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The Life and Work of My Father: Géza de Kresz (1882-1959)

Mária Kresz

Editor's note: One of the outstanding personalities of Hungarian-Canadian society in the interwar and post-World War II years was Géza de Kresz, the internationally known violinist and music teacher. In this essay Mária Kresz, his daughter, recalls the activities of Géza de Kresz in Canada and Hungary. This article is reprinted, with minor changes, from Géza de Kresz, *Thoughts on Violin Teaching* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba, 1969) pp. 75-9. The editors intend to feature the lives of other outstanding Hungarian Canadian personalities in future issues of the *Review*.

The life and work of my father Géza de Kresz, the famous Hungarian violinist, spanned two continents, Europe and North America. He was born on June 11, 1882, in Budapest, the eldest son of Dr. Géza de Kresz, founder and first director of the Budapest Ambulance Association, who together with his wife, was responsible for creating a love of music and the arts within the family.

Géza de Kresz's masters were Károly Gobbi, Frigyes Arányi and Jenő Hubay, who taught at the National Conservatory where he received his diploma in 1900. He continued his studies in Prague with Otakar Ševčik, receiving a diploma there in 1902. From autumn 1902 to 1905 he studied in Belgium with the great violinist, Eugène Ysaÿe, both in Brussels and in Godinne-sur-Meuse. As he wrote later:

> Quartet playing was our evening recreation after the morning lessons and the tennis or rowing matches of the afternoon. (I still possess a snapshot of Ysaÿe and Kreisler handling the oars together with the same rhythmical energy with which they used their bows in the Bach Double Concerto).

During this period de Kresz also studied composition in Paris with Theo Ysaÿe (pupil of César Franck) and with Albert Lavignac at the Conservatoire, playing chamber music with Jacques Thibaud, Pugno and Gérardy. On the occasion of his debut in 1906 in Vienna in the Grosser Musikverein Sall, it was his master, Eugène Ysaÿe, who was the orchestra conductor. His initial success was followed by concert tours in many countries besides Hungary — Belgium, England, Germany and Austria. In the summer of 1907 he was soloist and first concertmaster of Ostende, Belgium. From 1907 to 1909 he was first concertmaster of the newly founded Tonkünstler Orchestra in Vienna, playing with such gifted musicians as Hans Pfitzner, Bernhard Stavenhagen and Oskar Nedbal. In 1909 he accepted a position in Bucharest, Roumania, as leader of the Carmen Sylva String Quartet at the Royal Court and as professor of violin at the Conservatory, posts which gave him sufficient freedom to continue his concert tours in various countries.

In 1915 de Kresz moved to Berlin where he became well-known as a concert artist. From 1917 he was first concertmaster and soloist of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra at the invitation of Arthur Nikisch, who was also of Hungarian origin. In Berlin he played the great classic violin concertos a dozen times a year, and was invited to give similar concerts elsewhere in Germany, and also in Sweden, Poland, Belgium and England. Besides this, he was teaching at the Stern'sches Conservatory of Berlin and often played chamber music trios with Bronislaw Hubermann and Gregor Piatigorsky, also at times with Schnabel, Carl Flesch and Ernő Dohnányi. In 1918 he married the well-known English pianist Norah Drewett, with whom he was to give many recitals over the years.

In 1923 Géza de Kresz moved to Toronto with his wife and two daughters at the invitation of Boris Hambourg, a friend from his student days, to teach and play; "The new world, the old friend and our British sympathies were equally strong incentives." In 1924 he became leader of the Hart House String Quartet, founded under the auspices of the University of Toronto by Vincent Massey. With Harry Adaskin as second violin, Milton Blackstone viola, and Boris Hambourg cello, the Hart House Quartet developed into one of the leading string quartets on the American continent and contributed significantly to musical life across Canada. During the eleven years that Géza de Kresz

was leader, besides subscription concerts in Toronto, Montréal, New York and Buffalo, almost every year the Quartet made a transcontinental tour giving from 70 to 80 concerts as well as rehearsals in universities and colleges. In Toronto the Quartet gave some one hundred and twenty concerts; and in New York some thirty-two. The Quartet toured Europe and England. It was the Hart House Quartet that was chosen to introduce a new work by Ravel in New York.

