

CHAPTER 5

My family and I are immigrants. No one who is not an immigrant is likely to know how such a displacement feels like. On the other hand, every Chinese, Iranian, Syrian, Nigerian, Afghani, Polish, Haitian, Japanese, Cambodian, Korean, Mexican, Indian, Turk, Hungarian, Pakistani, Palestinian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Central American, Filipino, Gambian, Viet-Nameese, Irish, Nigerian, Philippino, Thai, etc. immigrant who has come to this country – except for the wealthy ones that don't need to scramble for a living – knows what it's like to be in such a new environment – and more often than not without a community of people they can feel comfortable with. There's also a new language to learn, barely adequate housing (some don't even have that at first), new culture, new foods, new laws, new customs, new ways and habits and behaviors, new clothing, new urban traffic patterns and noises, new neighbors, new ways of thinking and prioritizing, new money, new personal values and prejudices, new work, new sense of urgency of time, just plain being different from everyone else, and mostly living among human beings who don't really have any idea of anything concerning them and who don't much care to know anything about them. And even if the latter wasn't so they'd have to look hard to find things in common. It's tough, at first. But by the time they're citizens a lot of them speak at least two languages, and an awful lot of them speak three or four. Yes, things are mighty tough at first.

People feel most comfortable with others who are like them. Period. I've never heard of a single instance of any Afghani immigrant family, any Indian immigrant family, any Chinese immigrant family, any Arabic immigrant family, any Korean immigrant family, any Nigerian immigrant family, any Egyptian immigrant family, any Ecuadorian or Peruvian family, any Mexican or Central American family, or any domestic Afro-American family that has ever had a white American over for dinner. And vice-versa. Have *you* ever heard of even one such? I've had meals with Indian and Mexican families, but then again I'm not really all that different from them. I repeat: as far as I was concerned, I had no connection with any meaningful points of life reference outside those of my family. I didn't know that at the time, of course. But that was it. We lived as though in a submarine.

I look and sound like an American, but I'm not. I didn't grow up here. I arrived here at the age of 15, with my personality and acculturations already established. My mind works with different . . . uh . . . colored crayons, if I can put it like that (**fig. 10**). I haven't internalized the reigning American societal/cultural values which, if you pay attention to the what the media tell us every day, are not those of a nation but rather are those of a business. And it's a predatory one in which everything in the world is property. Me: I've been telling you that I never *had* anything, and whatever we had as a family was repeatedly taken from us, so the life of having, owning, possessing, and controlling things was largely foreign to us. To me.

Fig. 10: Dr. Jack Gillean's letter

LIFE AT HOME

As a side note to my parents' everyday state of mind, as well as their learned culture of upbringing of children, you wouldn't be surprised that they never spoke to my sister and me as though we were people. The culture they'd grown up in didn't have any of that. From what I know neither one of them had, when they were young, ever been treated as anything but objects, or servants, or worthless annoyances. So how would they know to treat my sister and me as little *people*?

The parenting habits and practices of that generation of Europeans, and the ones before it, are ably described by author Alice Miller in her various books. The dominant objective of European parenting in the Pre-World-War-II generations – and still largely today – was, quite bluntly, *to break the child's will*. That has been well documented; and in those generations no one thought twice about it. But that attitude necessarily meant that a child was a burden, a problem to be managed, and not a source of living life in a good way -- despite the fact that no one ever mentioned this. This was certainly my own father's ideology; he talked openly about the need to break his children's will. Morally, and from the point of view of intelligence and even common sense, that is a crime against the young. The young are forced to accept that they are worth something only to the extent that they are obedient to authority. And a lot of people seem to think that if they have enough authority then they're always right.

Added to the fact that my parents never talked to my sister and me as anything other than pets that went to school. We never spoke *with each other*, as a family, about anything that went on outside the walls of our house. I also don't remember either one of my parents EVER having shown any interest in or curiosity about me, my life, my school projects, or what I was otherwise doing. Ditto with my sister. They showed no curiosity or commented about my extensive young-craftsman work of carving, whittling, assembling of kits, playing with toy soldiers, playing with modeling clay and real clay and plaster, drawing/painting, putting together jigsaw puzzles, etc. I did all of that quietly, by myself, and out of sight and sound of either dad or mom. Ditto with my schoolwork. And/or my friends. I'm morally certain that they would have been completely baffled by any suggestion that my sister and I had anything to complain about. They had enough on their plates. I should add that, my mother did help me with dictionary-related homework a few times. My dad didn't touch that stuff. The *only* thing he ever taught me that I can recall is that, early on, he'd showed me how to tie my shoelaces.

As far as I know, my parents were brought up pretty much like they brought me and my sister up. They had been told what to do, and when to do it, and were fed and handed clean clothes to wear every day. As they acted toward me. What my dad did pay attention to was my report cards; he used them to brag about me. As far as I can remember, harsh though it sounds, that was really it. My father bragged about me to everybody all the time. Years later some of his friends were surprised when they learned that I had a sister. Dad had never mentioned her.

