

CHAPTER 4

I've been writing about the Second World War and my family's experiences during it. I'm describing those events as well as I can, using words. But words alone don't really do that kind of job all that well.

I want to jump ahead some, to October 20, 1991, the day of the Oakland Hills Fire. Almost four square miles of the Oakland hills were charred and devastated, and some 3,500+ homes went up in smoke – all in that one day. I got caught in that fire, and lost 99.8% of everything that I owned – my house, my shop, my tools, my woods, my furniture, my clothes, my most treasured personal possessions, all my jigs and molds and templates, my personal records and files, photographs of family and places I'd been, snapshots of places I've lived in and the people I'd known, my photos, my art, the instruments that I was working on, family documents, manuscripts, legal papers . . . in other words, everything I had, including my entire history (**fig. 5**).

Fig. 5 Me, looking through the rubble of my house and workshop

The fire was very sudden; it was an intensely windy and dry day, and a small fire that started out as a barbecue in someone's backyard got out of control and very quickly grew into a roaring Hell in which the sky was black with smoke and *everything* made out of wood got vaporized (**figs. 6a and 6b**). Not unlike the American firebombing of Tokyo in 1945, to be honest; but I'll comment more on that further on. We were having what are called Santa Ana Winds, which are notorious for increasing wildfire risks. The heat was so intense that my drill press -- a *very solidly built cast-iron Walker-Turner machine* of a kind that has not been made since about 80 years before -- had melted into something that looked as though Salvador Dalí had made it. That was pretty impressive. When I was allowed back into the fire zone a few days later I saw cars that had just melted away in the same way. No houses or structures remained visible. There was black ash everywhere and the only things left standing were brick chimneys and brick walls. . . and a lot of singed but not burned-down trees. I think that was on account of the fact that trees are solid and contain moisture but houses are thinnish wooden walls around an empty space (i.e., comparatively flimsy), and thus more flammable. And the fire moved unbelievably quickly – as fast as a car can drive on the freeway -- driven by the strong and hot winds. It didn't stay long in one place; I watched the fire line on the next hill over, thinking that the freeway in between us would keep the fire away from the hill my neighbors and I were on. I saw explosions. I saw the line of fire traveling across my field of vision, and I saw and heard houses explode that were *three hundred yards away from the actual flames*. Before the flames reached them. The winds must have carried so much heat ahead of the fire itself that homes in the fire's path were superheated so suddenly that exploded, as though they'd been hit by bombs. Superheated air *literally jumped over big empty spaces in the landscape – without any flames at all in between* -- as though an invisible fire-giant were walking across the ground, stepping over things, and burning things with every forward-step. Wow.

Fig. 6a ~~The firebombing of Tokyo~~ The Oakland Hills Fire

Fig. 6b ~~The firebombing of Tokyo~~ The Oakland Hills Fire

Anyway, all of that happened in one day, and the sheer scope of the destruction was hard to take in. The fire of course jumped over the freeway and burned our section of Oakland down completely. The morning after the fire I didn't have a toothbrush or pair of underpants (why are these things spoken of in the plural?) other than the ones I was wearing. I had my car that I'd driven off in, whatever I had hurriedly been able to throw into it, and the clothes I had on. And \$8,000 in the bank. That, plus the gold fillings in my teeth, was 100% of what I had.

It took a year and a half for me to get on my feet again. The State and the Government stepped in to help fire victims in various ways. The Red Cross showed up. FEMA showed up and interviewed people in anticipation of giving them loans so as to get their lives going again. FEMA didn't find me a good candidate to loan money to, though; their explanation was that as a guitar maker I didn't make enough money to pay them back the loan. So I got nothing. Thanks, fellas. Your tax dollars at work.

I mention this because, while it was one of the biggest blows I've ever experienced, and particularly jolting by its suddenness, it did help me to have a real sense, in retrospect, of some of my parents' own sudden and catastrophic losses . . . and what they surely felt like. They'd lost *everything*, and more than once, and more often than not without much notice, and often with a good chance of being killed. The effect of that fire on me personally was that I was in a daze for three weeks; I could walk and talk but, quite seriously, I could feel *nothing*. I was like someone who'd just woken up. I was numb. I couldn't think. Then, I started feeling again after three weeks had gone by, and I felt really, really down. But my disaster was accidental; I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. My parents' disasters, on the other hand, had been purposely done to them by people who either hated them, or didn't give a fuck about them, and/or were simply following somebody's orders. And, if the latter, I have no reason to think that they did any of that reluctantly or had regrets. I am sad to know my troubled, insensitive, and ineffective parents this well; they had never done anything to deserve any of that. May they rest in peace.

This last phrase I wrote, "may they rest in peace" is, candidly, something that I comfort myself with. Other than that I really don't believe that there's any such thing as resting in peace – or "turning over in one's grave" -- after one is dead. There's no one there who is resting in any mood whatsoever. They're dead and their atoms and molecules – preservatives notwithstanding -- go back into the earth, where they originally came from. They're gone.

