

MY AUNT KATHERINE

My father András, or Andrew in America, was the sixth of nine children, born 1912. His elder sister, Katalin, nicknamed Katus (pronounced Katush), Katherine in America, was the second in that line-up, born 1906. She was 8 in 1914 when World War I broke out, her father conscripted into the military, forcing him to leave his family behind, coming home on leave as often as he could.

In 1918, when Katherine was 12 and her father was still away at war, the Spanish flu came calling, turning into a worldwide epidemic. The only person who did not get sick in the family was her mother. Katherine was not as affected as the rest of her brothers and sisters and was able to help her mother care for her many siblings. Luckily, no one died.

When her father finally did get home, he was racked with guilt over having survived, without a scratch, when so many of his comrades, some standing right next to him, were killed. He felt God saved him. In return, he became an observant, orthodox Jew, making sure that all six of his sons were bar mitzvahed and arranging for their college educations. Unfortunately, only the eldest, Imre, completed his undergraduate degree, then going on to earn a Ph.D.

While the plans for education focused on the boys, no such plans were made for the three girls of the family. With so many mouths to feed, Katherine decided that she had to make her own way in the world. When she was 16, in 1922, she left the family, moving to Vienna.

It was a heady time. She had an entrée into Jewish society and met the founder of psychoanalysis, *Sigmund Freud*, and his family. She became a close friend of his daughter, *Anna Freud*, and spent a good amount of time hobnobbing with the intelligentsia of Vienna. She gained an introduction into the Montessori educational system, an alternative to formal teaching methods, which involves children's natural interests and activities. This method uses a hands-on approach to learning, focusing on the individual child's abilities as opposed to a structured classroom, as well as the use of social interaction. She trained as an instructor, graduated, and became a kindergarten teacher in a Montessori school in Vienna. Through that avenue, she met a family with twin

daughters, who hired her as their governess. Around 1935 she fell in love and got married. She decided to dedicate her life to childhood education, but not to have children herself. She periodically went home to visit her family in Hungary, but her life was now in Vienna, firmly rooted there by her husband, closely bonded friendships, and work.

Then came Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, the “Night of Broken Glass,” the government sponsored riots against the Jews. About 100 individuals were murdered that night, among them my aunt’s husband. She was not only devastated, having lost the love of her life, but terrified. The happy Vienna which had been her home for over a decade was now an inhospitable war zone against Jews. Her name was on a roster for arrest, she surmised because her husband had been among the murdered, forcing her into hiding. Through her contacts in the Montessori world, she was put together with the Albanian King, who needed a governess for his son. She was secreted out of the city and made her way to Albania.

She had never met a king, much less lived in a castle or palace, so was looking forward to what we usually think of when hearing of such grand surroundings. However, she was deeply disappointed upon her arrival at the royal palace, which was nothing more than a poverty stricken, run-down, estate. In order to get in the front door, she had to run through a gauntlet of farm animals, from cows to horses to pigs to chickens. She feared the geese the most. She took up her duties, and everything was okay until the King was deposed and the family was forced to flee.

The family chauffeur, Loro, was a Catholic Albanian man. He drove the royal family, with Katherine in the car, out of Albania in the dead of night, no head lights, finally reaching Turkey. There, the royal family abandoned her. She was alone in a new city, country, language, and culture. Loro was a few years younger and smitten by the governess. He offered to marry her, giving her some security in these new surroundings, but he insisted she convert to Catholicism. Although this union would not be the love match of her first marriage, he offered safety and protection, so she agreed, converted, and they were married.

In Istanbul, she gained employment again as a governess and Montessori teacher, and the two of them sat out the rest of the War there. When it ended, Katherine was finally able to find out what happened to her family.

She learned that her father Béla was murdered on the streets of Győr behind the Great Temple by his neighbors, beaten to death. Her mother Piroska and youngest sister Judit were transported to Auschwitz, where her mother was murdered upon arrival. Her two sisters, Zsuzsa and Judit, both survived Auschwitz. However, Judit was a Mengele victim, sterilized in the inhumane, torturous, human experiments. Her brother Gyuri survived hiding in the cellar of their parents' apartment building. His young daughter Csipet (pronounced Chipet) survived hidden in the Esztergom Monastery. Two of her brothers, László and Gusztáv, were murdered in Mauthausen, László leaving behind a wife who grieved for him until her death, nearly fifty years later. Her eldest brother Imre, with his wife Teréza and two young sons, found refuge in Asia, seeking a way in to Palestine. There was no word of my father András or his younger brother István at that time. However, both survived, returning to Hungary after they were released from Russian gulags in 1946.

Katherine was 39 by then and devastated. She decided to have a child in memory of her family, giving birth to my cousin Joseph, nicknamed "Joe" in English and known as "Zefi" within the family, in 1946. But with the knowledge of what happened to her family, she was repulsed by Europe and applied to immigrate to America. The All Souls Catholic Church in Alhambra, California offered to sponsor them, and they sailed in 1948. After that trip she refused to ever set foot on a ship or boat again. However, she told me that stepping on American soil was when she felt she took her first real breath of freedom.

My uncle got a job as a mechanic and my aunt secured a position as a Montessori governess. She changed careers to earn a better living, training to become a nurse, getting her license, and then was hired by the Huntington Hospital in Pasadena. My cousin was raised in the Catholic Church and attended Catholic parochial school. While he knew of my aunt's Jewish roots, he also knew to never say a word about that outside of their home, that it was a secret that had to stay within their small family. And there they were, in Alhambra, California, in the serenity of the 1950's, when the 1956 Hungarian Uprising changed the course of both our family's lives.