During the first years spent in Canada, the Quartet spent the summers practising in the Masseys' lovely old country home near Newcastle, Ontario. Thereafter Géza de Kresz travelled to Europe every summer to visit his native country and to give concerts in England, France and Germany. In 1929 and 1930 he taught summer school in Vienna, and in 1932-33 in Salzburg at the Mozarteum.

The promotion of Hungarian music was always most important for Géza de Kresz. Many Hungarian composers — Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály, Leo Weiner, György Kósa, Ernő Dohnányi, Jenő Hubay, Miklós Radnai — had certain works first performed by the Hart House Quartet, such as Bartók's first quartet.

In 1935 de Kresz was invited by Dohnányi, the Director, to join the Music Academy of Budapest, as professor of violin, after having been away from his country for over three decades. In 1941 he was elected Director of the National Conservatory, his former school; and there, under its auspices, he organized a Musical High School. In a memorandum entitled *Bach and Horace* he explored the theoretical problems of a music school at such a level and the need to combine general classical education with musical tuition.

Géza de Kresz was also distinguished as a leader of chamber music orchestras. In Toronto during the 1930s he organized and conducted the so-called "Little Symphony," a series of concerts with a chamber-orchestra conducted by him in the Eaton Auditorium. This aspect of his activities was continued in Budapest, when from 1937 to 1943 he organized the "Museum Matinée" series, these being concerts held in the National Museum with the aim of popularizing forgotten pieces of baroque music and other musical rareties.

During these years the family spent the summers in our beautiful country house, in the village of Kápolnásnyék, (the

birthplace of the great Hungarian poet Mihály Vörösmarty) not far from Budapest. Here Géza de Kresz and his wife Norah Drewett played and taught pupils, some of whom came from Canada. Géza de Kresz liked practising early in the morning in his room looking south over a valley. And it was while practising here that he made the discovery which is formulated in this book: namely, that there is a contradiction between the natural ease with which the great masters play the violin and the rigid rules of pedagogy. This discovery came as a revelation to him and led to a new phase in his own art. He made use of it in his teaching, at the National Conservatory, where his course on violin-pedagogy first incorporated these ideas. In the Hungarian notes on violin-pedagogy he gives an account of his experiences.

> How did I make the discovery? In spite of a very minute position — today I know that it was partly in consequence of that — I was aware of a certain handicap in the movement of the fingers and in shifting. If however I let my fingers move playfully — as we violinists sometime do — on my other hand or my trousers, the handicapped courses rolled with greatest ease. This I found somewhat incomprehensible. First I thought that it is naturally easier to let the fingers move in the air without pressing the strings, without the responsibility of making sounds, than to play the instrument in reality. But what made me think more deeply about it was that I discovered that in certain seconds of organization, when the handicap of the left hand is reduced to the minimum and the looseness is almost as great as without the violin, then a certain difference can be noticed from the minute "position." This deduction and the observations of a few excellent violinists — Kreisler, and especially the Russians such as Heifetz — led me to the solution of the riddle.