BACK IN BUDAPEST IN 1944

I was alive through the last year and a half of World War II. My mother and I hid/ sheltered/ lived in the apartment house where her father was "*házmester*" – the housemaster/ supervisor/

manager. The building was in the shape of an L and received several bomb and artillery near-hits that Winter. They luckily landed inside the “L”, so the building was damaged but not ruined. Everyone who lived in that building moved to the basement/coal cellar during the cannonades and the carpet-bombing runs, and also later as the city was being taken by deadly block-to-block and house-to-house fighting. It was fortunate that the cannon shells that nearly hit the building were Russian, because Russian munitions were not all that powerful. Had these been American bombs the building would have been blown apart, collapsed, and no one there would have survived. Jesus Christ: *how lucky can you get!?* It would take some effort to imagine the sheer terror felt by the people crouching in the basement during a cannonade or bombing attack; those are ordinary basements (and/or coal cellars) after all, and not bomb shelters. The ground shakes. The walls shake. Loud explosions and sounds of buildings blown apart and falling down, alternating with deadly silences. Regardless of your age, it’s not all that difficult to pee or shit in your pants at times like that. Any next bomb hit could end your life in a second. If you’ve ever experienced that level of blind fear and panic, even once, it’s not easy to forget it. And, all in all, we spent a lot of time in that basement/coal cellar.

I know only a few things about my maternal grandfather, who sheltered us in the second half of World War II. I know that when he was young he wanted to be an artist, but could not find a way to make a living at that. So for at least some length of time he made his living by being an interior decorator; you know, making people’s living spaces nicer to live in. He had been a soldier during World War I and was absent from his home, and his wife and children for more than three years. He was courageous in battle, though, and had some medals to show for it after he left the army. The medals came in handy to wear during World War II, because he could walk around the city and not look like someone who was afraid of being caught and was trying to hide. His medals became credentials, of a sort. I heard one story about him that has always stayed with me. He was on the street, wearing his medals, when a policeman walked by herding a group of prisoners toward the police headquarters. I don’t know what the prisoners had done, but they’d been caught and they were in trouble. My grandfather went up to the guard and in an authoritative voice said that thanks, but he’d take the prisoners over now and take them to the headquarters. The guard surrendered the prisoners and went back to wherever he’d come from. My grandfather led the prisoners down the street and around a corner and then when they were out of sight of everyone my granddad told them to run. They ran away, hoping to find shelter. I hope they did.

My parents had their own apartment when I was born, of course. And as I’d said, my father was taken away about a month after that event; he was Jewish and his presence was not . . . uh . . . wanted, tolerated, appreciated, valued, desired, nor welcome. He escaped from the police and came back to the apartment. He hid in the bathroom for a day or two, or three, but they came and found him and took him away again. We did not see him again for a year and a half.

I had also mentioned that my mother and I were evicted from that apartment soon after my father was hauled away. All Jews (and those associated with Jews) were evicted from their homes by decree, and assigned to live in the Jewish Ghetto. My mother refused to go there. She also refused to wear the yellow star that Jews were required to wear so that they’d be easier to identify. These were both acts of uncommon bravery. She took me, in a pram (i.e., a baby stroller), with whatever she

could carry, to live wherever she could: one night with one friend, one night with another. I don't know how long this went on. I think she stayed with her mother-in-law (my dad's mother) for a while . . . but they didn't like each other. Eventually she took me to her own parents' building; she got along with them . . . and when the serious bombings of Budapest started we all spent a lot of time in the basement, along with the building's other tenants.

One of my mother's stories was of how she had been due to go with me to one of her friends' houses to stay one night, but her own mother asked her to stay with her that night instead: the next morning it was learned that the house we would have been sleeping in got a direct bomb hit and everyone in it was killed. How lucky that we hadn't gone there! Well, that's what happens when a city is carpet-bombed: *szönyeg-bombálás* (i.e., Hungarian for *carpet + bombing*). Carpet-bombing is what it sounds like: dropping as many bombs as possible, indiscriminately, in an attempt to level EVERYTHING. One of my mothers' most often repeated stories was of the air raids during which the building we were staying in received not-quite-direct bomb hits. The building got damaged, but not destroyed. Air raid sirens had warned people to go to their basements. There was always terror, urgency and panic in her accounts of her running down the stairs to the basement as the building was being bombed. Anyway, the people stayed more and more in the basement over time, because there was less and less to go back to than there had been before. Plus, it was safer.

I must say that the logic of carpet-bombing anything with a view to destroying *everything*, escapes me. Carpet-bombing residential areas . . . in order to kill enemies . . . is no different from chasing an escaping bank robber into a building and then blowing the whole building up just to make sure he doesn't get away. If you're older than eight then the logic of that should escape you too.

