbish school.

In less than a year I learnt to speak Serbish and to write using the Cyrillic alphabet. Of course, it was essential for all of us to learn Serbish and to read and write using the Cyrillic alphabet, particularly for my father who was looking for jobs as an engineer. There was no point in trying to get back to Hungary (what remained of it) as jobs for engineers were scarce; the best that men with a diploma from the Budapest Technical University

(Műegyetem), that my father could hope for, was to drive streetcars. My paternal grandfather, who was a wealthy man, died in 1918 and his fortune evaporated in war bonds and in the horrendous inflation after the war.

My father must have learnt Serbish very quickly as by the end of 1921 he headed a road-building engineering group in deep Serbia ( in Pristina, Kosovo Polje) then the following year we moved to Kragujevac where my father had a major undertaking in rebuilding the main road running through the town. Our fortunes turned to the better in Kragujevac as compared to the rather primitive existence in Pristina, where we did not have much furniture and slept on mattresses on the floor, though we had a live-in servant called Djoko. Existence in Pristina was somewhat precarious as we (like the population as a whole) lived in constant fear of guerrillas (called the Kacak) who would descend from time to time from the mountains and ransack the town. My father had a loaded military rifle beside him every night.