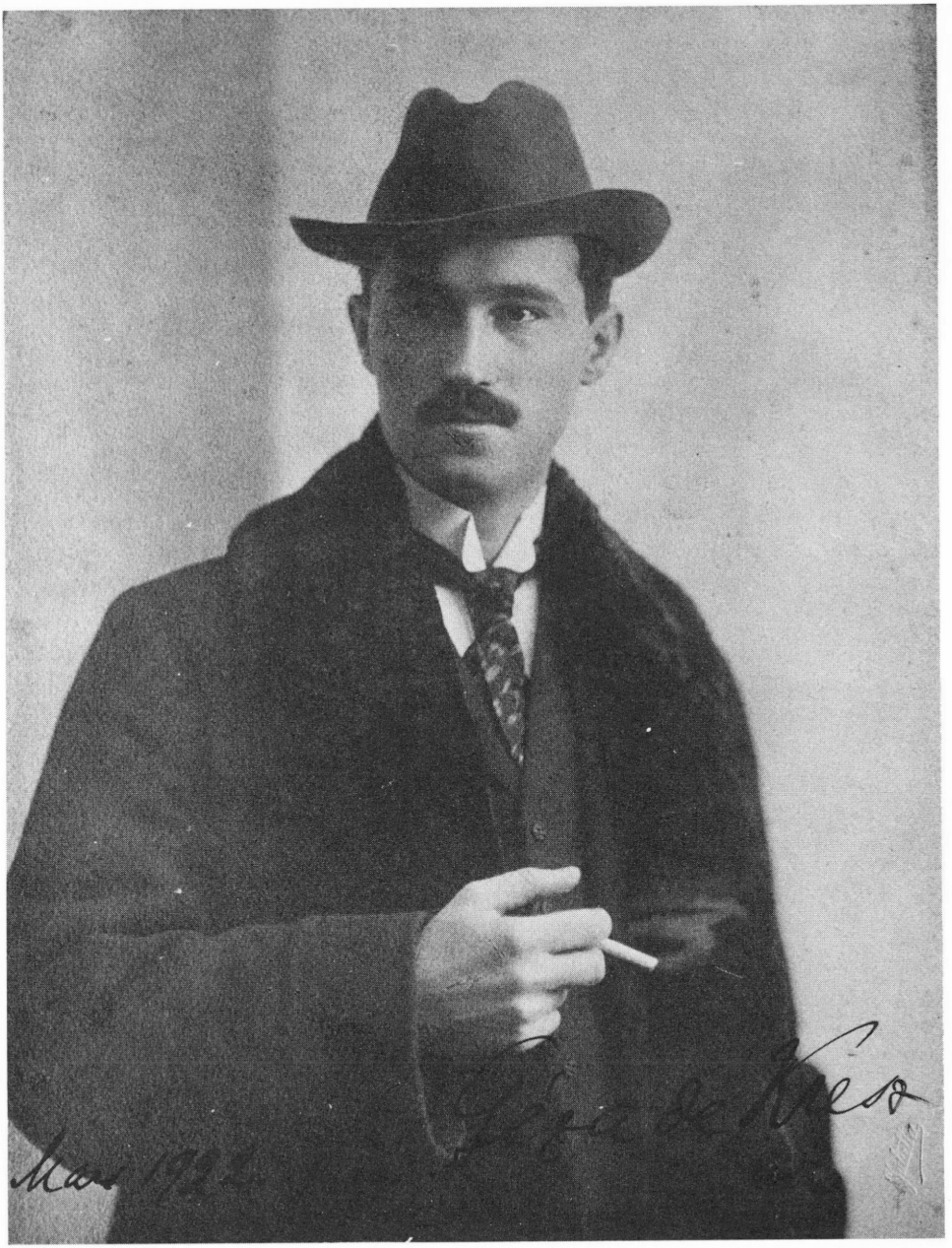
In 1947, after the end of the war, a new opportunity for concert tours was offered in Canada, his second home, where his music was well-known and appreciated. The sonata evenings given with his wife Nora Drewett brought such success that then, at the age of sixty, a new phase began in his life as an artist. At the same time his teaching resumed and he could incorporate his ideas on violin pedagogy; a course was announced at the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto and the first lecture was delivered on January 21st, 1948. The course con-

sisted of sixteen lectures, the first of which appeared in mimeograph form. He also taught summer sessions at Bloomington, Indiana, which imposed a strain on his health.

After a nine-year period of concerts and teaching, his last appearance was at a concert given in Toronto in 1956 in memory of Béla Bartók. Shortly after, Géza de Kresz was struck down by illness which lamed his body and deprived his hands of his beloved instrument, the violin made by Petrus Guarnerius in 1710 in honour of St. Theresa. Though he did not regain his physical strength, his strength of will conquered his illness as he then embarked upon literary work. He elaborated his lecture notes on violin pedagogy, which forms the book, *Thoughts on Violin Teaching* (University of Manitoba, 1969).