My mother and I were living, as I said, with her parents. My dad's mother was killed shortly after we'd been staying with her; so if she and my mom had gotten along we would have still been with her and all of us would have been killed. How lucky that they didn't like each other! As far as I know, my maternal grandparents held me and cuddled me as much as they could, as one would do to a baby. I think that that relatively small amount of being held and loved enabled me to remain alive. I mean, without any sense of being needed and comforted, what would any infant live for? There's a somewhat well-known medical account of twins who were born, one of which was doing o.k., and the other of which wasn't; he was very much not thriving, and seemingly dying. No one knew what to do about that. But one of the nurses there had the idea of putting the failing twin into the same crib (or whatever they were using there) as the thriving one. The thriving one hugged the ailing one a lot, and the ailing one got better and lived. No medicines, no extra oxygenation or intravenous anything; just physical contact and warmth. The body NEEDS that.

My mother, to my knowledge, touched me and/or held me as little as possible. She was always like that. I don't know who changed my diapers, and it's not easy to imagine how the old ones got washed under the conditions we all lived under. I think my mother hated changing my diapers. I think this because I remember that by age four or five I would have gagging/vomiting reactions when I saw shit. I think I learned how to feel utter disgust and repulsion from observing

my mother change my diapers. Really: can you visualize a helplessly gagging five-year old? I'm pretty sure I learned that from her.

Of course, one cannot survive by just hiding in a basement. One has to eat. My mother told me about getting food; people would cautiously leave their hiding places during lulls in the bombings and go to the marketplace area, to meet farmers from nearby who would bring fruit and vegetables to sell or trade. There was a lot of bartering, as most people had little or no money left . . . and no one was sure if money was worth much. Or how much. So people bartered. My mother once mentioned a happy exchange when she traded a dress for some strawberries! These would not have been available in the Winter. I don't know if the dress had been hers, or if it had passed from hand to hand to hand after being dug out from a collapsed building, or taken off a dead body. As you might guess, stores were for all practical purposes empty of food or merchandise.

Mishi (short for "Michael"), a second or third cousin of mine who was -- with his British wife Audrey, and living in Budapest at the time -- happened to find a sack of beans in some rubble once; the beans kept him and his wife alive for a long time. Members of groups like Weight Watchers would have been killed and eaten. Or tarred and feathered and run out of town, but for lack of tar or feathers. But I'm not tasteless enough to say such things. **NOTE:** I wonder if you'd object to my pointing out that these last three sentences are an example of apophrasis. It is that element of rhetoric in which the speaker, in disclaiming any interest in mentioning a person or a topic, mentions it. An example might be ". . . and I'm not even going to mention his problem with alcohol". It's sneaky.

AS I WAS SAYING . . .

I believe that because of food shortages during my mother's pregnancy, as well as the daily anxieties and terrors of those days, I was born two weeks prematurely and weighed less than five pounds weight at birth. Because I weighed so little I was not, by Jewish law, eligible to be circumcised (I don't know how many circumcisions would have been being done at the time in any event); but this saved my life a bit later. My mother told me that she had to walk to the hospital in the middle of the night with labor pains when I was about to be born, and was given a cot on which to have the birth. She said that there were cots all over the hospital and some of the patients were given only beans to eat, while others were given better food: when she asked why this was, she was told that Jewish patients got only beans. She of course brought me back to her parents' place after delivering me, and from then on everyone in that building hid in the basement during bombing runs.

The basement that my mother and I lived in for a lot of the first almost-year-and-a-half of my life was actually the building's coal cellar to which -- as I said -- that apartment building's occupants retreated during bombing attacks. I don't know how large the apartment building itself was, nor how many people lived there. But the coal cellar was dark, unheated, airless, and sooty. There was one little cooker/ burner for everyone to use. It burned coal, of course. When the building partially collapsed from a bombing the entrance to the basement collapsed too, and the only way in and out was a tunnel-like crawlspace. Not fun. And otherwise, we were all trapped. It must have been cold, dark, claustrophobic, lacking water and ventilation, and full of fear as well as coal smoke and soot.

Also . . . I don't know what everyone used for a bathroom; my guess is that everyone crawled outside to pee and shit. There was little or no running water. There wouldn't have been toilets or sinks that still worked. And it would have been hellishly cold (is "hellishly cold" an oxymoron?) during the Winter months. Scientists and experts who have studied such environmental conditions are in agreement that such conditions do not constitute the best environment for an infant. My mother also told me that when she and brand-new-I moved into the dark cellar that I've been describing, along with the other apartment house tenants, a number of them surreptitiously checked my penis out to see if I had been circumcised -- that unmistakable sign of being Jewish. There were rewards to be gotten from, uh, giving the authorities a tip. So to speak.

Man, how lucky can a guy get? And how insensitive and tasteless, too, to make puns like these? The fact of the matter, however, is that in those days saying or doing or being the wrong thing could get you killed.

