

## 1936

My father was born in 1912 in the small city of Győr, Hungary, situated on the border of Austria. He was the sixth of nine children, six boys and three girls. They were a poor, Jewish family, so as soon as the kids were old enough, they left to find their own way in the world. His eldest brother immigrated to Italy and married. His eldest sister found a new home in Vienna, where she was hobnobbing with the intelligentsia of that era.

By 1936, he had finished his required military service. As a Jew, he could only serve in support positions, so his job was taking care of the horses. For the rest of his life he hated horses, he couldn't even bring himself to watch Mr. Ed.

After his military service was done, he had the opportunity to emigrate. Living in Hungary, the rumblings of Germany seemed far away, so he and a friend decided to take a look for themselves by going to the Berlin Olympics. It was exciting, two young men, in the middle of a huge party. From the crowd, they watched the country's leader make speeches, and they thought he was crazy. They laughed at his antics, at his lack of substance, at how nothing he said made any sense, at his constant screaming, and how much he reminded them of a possessed Charlie Chaplin. When they went home, they felt good about their choice of staying in Hungary, near their families and friends.

As time progressed, my father fell in love and got engaged, but world events intervened on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939, when Germany attacked Poland, starting World War II. After that, all the doors closed and emigration was no longer a possibility. Instead, Jews were immigrating to Hungary for safety, so my father and his family felt that they were going to be okay and went about their lives.

He and his fiancé started arranging their wedding when disaster struck. My father and two of his brothers were called into the slave labor brigades that accompanied the Hungarian battalions. His older brother was married with a daughter. He took his little girl to a monastery where the monks were hiding Jewish children, leaving her there alone, and then went into hiding separately. My father and his younger brother decided they had to report for Jewish slave service because if no one showed up, the family would be arrested. He and his fiancé kissed good-bye. Facing such an uncertain future, instead of getting married, they tearfully gave each other their freedom.

The Hungarians abused their Jewish slave laborers, a majority dying from the violence and cruelty. Then things went from bad to worse when the entire battalion was captured by the Russians. They didn't care that my father was a slave and he ended up in a Siberian gulag, where the Russians tortured, beat, and starved him as a Hungarian by day, followed by the Hungarians beating and torturing him as a Jew by night. There were daily executions to thin the number of prisoners. The only thing that saved him one day was that they ran out of bullets. The beatings left his internal organs permanently damaged.

When the War ended, Russia did not free their prisoners. In 1946, the Czechoslovakian prisoners were being moved. My Dad spoke Czech and lied, claiming to be Czechoslovakian, so he left two years before the Hungarians, carrying a letter to the family of the best friend he made in the camp, the two men helping each other survive. Unfortunately, the friend did not speak Czech and so was left behind. The train, traveling from Siberia, broke down in Ukraine near the Hungarian border. They were allowed to get out, and when no one was looking, he slipped away, walking all the way back to Budapest, arriving at 79 pounds and next to death. Two of his sisters, both of whom survived Auschwitz, had him hospitalized, and got him food, medicine, and blankets, saving his life.

Three months later, he walked out of the hospital and restarted his life. Of the nine children, seven survived. His parents did not. Two of his brothers did not. His fiancé did not. He took his friend's letter, the one he carried from Siberia, to the address on the envelope and

knocked on the door, my mother answered. Several months later they married and had two children.

In 1956 a war broke out in Hungary, an uprising, which went south quickly. When Russia liberated Hungary from the Nazis at the end of World War II, they took over as Hungary's oppressors. In all the chaos, Hungarians started to flee, crossing the borders illegally out of the country. Then the Hungarians went on a rampage in the Jewish section of Budapest, where we lived.

My father looked at the violence, the future of Hungarian politics, and the new wave of anti-Semitism. This time he was not going to ignore the warning signs. Twenty years after the first opportunity, he took this second chance, and at great danger to us all, he dragged his wife and two small children with him. This time he was not leaving anyone behind. He was determined to save us from what befell Europe in the recent past, to save us as he could not save those he loved before. With a hired guide, in a harrowing escape, in which their baby daughter, me, almost died, we fled the country. Tragically, the hired guide, upon his return, was captured and executed.

In 1957, at the height of the Communist Red Scare era, immigrating to America seemed impossible, but at the last minute before leaving for Norway, we were accepted. We arrived with no money, no English, no nothing. And from there my parents went about building a new life. In those days, a union job would create the foundation of security, so we got lucky. And even though my parents were never able to fit in and never saw their relatives again, a loss my father bore better than my mother, they were proud of what they achieved, a home, two college kids, a slice of the American dream.

My father once talked about his 1936 miscalculation, and how different his life would have been if he and his friend had left Hungary behind back then. He wondered why he didn't take the chance then, yet took the chance twenty years later, carrying his family with him. Then he smiled and said he was glad he waited because that way he was able to give my brother and I a life he could never have dreamt of, a life of freedom and acceptance, a life where you did not

have to face fear as a daily part of living. But he was careful to point out the pitfalls that he missed back then, the demagoguery, the violent rhetoric, the violent followers, the slogans. He wanted to make sure that my brother and I could identify people and movements like that. He wanted us to be aware, to be able to recognize the danger, and to remember where movements like that could lead.

My father died in 1989, my mother in 2008. I think of my parents, and especially my father's warnings, as I look at today's world – post October 7, 2023. My father's warnings are ringing in my ears and I wonder how this is all going to end. It is eighty-eight years since 1936, when my father chose not to flee Hungary and paid an unfathomable price of pain, suffering, and degradation. As I listen to the words coming from the world today, I wonder if it is possible that some form of history is about to repeat itself.

Is it safe to stay? Not far from where I live, in quiet suburbia, a Jewish man was killed during a protest when a college professor of Arabic descent hit him over the head with his megaphone, causing him to fall, bashing his head on the pavement. His attacker was finally arrested twelve days later, charged with involuntary manslaughter, which carries a maximum sentence of four years in a state prison and a \$10,000 fine. What is a Jewish life worth? Apparently not much, except to us.

If it's not safe to stay, where would I go? Canada has already rejected me because of my age. I could claim my EU citizenship, but where in the EU would I want to live? Or, as a Jew, am I safer in an Israeli war zone? Just where, as a Jew, can I find a safe haven for my children and I to just live our lives? That is the quandary, as I wonder if I am facing my own 1936.