

COMING TO AMERICA

I WAS BORN

Both my parents were Hungarian Holocaust Survivors. They met after the War and married, making their home in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, a country that became a communist satellite of the Soviet Union, creating the Iron Curtain against America and Western Europe.

My mother was from a bourgeois, upper-middle class family, her father a successful attorney before World War II, her maternal grandfather the head rabbi of Ráckeve, a small town on a tributary of the Danube River. Her uncle became head rabbi upon his father's retirement. My mother was grateful that her grandfather died in 1940, before he could be subjected to the deadly Nazi era. Unfortunately, her uncle and his family were not spared. In 1944 they were deported, along with all the other Jews outside of Budapest, to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. No one in her extended family came back.

My father, on the other hand, was from a poor family, the sixth of nine children. My grandfather was not especially observant until after surviving his World War I military service. Upon his return, he became Orthodox and made sure that his six sons were bar-mitzvahed in the great temple in Győr, a small city near the Austrian border.

In this new, post-World War II world, the Communists penalized the educated, bourgeois, upper middle-class workforce by haphazardly replacing them with the proletariat working class. My father's family was considered part of that proletariat working class, so his surviving brothers and sisters prospered. One sister became an important official in the communist government, another sister became a doctor. My father's two brothers also thrived, and so did he as he was able to get employment in his field of textile engineering. To secure these positions they had to join the Communist Party, which they all did, as did my mother. Because of her marriage to my father and her education, she became a secretary to an important official. Her two brothers benefited by association and joined the Communist Party, with the eldest becoming a diplomat, the younger

ultimately running the nationalized Herendi china factory, one of the largest porcelain and ceramics companies in the world, known for its beautiful hand-painted and gilded porcelain.

My brother and I were born into this communist world, he in 1947, and then I came along in 1955. When my mother went into labor, she told my brother Peter, who was seven at the time, to stay in bed to wait for grandma. Then she and my father walked to the hospital, while she was in labor, in January, the coldest month of the year, because they could not afford a cab.

I was a natural birth but breach, feet first, two weeks early. The injuries my mother suffered, because the hospital was not equipped to do a surgical C-section, lasted the rest of her life. However, considering the state of care and sterilization in post-WWII Hungary at the time, who knows if the outcome of a C-section would have been any better.

My father wanted to name me Piroška (pronounced Pee-rosh-ka). It is an old-fashioned name and my mother hated it. In Hungary, every day of the year is associated with two saints, one male and one female. Whatever your name, the day on which those saints are celebrated is your name day, which is a more important day than your birthday. I was supposed to be born on January 18th, which happened to fall on Piroška name day. The bright side of coming early was that my mother thought she would get out of naming me Piroška. No such luck and that is the name with which I was born. To make up for it, just in case I didn't like it, she gave me the middle name of Veronika.

Why was Piroška important? My father's mother was named Piroška. She perished in Auschwitz, murdered upon her arrival in 1944. My father was in concentration camps himself and did not know this until he finally made his way home in 1946. So not only was I saddled with an old-fashioned name, but the emotional punch and legacy of that name, a heavy burden for a little baby to carry, and one which I continue to carry.

My beginnings were not auspicious. At one month I became very ill with measles and was quarantined in a hospital. My mother was not allowed access to me, so she pumped breast milk that was fed to me by a nurse. As she watched me cry through the window, she cried on the other side of the glass. When I was finally released a month or so later, she took me to the baby nursery at the company where she worked, where I caught something else that nearly killed me. Upon my release from the hospital the second time, the doctor told my mother that if

she planned on keeping me alive I had to stay at home, so they hired a woman to come during the day to take care of me, even though that ate up much of their income.

Because of all the illnesses, I was developmentally delayed, walking and speaking late. By October of 1956, at 21 months, I was just beginning to stand up; toddling seemed to be a long way off. And it is at this point in my then short life that war broke out.