It was not easy to listen to my mother try to describe something. She rambled. She talked about disconnected things at the same time. But she talked like that whenever the conversation was about something in the past; she did o.k. in talking about here-and-now practical things, although a lot of that was to be complaining about something. I was just never able to get a coherent account of life in Budapest from her. Or anything else, really, that had any narrative to it. Her inner life, regardless of whatever it may have been before, was permanently like that after the war. Sadly, regardless of whether I'd think good or bad things about her she was, as a person, pitiful. She was needy. Desperately and insatiably needy. And angry, I daresay. And broken into pieces. After college, I wanted to learn something about my family's history, and I got a tape recorder and wanted to interview mom. She rambled and mixed facts up and repeated accounts that were marginally intelligible and also quite out of sequence. I gave up. She was incapable of speaking coherently.

I think that I can understand some of my mother's neediness; after she left Hungary, after the war, she was *always* a stranger in a strange land. She didn't have any friends in those countries, or know their languages or customs, or foods, or people. She was vulnerable and with a child to care for -- as well as she could, however spotty that attention to me might have been. She had left her family and friends behind, as well as the culture and language that she'd grown up in . . . and that she knew how to navigate through . . . and was living with a very troubled and half-crazed man who was, if nothing else, the provider with whom she could converse in her own language. And the war itself -- which neither of my parents ever dealt with in any way that we'd recognize as being helpful -- had sucked a lot of life out of her. I'd feel needy too.

My mom told me that one night that Winter, when street to street and house to house fighting was very fierce, some German soldiers entered the basement, trying to hide from the oncoming Russians. Everyone knew that if the Germans were found there everyone would be killed in the shootout. More likely someone would simply throw a grenade into the basement to kill them -- and everyone else. Or do it with a *lángszóró* -- a flame thrower. My grandfather, as the senior member of that huddled group of former apartment dwellers, asked the Germans to consider the civilians, and move on. They did. They were very probably killed somewhere else. Audrey, my British second cousin Mishi's wife -- another Budapest survivor -- said that the first Russian troops to enter

Budapest were all dressed up in thick Winter clothing, and when they took their caps off she was astonished to see that many of these front line soldiers were women. Well, the Russians had lost an awful lot of men in the war. I don't think any Allied soldiers ever got into Budapest. Anyway, it was a Russian occupied city in a Russian occupied country from then on, until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

SOME MORE ABOUT MY FATHER

My father was a smart man who was severely tormented by his war experiences. He was tormented by his own early life experiences too. When he was young his own parents beat him a lot for any annoyance he caused, and in particularly humiliating public and painful ways. I'd say may they rot in Hell, except that the truth of the matter is undoubtedly that they themselves had been brought up like that by their parents, as *their* parents had been brought up, who themselves had been brought up the same way . . . by people who'd been brought up to think in the same ways . . . and they could not comprehend the idea that they might have been doing something wrong. What else would any of these people have known about parenting as we think of that word?

I would hope that's all changed, although I have no reason to believe that parenting styles have ever been affected by technology, religion, demographics, daily events, government programs, by reading books about how to be better parents, or the simple passage of time. Parenting styles are transmitted under the radar, silently, automatically, and without anyone's awareness of it happening. Parenting's aim is pretty much to ~~indoctrinate train~~ bring up the child to not be bothersome, to obey authority, be "useful" in society, amenable, and to be subservient to authority. Well, that's exactly what the Nazis and the Hungarian Fascists were. The earliest of life's inputs are from the people who take care of one. And being the earliest of any such input, or attitude, or early socialization, these are bedrock . . . that is accessible later in life only if one digs a lot. EVERYTHING else -- things like racism, fairness, responsibility, sense of being "better" or "worse", sense of life-entitlement, one's attitude towards authority figures, toward the opposite sex, and towards "others" (including in matters of Religion, money, status, and authority) -- is built on that foundation. And mostly without anyone being aware of it.

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I first really saw my father when I was seventeen months old. My mother told me that, shortly after I'd been born, she had taken me to the prison where he had been taken, to take food to him. This must have been in the days very shortly after he was taken away from being found in the bathroom in our apartment. One day she arrived and found that my father and all the other prisoners gone; she was told everyone had been taken to the railroad yards to be taken away. She went there, in a panic, to try to find him. When she got there, there was commotion and chaos. A fascist Hungarian officer barked at her to ask her what her business was there. She had the presence of mind to look him in the eye and tell him that she was looking for a captain so-and-so. The officer's behavior changed immediately from peremptory to ingratiating and said "*would you be good enough [méltószön maga] to leave the platform, Christians are not allowed here [nem szabad kereszténynek itt lenni]*".

She left, and didn't see my father again for a year and a half. She had presence of mind in a pinch. Wow.

As far as my father's war experiences were concerned, as I've mentioned, he almost never talked about them. He NEVER talked about his parents or his early life. Or even not-so-early-life. (But I bet you know *something* about your own grandparents' lives.) And certainly not about his war experiences – except for the episode of his telling one of my school friends about his escape from a transport to Mauthausen death ~~camp~~ factory.