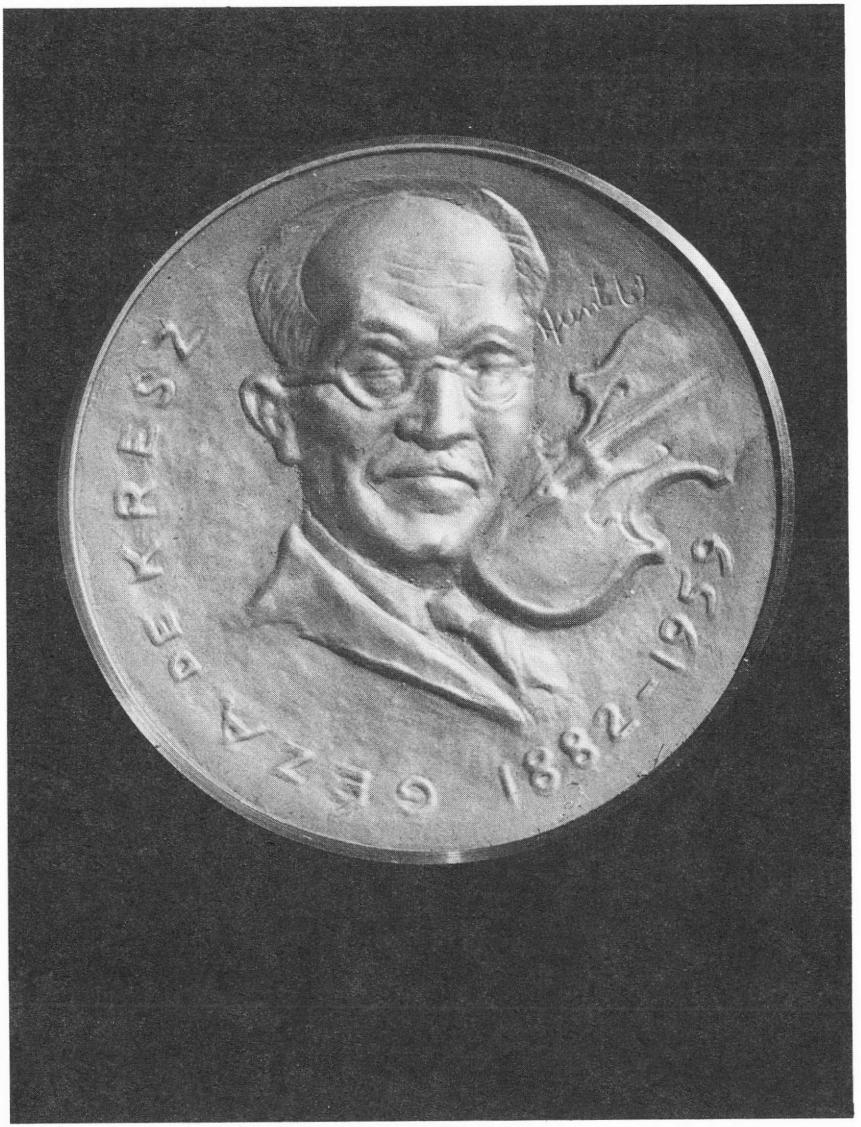
Géza de Kresz regarded himself as the continuer of the Joachim-Ysaÿe violin school and set down the theory of this school in his work, a theory of entirely novel ideas. The day he finished the manuscript he suffered a relapse and his health continued to worsen. On October 2nd, 1959, at the age of 77, after long and patiently endured sufferings — his substantial life ended. His last hours were spent at a Hungarian concert held in Massey Hall, Toronto, with Antal Doráti conducting the Philharmonica Hungarica Orchestra during which he was publicly commemorated by Hungarians and Canadians. It was a life during which he had educated thousands to love music and understand it more deeply.

His wife and musical partner Norah Drewett lived but a few months longer and passed away in Budapest on April 24, 1960. She is buried in Kápolnásnyék, close to the Vörösmarty House where so many happy times were spent.



Géza de Kresz

Géza de Kresz with his wife Norah Drewett



Commemorative medal by Dora Pedery-Hunt

The Hart House String Quartet (*L-R*): *Milton Blackstone* (*viola*), *Harry Adaskin* (*2nd violin*), *Boris Hambourg* (*violoncello*), *Géza de Kresz* (*1st violin*). (*1928*)