THE STORY OF ONE FAMILY'S UPROOTING FROM HUNGARY, NARRATED THROUGH THE PERSONS OF FATHER AND AMERICAN-BORN DAUGHTER

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My presentation is not based on scholarly research. By contrast, it is a simple story, the story of my father, who at age 37 came to America with his wife and six children. He knew no English. My mother was 8 months pregnant. My father had no friends here, no money, no work. He was one of those Hungarians who had a fierce love for his country, but whose life was swept out of his control during and after World War II, and who felt he had to make a choice: either stay in Hungary and live under Soviet rule; or emigrate to America. Because he loved Hungary and hated oppression, neither choice appealed to his basic instincts. The post-war scare of communist expansion throughout Europe eventually convinced my father to emigrate to America.

Three weeks after they arrived, I was born. I'm seventh in a family of ten. I have always felt my birth was a pivotal event in the history of my parents' lives: they called me the "Lucky Seven" because my birth allowed them to make America their home; but because my father never really felt "at home" here, I have sometimes thought that the timing of my arrival was less than fortuitous. But, we do not choose these things, and — like my father — feel I've made the best of an ambiguous situation. So, my story — the story of my father, attempts to give human and familial context to the issues raised here at this conference.

Before I start reading, I'd like to mention the events leading up to their emigration.

My father was imprisoned in October, 1944 in Budapest (when Szálasi was briefly in power) for expressing a political opinion that was not sympathetic to the Nazi Regime. That previous summer, in order to escape the heavy bombing in Budapest, my father had taken my mother and their four children to Köröshegy, a village to the southwest of Budapest. He himself continued working in Budapest and would commute to the village on weekends. This went on until he was arrested. When the Red Army "liberated" Budapest in December 1945, and freed the prisoners, my father made his way — on foot — to Köröshegy to find my mother. Of course, no news could be sent, so neither really knew the fate of the other. Roads were closed. There were no trains running; there was little food; there was still fighting between German soldiers heading west, and advancing Soviet troops. My father spoke German, Russian and French, and somehow fabricated the right stories that kept him alive. One evening he found out he unknowingly traversed a field that had recently been planted with mines. He walked, sometimes out of his way, to avoid the possibility of capture. By the time

he reached Köröshegy, his shoes were flaps of weatherworn leather held together with rags and his feet were covered with sores. His relief at arriving in the village, however, was short-lived, for he couldn't find my mother anywhere. Finally a neighbor told him she had to go to Gyógypuszta, about 12 miles away. The neighbor tried to convince my father to stay the night because his feet were in such bad shape, but he refused. He walked on, knowing that if he fell, he would not be able to get up. Only his unwavering faith in God gave him strength enough to continue, and he was reunited with my mother. They stayed until he regained his health.

When my father brought his family back to Budapest in August, he returned to his job as an electronics executive at Orion. One day he was approached by the new Soviet director who praised my father's work, and advised him to leave Hungary for Moscow where he would be given a higher position and better pay. Of course my father — not wanting to leave his home — turned down the offer. After that he felt he was being watched. The apprehension this caused him, particularly since the memories of prison were still fresh — together with the chaos of day-to-day life in Budapest, convinced him to take his family to Belgium.

Promise (excerpts)

The Hungary János left behind frightened him. The continuing presence of Soviet troops in Central and Eastern Europe accentuated his uneasiness and fear that war would break out again. For two years he and his family, which now included another son, stayed in Belgium. His work, constructing model trains, was pleasant enough, but the pay was low, forcing him to take other jobs as well. He had heard about aircraft firms in California — in America — that were recruiting engineers and technicians. Could he go there? he wondered. He became intrigued with the idea of going to America. To János and Editke, like to most Eastern Europeans in the 1940s, America was the land of gold — golden sun rays shined by day, and by night golden stars filled the heavens.

When German refugees began pouring into Belgium with stories of imminent Soviet invasion and occupation János and Editke began to put some form to their dream of leaving for America. What he needed to do first was find out how, if possible, he could get travel documents and tickets for his entire family. Often one could secure passage on a steamer for an individual, but finding room for a family of three adults — for Editke's mother was now with them — and six children presented difficulties. To make matters worse, Editke was expecting their seventh child, and pregnant women close to term were not granted permission to travel. Undaunted, and refusing to be separated from his family again, János determined to find a way.