I heard a few things about what my father had gone through, mostly from my mother -- and also a bit from my sister, who remained at home after I'd left for college, from her getting to talk with dad a bit once the tensions of my living at home had subsided. I also read a lot and learned from that. And what I could visualize, that I got from movies. My sister said that dad was more relaxed after I'd left than he'd been before. I think my absence made him feel a bit more relaxed; tensions between men in a household often increase as the boys get older. I think it works the same way with women; my ex-wife was very attentive to our daughter when she was little; but my ex-wife's temper and tolerance diminished as our daughter got older and was starting to show a will of her own. In any event, only rarely would dad make any reference to *any* war experiences. Once, he commented on some concentration camp victims who were so maddened by thirst that they drank gasoline. They all died, of course.

We all carry our parents inside of us all our lives, and my feelings toward my father are, understandably, mixed. I lived at home with my parents until I was 17, and I'd been afraid of him and his outbreaks of mindless and violent temperament since way back. He wasn't an alcoholic; he just had serious P.T.S.D. and anger issues. I knew that his parents had beaten and abused him very badly. And often. And he was undoubtedly savaged in the concentration camps he'd been in -- by guards and officials whom he couldn't put up any resistance to. I have reason to suspect that my dad had ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) when he was young – although that condition was not recognized then -- and that he was hard to control. It's quite possible that his parents were trying to control his [probable] A.D.H.D. by punishing him as much as they did. Well, if he had what we now call ADHD, he really would have been a handful both at school and at home – and punishments don't do much good against that.

My mom told me that at one point that when dad was about nine or ten, the school staff thought that they could distract him and maybe calm him down by giving him something manual to do. So they gave him a load of toothpicks and some glue, to play with. I don't know whether any particular thing was suggested to him, or whether he was left to his own devices or copied a photograph. But by himself, at that young age, he made a toothpick construction of one of the more famous bridges in Budapest: The Chain Bridge (*a lánc híd*), which in real life was huge and crossed the Danube river. It was like the bridge seen in **fig. 7**, except that it standing, and was bigger, and the main cables that swung in a curve between the towers on each end were huge chains. Support cables then extended downwards from the links and held the bridge itself up. My dad made that model so perfectly that the school put it on permanent display in a special display area where it remained until World War II – during which it disappeared. I think that I may well have gotten my own fine-motor

abilities from his genetic contributions. Clearly, my father could have become someone very different and accomplished had the war not torn his guts out. I wish he had had a chance.

Fig. 7 Image of the Lanc Híd [lantz [("L ") + ("a" as in "say AAh") + (ntz)] + heed) Chain Bridge.

ENGLAND IN 1938

I've told you that, toward the end of World War II, my father escaped from a transport that was taking him to a death camp. It's a chilling thought, that one. And he had traveled West and met up with the advancing British Forces, with whom he was "safe". He became quickly useful to them as a translator because he was multi-lingual and could communicate with the flood of end-of-the-war refugees who spoke no English and had no place to go and were looking for something . . . or someone. Dad was given a British uniform (they had nothing else to give him, in any event), which gave him semi-official-looking standing. There's a bit more to the story about my dad's meeting up with the British, and being able to speak to them in their own language.

My parents had already been in England, in 1938. They had tried to leave Hungary then, just as everyone who was able to left that country in the middle and late 1930s. My parents had sold everything they could and converted that into jewelry, which was easy to transport. They had gone to England hoping to find work; and had they done so it would have entitled them to stay there. But they failed in that. My mother did find a position as a nanny (maybe she could take care of kids before the war; she certainly was unable to do that after it); but my dad failed to find a job. So he had to go back to Hungary . . . and mom chose to go back with him. Having to go back must have been a disappointment past words, and they went home to prejudice and hardship.

My parents had both learned some English during that visit; they *had* to have learned at least some English simply to be able to be there looking for work. But, as I said, my parents had to go back to Budapest, to carry on with their lives, and try to survive. Before they'd left, however, they entrusted their Jewelry to a man they'd befriended -- for safekeeping -- until they could find a way to retrieve it later. As things turned out, they wouldn't see each other for ten years.

The point of my telling you about this failed expedition is that my dad's abortive few-months-long stay in England in 1938 became unexpectedly useful when he met up with the British after escaping from that transport to Mauthausen -- *because he'd learned enough English during that failed visit in 1938 so as to be able talk with the British in their own language in 1945, and get a job with them! And survive!* His English improved once he was among the British soldiers, for sure. But the English he had learned from that earlier unsuccessful trip to England became a workable survival kit when he met up with the Brits some years later. Really: *how Goddamn lucky can one get?*

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The Brits hired my multi-lingual father as a translator/ interpreter. And, also, for the same reason, he was given a job as a censor; he could not only speak, but he could read and write those languages as well. The job of a censor consisted of opening and reading as much of the stream of late-war and after-war mail as he was handed. People were wanting to find friends and family members from whom they had been separated. And, of course, they wanted to know who was still alive. Their lives had been torn apart and, understandably, they wanted to have as much of their former lives back as they could scrape together. Central Europe was full with refugees and, as far as mail went, letters were being written in all the languages of that part of the world.