THE UPRISING

A large portion of Hungarians wanted their autonomy, unhappy as one of the Soviet Union's colonial states that was being robbed blind of all its assets. Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Voice of America (VOA) could only be heard on pre-WWII radios with a dial, new radios came with buttons for only two national channels. There were enough pre-WWII radios around to encourage the Hungarians' dreams of liberty. Over the radio there were assurances that if the Hungarians fought for their freedom, rising up against their Communist Russian occupiers, the world would come to their aid. Hungarian students, soldiers, police, men and women, Jew and gentile, from all walks of life, spontaneously bonded together to fight the Russians, broadcasting over RFE and VOA for help.

Meanwhile, at the same time of the Hungarian Uprising, the world was struggling with The Suez Crisis. The world paid attention to that situation because the Suez Canal was at stake, a major conduit for trade and oil. Often, we disregard far-off world events because we think it has little effect on our lives, but that turn of events in the Middle East had dire consequences for my family in Hungary. Further, one can argue that the world, by overlooking Hungary in 1956, emboldened Russia's course of action then, and experiencing no world resistance, Russia's successive actions to this day.

For all of RFE and VOA's assurances, in the end, the world ignored Hungary, betraying those promises made over the radio and did not come to the country's aid in its fight for freedom. The world feared a shooting war with Russia, a country armed with nuclear missiles, that could lead to World War III. The Hungarians prevailed for one week, but without foreign military intervention, they could not stop the Russian tanks that rolled in to crush the conflict.

In Budapest it was war. Violent battles were fought street by street, with guns, bombs, bullets, and hand to hand combat. My parents rushed my brother and I into the cellar of the building to hide. While the Russians were shooting at the Hungarians, the Hungarians followed their normal pattern of blaming the Jews for their misfortunes and an all-out pogrom broke out in the Jewish section of the city where we lived.

When my parents thought it was safe, we climbed out of the cellar and went upstairs. But that safety was an illusion as a huge explosion blew out the window, with shards of glass landing in my face, cutting up my bottom lip. I bled profusely, but my parents could not get me any medical care because the battle was raging outside, forcing us to rush back down to the cellar. The cellar was where the coal was kept that heated the building. I was crawling and apparently crawled into the coal, which then covered the open wounds on my face.

My mother was in a panic, and not only because I was injured. My father had offended the local leaders of the Communist Party a few years earlier. He was a textile engineer at a textile manufacturing factory. The factory needed cotton, the cheapest coming from America, but the communists would not do business with America. At a monthly meeting, the local party bosses came up with the solution of Hungary growing its own cotton. My father pointed out that Hungary did not have a long enough weather season to successfully grow cotton. That opinion was viewed as a public challenge to the local leaders' authority, which turned out to be a politically very bad move on my father's part. At the next meeting, he was called before the party leaders where he was publicly reprimanded, accused of being negative to the Communist Party's goals, and then thrown out of the Communist Party. However, he was never fired from the factory. His education, experience and competence sealed the job for him, even though the cotton crop failed as he predicted, further humiliating the Communist Party bosses.

As Russia gained the upper hand over the Uprising, anyone with my father's communist history was considered a traitor and hunted. Now my parents had to contend with not only my injuries, the riots in the Jewish neighborhoods, and their PTSD from having survived the Holocaust, they also had to worry about arrest, prison, and even execution.

What to do? Their decision, leave Hungary. They were not young: my mother was 35 and my father 44. They spoke Hungarian, German, Russian, Czech, and French, but their goal was America. And with that, the journey began.

ESCAPE

Leaving Hungary was not easy. We had no travel documents or visas to any country. The closest country that shared a border with Hungary that was not in the communist sphere, and might offer sanctuary, was Austria. To help a family escape was a dangerous and deadly business. Anyone caught assisting someone escaping would suffer the same fate as the escapee. Both my mother's and father's families got together to discuss the situation as quietly as possible, as well as voice their concern about me going on such a dangerous journey. My brother was an active and smart 9-year-old boy, capable and old enough to walk, run, follow instructions, and understand what was at stake. However, I was a sickly and injured baby, who would have to be drugged and carried. The consequences of my making a sound could be fatal. Even though my brother faced as much peril as my parents, and I was an extra burden that added even more risk, my parents refused to leave either of us behind. We would either succeed or perish together, and I shudder to think of the future that would have laid before me had my parents left me in Hungary, as many of these "orphaned" children were never reunited with their families because the subsequent repressive government would not grant them passage out of the country. Now, with all in agreement that we had to go, that all four of us were going, and at great personal risk to my mother and father's families, who were all assisting us in the escape, the plan was hatched.