It cost the family much of their small fortune in jewels, which Editke had been astute enough to hide in babies' soiled diapers when Russian soldiers came looting, but he finally obtained the necessary documents. The destination assigned to their visa however was Venezuela. The quota for Hungarian refugees in America was filled.

Nevertheless, they were given a transit visa which would allow them to stay in New York for three weeks before continuing the journey to South America. To conceal her pregnancy, Editke wore a large coat under which she girdled her abdomen sufficiently but without causing herself or the growing baby harm. In this manner they boarded an American Liberty ship originally used to transfer American soldiers, now full of Belgians, Hungarians, Jews, French, Polish, English, Irish — Displaced Persons leaving their homelands. In late October, they left Antewerp, briefly stopping over in Liverpool where more passengers boarded, and from there the ship began its twelve day journey to America.

As the ship drew into the harbor, János held his pregnant wife who was cradling one year-old István, born in Belgium, and gathered his five other children around him. From the deck, they could see the Statue of Liberty, an imposing sight on this cold morning of November 1, 1947. He knew it was an important moment, and leaning toward Editke, his words were a mixture of joy and relief — and full of promise. "We left behind old Europe, and we'll start a new life."

Influenza kept me awake where I lay on the living room couch, savoring my mother's quiet kitchen noises — not the usual scrubbing of dishes — but rather the rustle of newspaper pages being turned. I loved it that my mother retreated to the large, warm kitchen to read after everyone else was asleep. Tonight was no different. She was waiting for my father to come home from work. My father would be making the long drive home after working all day in Cleveland on the trains. I thought of words he had recently spoken over Sunday dinner.

"Your father is the best diesel mechanic in the train yard. He can smell out any trouble with the trains. That is why he is gone so much of the time. Even on his days off, the yard superintendent will call and say, 'John, I know it is your day off, but we cannot get this engine to run, and you are the genius around here. Can you come?' And, of course, your father goes and finds the trouble immediately. He knows more then the others."

Finally the sound of my father's old car filled the driveway and then the familiar smell of diesel penetrated the kitchen. I detected sadness in his voice as he greeted my mother. I heard the clink of a bottle and knew they were sharing a glass of wine. My father began talking.

"They don't like it that I know everything about the engines, so they laugh at my English. So I want to learn better. When I take a book to read, to study, to learn the language, they laugh because I spend my lunch hour reading. Imagine, today I had to climb atop an engine and as I was bending over to inspect the injectors — they struck a match to the oil rag in my back pocket."

Tears filled my eyes, and then I felt rage. Then I felt sorry for my father. I got up and went into the kitchen, wanting to be included in the moment. But when my father saw me, his weariness vanished, and his eyes intensified with anger. "What the devil are you doing up at this late hour?" he demanded in Hungarian. "You should be in bed, asleep. Now go upstairs! Ten-year-olds should be sleeping by this time. Go on, get upstairs!"

I looked at my mother in supplication, and she did say that I was sick, but my father's insistant gaze banished me from the kitchen. I went upstairs and climbed into my bed, my heart hurting more than my stomach. Soon I heard footsteps coming upstairs and the light from the hallway fell across my blanket. I looked over at my sister's bed wondering if Elizabeth had gotten up during the night. But, no, she was sleeping soundly. Then father entered the room, carrying a mug full of something steaming.

"Here, drink this. It will do you good."

I took the cup and sipped the concoction. It was his all purpose remedy: tea with lemon, honey, and a splash of Mogan David Blackberry wine. I drank it down feeling the rush of warmth and wine circulate through my blood.

"Have you said your prayers?" he asked.

"Yes", but I hadn't. I never seemed to have time after staying awake too long trying to finish a book.

"Well, say them again. Cross your heart and God and your guardian angel will always protect you. Now go to sleep."