It was in my father's work as a censor that he happened to open a letter from his wife, addressed to the Red Cross, asking if anything was known about him. What are the odds of that kind of thing happening? My father wouldn't have been the only censor hired by the Allies, either, as there would have been thousands of letters to wade through, from thousands of survivors, asking if anybody knew anything about this or that person. What are the odds that he would come across his wife's letter? It might have wound up in the hands of any of the other censors. You'd have a chance on the order of throwing a dart at a bee that was buzzing by on the other side of the room and hitting it. Neither of my parents knew the other was alive. And if my father hadn't opened up that letter they might not have reconnected at all. I don't think that my father would have had any desire whatsoever to go back to Budapest to look for people who were probably dead. Or, if he'd wanted to look for shards of his life a month later he would have been unable to get back into Hungary because it was by then in Russian control and no one was being let into or out of that country. I repeat: *how Goddamned lucky can one get?*

My dad asked his commanding officer for permission to go from Vienna (the British Zone) into Budapest (the Russian Zone). He was given a two-day pass and access to a freight car with which to make the trip. Working for the British forces he of course wore a British uniform, or something that looked like it, and that was going to facilitate our extraction. He went into Budapest and left with my mother, and me, and two suitcases full of what possessions they could carry. Period. That's just about as much in the way of possessions that a lot of the homeless people who now live in my area have, except that they carry what they own in shopping carts rather than in suitcases.

My parents' first meeting each other after a year and a half of Hell, maybe even (Hell)², not even knowing if the other had been alive . . . defeats any attempt to find words that I can think of. They weren't the same people they'd been when they'd last seen one another. There was a 17-month-long deep and traumatizing chasm between them . . . in which they both lost any ability to feel safe. My mother didn't yet know how crazed my father had gotten during the war. And there was no way in which my father could have dealt with his wife's terrors-induced P.T.S.D. He had his own to deal with . . . although no resources existed for anything like that to happen in any event; P.T.S.D. was not yet recognized as anything that existed and that had a name. Plus . . . I'd arrived, and I needed to be taken care of. If I hadn't survived my parents may have had one less thing to worry about, and maybe things could have gone differently for them. They were starting from scratch in a new country, far from their culture, friends, family, memories, and familiar environment; it was too great a combination of challenges, which they sort-of-kind-of-maybe-but-not-really negotiated as best they

could. I feel for them; they were carrying an impossible load, with very limited resources. In case you're wondering why I'm spending so much time in describing my parents to you instead of things about my own life, my own life was 100% informed, and shaped, and misshaped, by my parents' lives.

TWO VERSIONS OF MEETING UP WITH THE ADVANCING BRITISH ARMY

I have heard two versions of how my dad had met up with the British. The first was on the occasion I'd mentioned when, in a moment of expansiveness, he bragged about his wartime successes to one of my high school friends. I heard the story just because I was sitting at the table. Dad made himself out to be a hero, really. He told about his escape from the prisoner death march and, with great brio, of meeting up with the British, and of soon working with/for them in several useful capacities. Part of that story was that he had been trusted enough to eventually be assigned the job of being a quartermaster -- that's the fellow who runs the warehouse that all the equipment and supplies are.

My father may have been overstating his stint as a quartermaster; he wasn't *in* the British army. He had maybe been an assistant to someone whose job it was to do that. However, he did speak German, which was an advantage to anyone living in Austria. That country was in rapid flux at the time, with people stealing, hoarding, buying, finding, selling, trading, and black-marketing anything that they could get their hands on. Dad was able to get "non-regulation" food supplies and alcoholic beverages for the officers. He was in a good position to do so because he could pay for items with British cigarettes, which were better than money at the time -- and of which supply he had access to. In this capacity my father also got hold of several authentic Renaissance paintings . . . certainly looted from whoever had owned them. And they were VALUABLE. They were later stolen from him by my uncle -- the husband of my father's sister. But more about that later. The cigarettes that the Brits and the other allied soldiers preferred, and that were the best currency, were Camel brand. The R.J. Reynolds company, that produced and still produces Camels, must have been doing rather well in those days on account of an increased demand. That company was, in a manner of speaking, packaging money to burn.

What I just said above, however, may or may not have been entirely true. Or at least been exaggerated (but with the exception of what I said about the R.J. Reynolds company). As opposed to that once-heard story about how my father had first encountered the advancing British forces in the railroad yard that served that area, told with some gusto and bravado, my mother told me that she had talked to one of the British officers who had first found him (she'd learned a bit of English, too) -- possibly in the local railroad station or yard. That soldier told her that my dad had been found huddled in a doorway, dazed and shrunken, more than half dead, and trying to eat a raw onion he'd found somewhere (**figs. 8a, b**). He was more dead than alive, and more an animal than a man. He was full of lice and sores, and he weighed 38 kilograms. That's 83 pounds.