Katherine was worried that Joseph would end up alone, without the support of extended family should he need it, since he was an only child with no relatives in America. When the Hungarian Uprising failed, a warrant was issued for my father's arrest because he had been thrown out of the communist party. This forced my family to escape Hungary. Katherine was elated, seeing an avenue of creating that extended family security she sought

for Joe. She moved heaven and earth, bulldozing her way through every bureaucracy, succeeding in getting us temporary refugee visas to America.

Joe was not as enthusiastic. He was a happy only child, whose life was suddenly invaded by four strangers. Not only was he forced to share his bedroom with my brother, he had to deal with an annoying aunt and uncle who did not speak English, and an even more bothersome baby girl who was traumatized, sickly and cried a lot. This was not his idea of a good time at all and he acted out his displeasure.

To earn money, my mother took in laundry and ironing. She had been an important secretary in Hungary. Although she felt humiliated because this was all she was qualified for in America, with no other options, she worked hard, hour after hour, washing and ironing, hanging up all the ironed shirts outside on hangers on the clothesline, which Joe then cut, all the shirts falling into the dirt. When his father came home from work and saw what Joe had done, he was outraged and dragged the boy into the garage, where he took off his belt and whipped him. They had a German Shephard named Mikey who went crazy hearing the shouting, screaming and crying. My mom and Katherine rewashed and ironed all the shirts, and there were no repeat performances of that escapade, but that was just one incident among many.

My mother was unable to deal with Joe's 10-year-old childish hate of our being in their home, of his glowering at us, or of Loro's physical threats and actions towards Joe for his conduct, which then just further fueled Joe's angry attitude towards us. My mother also felt that Katherine was interfering with her as a parent to her children. I was a developmentally delayed child because I had been a sickly baby, who was then injured by shrapnel in an explosion during the Uprising. I learned to walk and speak late, and I was very fearful, especially afraid of any kind of loud noise, which could send me shrieking under the table hiding with the dog, or sobbing under my mother's skirts. The two boys found this hilarious, using every opportunity, when no one was looking, to make a bang. My aunt felt I should just buck up, while my mother felt my brother would never do these things to me were it not for my cousin's prompting. Within three months, the turmoil just became too much for her, so she went out, found us a one-bedroom apartment, and we moved out. Katherine, fifteen years my mother's senior, was furious with my mother for defying her at every level, from finances to child rearing. However, in the end, I think everyone was relieved once we moved out, even Katherine.

Katherine's biggest worry with our arrival was to make sure that no one find out we are Jewish. To that end, a conspiracy of silence enveloped my family so that the youngest, me, should never know and give us away. However, when I was around ten, while visiting them, Katherine asked me to get the mail and I found a letter from Israel. When I asked who she knew in Israel, she told me her brother and the secret was out. My parents were terrified that we could be deported because of the lie on our visa applications claiming we are Catholic, and so they swore me to secrecy, a promise I kept until I was in university at UCLA. My father never forgave my "coming out."

If Katherine thought bringing us here would create one happy, extended family, she was sorely disappointed. Growing up, my brother and Joe never really got along, Joe being athletic, my brother not so much. As the much younger little girl, I was just a nuisance. And from the beginning, my mother and Katherine did not see eye to eye. They often argued heatedly, leaving behind a lot of hurt and hardened feelings, leading to years of them refusing to speak to one another.

As adults, my brother Peter, my cousin Joe and I did become that extended family Katherine so much wanted to create. Joe grew up to be a very handsome, kind, fun and caring adult. However, my mother refused to forgive his behavior towards us as a child, sometimes ranting on and on about all his childhood misdeeds, especially towards me, just so I would carry a grudge like she did. That I did not was yet another point of contention between us. More importantly, Katherine and my mother could never get over the hump of the damage in the relationship of those earlier years, and they remained estranged. After Loro and my father's deaths, I was the one who traveled between the two widows, doing their shopping, taking them to appointments, and seeing them separately at least once a week.

Joe died in 1994 of AIDS. Peter and my heartbreak could not compare to Katherine's devastation. No longer wanting to live where she had raised her family, she decided that her home was going to be with Joe's partner, Jim's family, and moved to Eugene, Oregon to be near them. I would speak to her on the phone at least once a week and fly up to see her several times a year, sometimes alone, sometimes with my young daughter, and sometimes with my family. She was always so glad to see me, with both of us enjoying the time spent together, which was why it was such a shock when I saw her Shoah Foundation testimony after her death. In the video,

she speaks at length of Jim's family, but does not mention us, the family she brought to America in 1957; not my father who was her brother, not her nephew my brother, not me her niece, not my daughter, Katelyn, her namesake. After never abandoning her, even though that left us open to my mother accusing us of being disloyal to her, which maybe we were, watching that video felt like a final, gut-punching, insult.

Nothing with families is uncomplicated. While we do the right thing on the one hand, the pain we inflict with the other lasts a lifetime. I am forever grateful to my Aunt for bringing us to America, creating the opportunities and lifestyle that would have been unimaginable had we remained in Europe. As a child I feared her, but as an adult I learned to deeply love and respect her. At the same time, she leaves behind a painful legacy, one that added yet another layer of emotional damage to my mother. And her demand that we deny and hide who we are, our being Jewish, creating the life of silence in which I grew up, leaves me struggling, even now, to learn, understand, and come to terms with my own, personal history.