I placed my hands across my heart, leaving them there until I heard my father's footsteps fade at the bottom of the stairs. Then shifting my position, I thought about what a guardian angel might look like. I didn't believe in them, but if I had one, it probably looked like me.

When they landed, János and his family, along with the other refugees were met by Traveler's Aid representatives who handed out sandwiches on white bread, and candy to the children as they waited to pass through customs. Editke, beginning her ninth month of pregnancy, felt relief at being out of the ships's berth which the three adults and six children had shared with a Polish couple and their two children. On this crisp, sunny day in November, János felt jubilant, energetic. "How thoughtful these Americans are to bring us food", he remarked to Editke, and although he was unable to express his gratitude verbally, he smiled. They passed through customs clearing their transit visa, and, once again, assisted by Traveler's Aid, they found a hotel where they could stay until their visa expired.

They knew nobody. János had only one address, that of a Catholic priest who lived on the East Side, in the Hungarian section of the city. Unable to speak a word of English, János set out to find this priest, who, he felt sure, would help him settle his family. He knew he had to take a subway, but which one? where? how? Before he left the hotel, Editke, who had studied English in Hungary, had written out their address and the words, "WHERE" and "HOW MUCH" and "TELL ME PLEASE" on the other side of the paper holding the priest's name and address. With a confidence that surprised him, János left the hotel to find his priest. The subway station around the corner provided a helpful guide: János was lucky to find a passenger who spoke German, and soon enough he was heading for New York's East Side. Accustomed to traveling great distances on foot, he chose to walk rather than risk the buses, and trusting his intuitions, made his way to the Hungarian neighborhood where he found the church,

and inside, the priest. János delighted in speaking Hungarian in America, and the priest was kind and gave him advice and information. As he set out to return to the hotel, János formulated a plan. They would stay in America, that was for sure. He would move his family to the Hungarian neighborhood and look for a job. Since his wife was going to have a baby so soon, the priest had told János, they wouldn't be put on the boat to Venezuela. The priest even told János that he would be able to take his ticket to the port office and probably get a refund from the remainder of the trip to Caracas. He also gave János the address of the Catholic hospital nearby where many of the doctors were from Central Europe. János wanted to hurry back to give Editke the promi sing news. In his excitement, he lost track of the subway station. Now, where was it? he puzzled. He looked around, trying to focus on something familiar, but all the tenement apartments looked alike. Approaching a small cluster of people surrounding a busstop, János tried to look for facial features that spelled "immigrant" but felt confused searching these foreign faces. Utilizing every language he knew, but unable to speak the only one that mattered now — English — János asked a man for directions.

"AWWWWWWWWW, SHADDUP ya damn DP!" the man spat at him.

I didn't notice his anger until he stood up and approached the chair in which I was curled reading Ian Fleming's latest James Bond thriller. "Oh, God", I thought, dreading the next moment, "what is it going to be this time?" My father neared, his eyes ablaze but his voice low and controlled. He showed me the Franklin Delano Roosevelt stamp which he had meant to apply to an envelope. Then he thundered, "Do you think I would lick this stamp? Do you think I would lick the man who ruined my country? Bah! No! I spit on that man!"

He spat on the stamp of FDR. And he continued with his condemnation of the dead American president who in 1945 negotiated the Yalta Agreement.

"There he sat with Stalin and Churchill and, just like a pie, cut up Hungary! This piece is for you — this piece is for you!"

My father's voice became louder as he described the helplessness of his country, the injustices it suffered, the resultant obscurity of its genius.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I AM SAYING?" the Hungarian words shouted at me.

"Yeah dad, sure, dad", I mumbled.

He glared at me. "When you are in your father's house, you speak your mother tongue, you speak in Hungarian to your father. Do you understand? *Érted?*

"I said, yes, father, I understand", I enunciated in Hungarian.

And I longed to say to him, but I didn't dare, *If you hate it so much here, why the hell did you ever come?*

With the help of Father Bodnár, János installed his family in a two bedroom apartment on New York's East Side whose open court in the middle served as a refuse dump attracting large, browsing rats and scurrying cockroaches. Because Editke was due to deliver any day, their transit visa was extended. When, on November 23, 1947,

János became a father for the seventh time, he had no way of knowing how his little daughter would alter the course of his life. She, being born in America, was a naturalized citizen and because of that, her birth allowed János and his family to stake their claim in this new country.