Fig. 8a Concentration camp victims.

Fig. 8b Concentration camp victims.

How could people do this to people? Fuck anyone who would even *think* of doing this to another human being. And many of those who did it took *pride* in both doing it as completely and dutifully as they could. May they be rotting in a syphilitic lepers' compound in a deep basement of Hell . . . nailed, like Jesus, but onto a synagogue door instead of a cross . . . on an islet that is slowly sinking down into, and then slowly rising up out of, a tide of putrid and heated-to-3,500-degrees sewage . . . and where at each low tide their skins are sandblasted off . . . verrry . . . slowwwly. I said at the beginning of this narrative that I carry a lot of sadness inside me. I do. But clearly there are other feelings in there too. I trust that you can understand that. The aim of Buddhism is to let go of earthly things and concerns. I'm still working on letting go of these.

HOW LUCKY CAN YOU GET???

Sometime around 1942, being trapped in Hungary and unemployed (or just mostly so, if he could find part-time things to do; non-Jewish businesses were prevented from hiring Jews, and Jewish businesses were discriminated against and were having a hard time surviving), my father was arrested by the police on suspicion of illegal political activity. Evidently some people had had a meeting at his apartment, and someone reported him. I don't know what his part in any of that might have been; but he spent eleven months in jail *in solitary confinement* on account of this, and without a trial or hearing. He was ultimately released, I'm guessing because no one could prove or substantiate the charge. Or wanted to do the work. There does not seem to have been, as far as anyone knows, any legal process or proceedings involved in any event: my father was just locked away and a year later let go.

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My mother, in the absence of dad's ability to earn any money in this period, had gotten a job as a secretary-typist; it was she that brought in the money to support them. Her little typewriter was one of the things that she always took with her, no matter to which new house or country we were going. I keep on telling you, and will keep on commenting on, how I have virtually no memory of my mother in any part of my early life. I'm pretty sure that she spent a lot of time typing letters to friends and relatives back home. No, I don't know who, but she had a box full of correspondence that others had sent her. That typewriter was something that was always around when I was young.

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It was during this time, when my father was in jail, in solitary confinement, that the Nazi transports of Jews out of Hungary and into the concentration/ death camps began. Jews were beginning to be rounded up and taken away in cattle trains to extermination camps like Treblinka, Mauthausen and Auschwitz. They started with the educated Jews, and all my father's schoolmates and friends were in the very first transport. None of them ever came back. If he had not been in jail

then he would have been murdered too. Wow! Really: *How Lucky Can One Get?* He was rounded up in a subsequent call-up and sent to a labor camp (instead of a death camp, that is; labor camp inmates were used for digging trenches, repairing roads, and things like that). It was from this labor camp that he escaped a few weeks after I was born, and came home to hide for two days in the bathroom . . . until he was recaptured . . . and sent to a worse place. Or places. I'll never know. He never spoke about any of that.

It turned out that the first German concentration/killing camps could not keep up with the number of people being shipped to them to be killed. So Auschwitz was built. It was the size of 6,000 football fields and by far the largest death factory (**figs. 9a & 9b**). Auschwitz was actually two side-by-side camps: Auschwitz and Birkenau. Auschwitz, the killing center, *could* keep up with the overwhelming supply of people to be killed. Thousands upon thousands of not only Jews but also Poles, Russians, Czechs, Yugoslavs, Hungarians, and even French were shipped there by the boxcar-load pretty much day in and day out. Those ~~cattle~~ people were unloaded and then almost all of them were killed as soon as possible. Birkenau was a place where the people who hadn't been killed in Auschwitz were sent. To work. They were worked to death. They died in large numbers from hard labor, starvation, diseases, and executions.

Fig. 9a Auschwitz was the size of 6,000 football fields. "Huge" is rather an understatement.

Fig. 9b Dwight Eisenhower's take on Auschwitz, et al.

I might add that all of that was largely made possible by Albert Speer (pronounced "*spear*"), Hitler's minister of Armaments and War production. He was so efficient and effective at keeping up train shipments and schedules all over the Reich, that *it is calculated that, by himself and his staff, he was able to keep the war going for an extra year*. And no, he was not the inventor of the Speer Tire.

In any event, the upshot of all this is that, between this and that, my parents lived in terror and dread such as Southern blacks, expecting to be imminently attacked and killed by the Ku Klux Klan, are likely to have lived with. Minus the freezing snow, of course. As I said, I myself absorbed, and carried . . . and still carry (although now not with the earlier intensity) . . . exactly such a sense of lack-of-being-safe. I osmosed that from the war, and after that from my very troubled parents, day after day and year after year, until I left home for college. And I continued to be crippled by this until I got some therapy when I was in my 40s.