My father's older brother Gyuri still lived in Győr, while the rest of the family lived in Budapest. My parents were able to get travel passes to go to Győr for the Christmas holidays. In preparation, my maternal uncle's wife, Hilda, took off her winter boots and gave them to my mother. We left Budapest for this supposed holiday wearing as many clothes as we could, my mother the boots. My mom feared she might never see her brothers again, stuffing photographs of them, their families, her parents, and my father's family into her pockets, sentimental but impractical.

Upon our arrival in Győr, we were met by my Uncle Gyuri and his young wife, Erzsi. She was from a peasant family. The men from the former peasant class, in the areas near the borders, were the ones who became the border guards. Her family knew many of these border guards and were able to hire one to lead us across.

My paternal aunt Judit, who was a doctor, also came to Győr. She administered the drugs that put me to sleep so I wouldn't wake-up to cry or make any noise. Then I was dressed in a snow suit, but because of the injury to my lip, they could not tape my mouth shut, leaving them with nothing but hope that I would not make a sound, even in my sleep. The first crossing attempt failed, and we returned to Győr, but the second try on December 24, 1956 was successful. Our hired border guard carried me, a heavy, unconscious, nearly 2-year-old child, while my father carried his gun. My mother held my 9-year-old brother's hand. As quietly as possible we ran, walked, crawled, slid across frozen bridges, waded across running streams, hid from other border guards and watchtowers, facing danger all the way. Our guide led us to a section of the border that was still open and unguarded, where he handed me back to my father and my father returned his gun. The guard pointed and said, "There is Austria" and left. We went unmolested across the border, entering Austria.

Thirty years later, in 1986, when I first visited Hungary, my Aunt Erzsi told me what happened to our savior, the border guard. I learned he was caught when returning to his post. He did not divulge our names, because if he had, the entire extended family of my mother and father would have been arrested. To my horror, she told me that he took the information to his grave when he was strung up, publicly executed, as an example to the populace at large. And I don't even know his name.

AUSTRIA

It was snowing and cold as we trudged through the more than knee deep drifts. In the dark, my father spotted headlights in the distance. He started running towards the vehicle, shouting "hallo" and waving his arms. My mother froze on the spot, with me in her arms and holding my brother's hand. The open, jeep-like military vehicle met my father. They were American military working the U.N. mission of picking up Hungarians escaping the country. The two men drove my dad back to where my mom stood, holding me, her unconscious

baby, and my brother's hand. One of the men said to my mom in Hungarian, "Ne félj. Biztonságban vagy." ("Don't be afraid. You are safe.")

They loaded us into the jeep and drove us first to a nearby temporary camp. The men and women were separated, my brother going with my father. I was unconscious in my mother's arms, so the two of us were rushed to the infirmary. My mom told the medical staff what drugs I had been given to keep me asleep. I was not waking up. They undressed me and saw that the snow suit had slipped up exposing my wrists and ankles, both exhibiting a mild case of frostbite, and I was suffering from hypothermia. They looked at my lip, which had healed into a messy lump. My mother asked if they could do anything about it, and the doctor answered no, it had healed too much. The best he could offer was that as I got older, possibly plastic surgery would put it back together properly. More importantly, if I didn't wake up, they would have to pump my stomach. Luckily, I woke up.

The four of us were reunited, put on a train, and sent across Austria to the town of Innsbruck. There weren't enough seats on the train, so I sat on my parents laps while my brother rode in the luggage rack above our heads. He's always said that was his most fun ride ever, better than any amusement park.