But good work was hard to find in New York for a middle-aged man who knew no English. When Father Bodnár told János about several Hungarians who found work in Cleveland, Ohio, János decided to leave New York. Thus, in October, 1948, almost one year after arriving in America, János moved his family to Cleveland where another daughter, Elizabeth was born the following May. They shared the large house, divided into two homes, with an old Hungarian woman. Once again János relied on the Hungarian community and its Catholic priest for assistance. He was not disappointed. Although he spoke very little English, he found a job working for an electronics firm which employed many other Hungarians. But within six months he realized how dispensible he was when a strike hit the firm, making demands and altering working conditions. János was one of the first to be laid off.

For a time he was out of work, and money was scarce. Inquiring for work, he was taken on by a Hungarian in a furniture-moving business. *But I was not educated to break my back for pennies,* János thought. He quit the hard work to take another job with a hearing-aid firm where his intuitive abilities with electronics were put to use. He liked this job; it challenged him and he felt useful. But the pay was very low, and he found he was unable to support his family. He knew he would have to find a better job, one which he hoped would pay medical benefits.

The question of insurance coverage had never been as important as it had been on a bright Easter morning when the family was gathered around the kitchen table after Sunday Mass. Suddenly someone realized that two-year-old Elizabeth was choking. The little girl had taken a huge bite of Editke's traditional *kalács,* the sweet, golden-raisin-filled bread. Editke, slapping the child on her back, ordered her eldest daughter, now fluent in English, to run across the street and summon the ambulance. Within minutes the sirens were outside their door and János and Editke climbed aboard with their baby whose face was beginning to lose color. During the short ride to the hospital, Editke tried to dislodge the bread from the baby's throat, but with no success. János wanted to help, but could only utter anxious words in Hungarian for the ambulance to hurry up. When they arrived at the emergency room, János felt relief with the knowledge that he could put his gasping daughter under the care of professionals. He and Editke rushed to the Emergency Room receptionist where János, in a voice louder than he intended, said, "PLEASE, THE DOCTOR!"

"Yes, I know that you would like to see the doctor", the receptionist began casually, "but we must fill out the medical history forms first. We also require the name and address of your insurance company. Now, is your coverage provided by one of the companies listed on the form? If not, then..."

"Laydee, PLEASE, the DOCTOR!" János interrupted frantically.

"Well, we can't very well get the doctor unless we know something about you and the patient", snapped the receptionist looking up from her paperwork.

János and Editke exchanged horrified looks, not understanding, but realizing that their daughter would die if she didn't get help soon. Editke, relying on her parochial school English, persisted, her voice now loud and shrill, "Can you not see my daughter is dying? A DOCTOR, NOW!!!"

The receptionist stared at Editke and then shot back at her in raised voice, "You need to put your place of birth on this form here, and if you can't read it..."

But János, seeing his daughter become passive and glazy-eyed, waited not a second longer. He stomped from the receptionist's desk towards the double doors that led to the inside of the hospital, in search of a doctor. He grabbed the nearest one, a young intern, who took one look at Elizabeth and whisked her off to the hospital's internal care unit where he held her upside-down while another physician administered a firm-fisted thud to her chest, finally dislodging the bread. The little girl could breath again.

On the ride home, János tried to understand what had happened at the hospital. "This would never have happened in my country", he decided. The incident reminded him of when he and Editke left Budapest five years ago. His three-month-old daughter, Alice was not getting enough milk because of the rationing. She was slowly starving. By the time Editke reached Belgium, Alice was seriously ill. But the nuns at the hospital wasted no time and began fussing over the baby. They fed her yogurt and buttermilk until she began chortling again. There was no paperwork to attend to; no, there was a life to be looked after.

So when New York Central Railroad offered János a job that provided medical benefits, he took it. He suspected that if he should ever have to struggle with hospital forms in his broken English again, the medical insurance coverage would translate on his behalf, and allow him admittance without interrogation. He also began attending night classes where he would learn English.