KLAGENFURT

We were living in Klagenfurt, Austria; and my father was working with the British there. That city was not our home, any way that you looked at it; we were not Austrian and we were there because my father had a job with the Brits. We did not feel safe; Austria was an openly Nazi country (Hitler had been Austrian, not German) and we were socially isolated and essentially friendless. We "passed" because both my parents spoke German and we didn't "look" foreign. And it was also my

first language. I hadn't learned to vocalize Hungarian yet; that came next. English and Spanish followed later.

My parents had been able to find an Austrian nanny for me -- a middle-aged woman named "Teta", who took care of me. She was nice. She played with me. Given how poor we were I don't imagine that Teta got paid much; but many of the [relatively few] memories that I have of that part of my life involve her. The truth is that I have more memories of her than I have of my mother. I'm inclined to believe that Teta, not my mother, took most care of me. I have no idea of what my mother did. Except maybe write letters that described how unhappy she was.

In any event, I have only a few faint memoirs of my mother until I was in my teens. Or, maybe I just blocked out her unceasing need for me to fulfill her own needs. She *was* insatiably needy . . . and drained me instead of nourishing me. I was indistinguishable to my mother from a box of Kleenex tissues and its uses; she would take me out whenever she needed to blow her nose, and then she'd lose interest in me and discard me. I didn't understand her until, much later when I was in college and I learned about *narcissism*. A main difference between my parents was that my dad would attack you if you broke a rule (displeased him); my mom would sneak up on you when you weren't looking, whenever she felt a need to have comfort and nourishment . . . and she'd suck that from you. I don't think that she had a clue about ever *giving* comfort. Don't misunderstand: she wasn't clinically crazy; she looked "normal", she cooked and shopped and did helpful domestic things, and probably a lot of nice other little things . . . but, emotionally, she could have sunk the Titanic. I'm inclined to believe that she was to some extent, in those behaviors, replicating the kind of childhood she'd had. That had been a very deprived one also. But I'll never really know.

I have, in fact, *only one memory* from my early life of my mother paying any attention to me -- taking a splinter out of my foot. In the few family photographs that have survived from that time, in no photograph of me with my mother are we physically touching or even looking at one another. It whispers loudly of a fundamental disconnect. So, whatever caring or attention I received then, I owe largely to Teta. It's quite possible that if I hadn't had Teta in my life . . . I would be a bit different from the person I am today . . . and you wouldn't be reading this.

I have few memories of my father, for that matter. He was somewhere between functional and unstable/insane. The insane part could be brutally punitive, and I was scared of him. Also, he wasn't around a lot; he was off doing things for the Brits. As far as things like domestic hygiene were concerned, little kids of that time would shit into baby potty-bowls with handles. Once, when I was two -- that being the age at which youngsters start to become defiant -- my father told me to shit into the "*bili*". I said no. He then spanked me so brutally that I my entire backside was black and blue. Yeah, I was quite frightened of him. He of course acted toward me the way people with more power and authority had acted toward him. What else did he know? And not only that, but he couldn't remember some of his outbursts afterwards; I'm not a psychologist, but I can recognize Dissociative Identity Disorder. It's what used to be called "multiple personality disorder". My dad had it. But, as I've said, what else did he know? He didn't even know himself.

Well, maybe he knew a few other things. He mellowed some as he grew older and no longer needed to function in survival mode, as he had most of his life. Then some of the good stuff in him that had never previously had a chance to come out had a chance to emerge. He liked to eat. He liked to laugh. He liked to tell stories and did so with gusto. And he had stories to tell. He could tell you about old Greek culture and its heroes, Roman culture and its heroes and conquerors, historical events from various periods of European history that most people wouldn't have known about, and lots of facts and stories about this and that in various parts of the world. He could be very charming and entertaining, and even warm and generous. The other side of him was, of course, that of having Dissociative Identity Disorder.

Dad loved dogs; he liked them and trusted them more so than he did people. Well, his life experiences had long since justified that attitude. And as I gained distance from him the more I saw that side of him, and the more impressed I was with the strengths of his toughness and focus in keeping his family together through very hard times as our family pilgrimaged through five countries around the globe that didn't want us. He'd survived things that are close to impossible to imagine and that I'm pretty sure I could not have survived, even with all the advantages I've had. I hope there are dogs where he is now.

Way back when, my parents had a friendly little fox terrier, "Jacky", that my father adored. Jacky lived out his life, and then died, and it hit my father hard. He broke down and cried – which was a behavior that was way out of character for him. He was sobbing like a child from grief, loss, and sorrow. My mother chided/ scolded/ criticized him for being such a wimp. I think it is a shame that the field of marriage counseling had not been invented yet. Or that firing squads were not available for civilians. My mother never showed *any* capacity for sympathy or empathy, and I don't think that marriage counseling would have made a dent in that wall of hers. Well, maybe the firing squad thing could have helped.