In Innsbruck we were housed in a reopened displaced persons camp for Hungarian refugees. My parents sent word to my father's sister, Katherine, in America that we were out and in Austria. She replied that she would do all that she could to get us to America. We were given new clothes, and the old ones in which we came were taken away, including the boots given to my mother by Hilda in Hungary. My mother never saw the boots again, grieving their loss the rest of her life. As I look back, I wonder if those boots represent the soles of all she lost, from her family, to her language, to her culture, to her home, to her career, to her aspirations, and unknown to her at the time, the very center of who she was, forever gone and forever mourned.

Israeli officials came into the camp in Innsbruck to meet with my family, offering us immediate passage to Israel. It was tempting. My father's eldest brother and his family were living in Israel, and we would be among our own kind in a place where being Jewish was not a bad thing. However, my father had had enough of war. He had survived World War I as a child, the Hungarian military, the Holocaust, and the Hungarian Uprising. He looked at Israel as just another place where we would be at war so he said no, for now. If no other country offered

us sanctuary, then we would go to Israel, but he wanted to find a place of peace, and he didn't feel Israel offered that refuge.

Because the Israeli delegation had come into the camp and met with us, the Hungarians realized we were Jewish. The refugees coming out of Hungary were no less anti-Semitic than the Hungarians left in Hungary, with many complicit in the genocide of nearly 600,000 Hungarian Jews over the course of World War II. There were rumblings and threats until our fellow Hungarian refugees ultimately attacked us. My father fought them off and luckily the American military quickly intervened. We were then moved to another camp closer to Vienna that housed mostly Jews.

Finally, Norway said they would take us in as refugees. My parents were ecstatic. We were going to be on our way, leaving for Munich the next day to be processed to go to Norway. That evening, the paperwork arrived giving us temporary refugee status in America, putting Norway aside forever. We were to be sponsored for one year by my Aunt Katherine and a Catholic church. My parents were surprised that a Catholic church would sponsor us, but figured things in America were maybe different, and my parents were not going to ask any questions.

The next day we traveled to Munich, and from there we flew to New York. All we had were the clothes on our backs, diapers for me, and the photographs my mother carried in her pockets. My parents were relieved to kiss Europe good-bye, not able to get out of there fast enough. For them, the continent held the memory of every bad experience they had survived, every indignity, every loss, every tragedy. It would have to be better in America, in the land of plenty and freedom.

AMERICA

When we got off the plane in New York and were escorted through the terminal, my mother was shocked to see how casually everyone was dressed. No one was wearing suits, and the kids were wearing jeans. We were put on a bus and went out to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey.

From Camp Kilmer my parents were able to communicate with my Aunt Katherine in California. We would be flown to Los Angeles by the American military. However, there were no flights scheduled and none

on the horizon, so we would have to wait in the camp. This was alright with my parents, but not with my Aunt. Her solution, she would pay for the four of us to fly to Los Angeles on a commercial flight, and once on our feet, we would pay her back. My parents took her up on her offer.

On March 17, 1957 we landed at LAX. Waiting for us was my Aunt Katherine, her husband Loro, and their son, Joseph (aged 10). Also waiting for us were the representatives of the Catholic church which co-sponsored our immigration, along with the local newspaper, the Post-Advocate. Hungarian refugees were big news at the time.

The language in my Aunt's home was German, and of course everyone surrounding us, but my family, spoke English. So my Aunt spoke to my parents in Hungarian. She told us that she was a converted Catholic. No one in America, except her husband, knew that she was born Jewish. We were sponsored as Catholics. She had lied on our immigration papers about our religion. Should that be found out, she would be arrested and we would be deported. No one must ever know that we are Jewish. Faced with no other choice, my parents agreed, later telling me that they figured why not, since being Jewish had brought them nothing but grief. If we were to survive in this new world, as far as they were concerned, we would survive as pretend-Catholics, and do everything to protect that lie, making sure that no one would become the wiser.

And so our life in America began in a swirl of deceit, lies, and subterfuge. As I grew up, this full-time masquerade caused an enormous amount of tension within my family, as well as creating a lot of anxiety, confusion, and heartache for me, even after shrugging it off and claiming my Jewish heritage in college, a decision my father never forgave. The consequences and pain of the choices made at that moment of our arrival never stopped reverberating through our lives, and continues to haunt me to this day.