The bottom line is/was that my parents didn't like me. Or my sister. This is not an emotional statement; it's just factual. They didn't hate me. *Not liking* is neutral -- like you'd feel about the next bus or car driver that you see. You *don't know* him and you wouldn't either *like* or *dislike* him. My parents didn't know who I was and if they'd taken a lie detector test it would have shown that they honestly believed they'd loved me and done everything for me. I was not a person to them; I was just something they had responsibility for. If they were alive and I could have a conversation with them now about how I experienced them they would be shocked and disbelieving. My mother, the narcissist, would immediately label me as insane and brain-damaged. Bottom line: *liking* and *disliking* are personal, not neutral, and neither of these apply to your feelings about the next bus or car driver you see.

I disliked my parents for denying me love and caring; now that I'm older I can see that they withheld those simply because they didn't know what they were. They'd had none. They had no concept at all of parenting as we might think of it, and if anyone had asked them to make a list of what parenting consists of, they would have been baffled. I must sound like I'm whining a lot, but these are just descriptions of past times and events, and I'm telling you how I felt at my varying points of maturation. In more immediate language, parents fed on my sister and me. They literally fed on our personal energies. To the point of depletion. We *did* do a few nice things, and I was taken to a few movies, but otherwise we had very close to no family or time-together rituals (holidays, Thanksgiving dinners, birthdays, sitting around in the living room in the evenings, etc.) -- outside of going to our favorite Chinese restaurant once every two or three weeks. My young life was 99.8% (1) going to school, and (2) doing something by myself at home. Other than that, my mother sucked at me like a vampire and my father treated me as though he was a concentration camp guard and I was a prisoner. But what else did they know???

MY MOTHER

Giving the parenting mores of those times, my mother's focus landed on my sister and me quite differently. My mother clung to me like Linus of the *Peanuts* cartoon strips clings onto his security blanket. I was her comfort food and the one who could do no wrong (except when I thought or said something that she didn't like; at times like that she was utterly right and I was always wrong -- dropping in the blink of an eye any thought that I was any of the good things she usually described me as. She had strong defenses against any perceived or real criticism). My sister, on the other hand, was the perpetual failure and disappointment to her. My sister could do nothing right, from both my parents' point of view. She was problematic and rebellious, and the one whose every move was seen as less than satisfactory. As for me, I'd learned early on to get out from under the worst episodes of parenting by being acquiescent. One does what one can to survive.

Yet . . . my mother did save my life in Budapest. And did so courageously. She saved my life and I think I saved hers; I must have been some point of focus for her in an environment of unimaginably violent impermanence. If you happen to be wondering how a person who grew up with the deficits I've mentioned has come to be the decent, intelligent, honorable, respectable, and contributive person that I am today, I can offer that I've had quite a bit of counseling and therapy to

help me put my various parts and pieces together in helpful ways. It has very much helped to get me through the difficult stretches. I don't usually mention these things to people, but it *is* part of my story.

So, what did I get from my mother, overall? Well, she bore me, she fed me, she clothed me, she kept me alive, she drove me to school and back when I was young, and she even helped me with my homework from time to time. When I was an adolescent she even got me a book about sex for adolescents (she herself could never have had a conversation on that subject). And she kept the household that we lived in going. But . . . possibly the strongest thing I ever learned from my mother was to be scared of women. I was scared of her in a different way than I was scared of my father. Dad attacked. Mom snuck up on you from your blind spot and sucked you dry. From my mother I learned that women they were Powerful, Dangerous, Clinging, Massively Needy, Opaque, and Likely to Mine Me for Comfort. And after they gotten some they'd Abandon me. In a word, that women were Untrustworthy . . . and Sneaky.

It took me quite a long time and talking in therapy to see that women were really . . . just . . . people. Like me, but different. They're just who they are, some more sane, some more irrational; but they don't, on average, behave pathologically unless they're in politics or have been traumatized a lot. But, well, that applies to the men, too. I can't describe what the discovery/insight that women were . . . uh . . . just people, felt like, other than to say that it was like walking into daylight after having been trapped in a dark underground tunnel for a long time. That insight is one of the most important discoveries I've ever made. And therapy made it possible.

You might be thinking, at this point: *what kind of Holocaust story is this, anyway? It's just a list of your parents' neuroses and shortcomings, and not an account of your war experiences!* Well, yes; it is both. This *is* a bona-fide Holocaust account, and of how I took the Holocaust in -- both directly and from my parents -- and of how our family was pretty much everything to each of us regardless of how dysfunctional we were. We were hermetically ingrown. We were like four survivors on a raft in the middle of the ocean, joined and sealed together as a unit that really didn't have any separate parts. The thing is: *separation is necessary* for adolescents' and teenagers' -- and just plain human -- growth. For us, though, separation was not an option.

THE WOMAN WHO WASN'T THERE

If you are wondering why I'm dwelling on all this early-life stuff so much, instead of getting past it and moving on into my adult experiences, the reason is that I never really got past my early-life stuff. It doesn't work like that for anyone. We all carry these things with us, all the time, until we die. It's just that most people are unaware of how tenacious their early-life lessons and indoctrinations are. Everything in life begins with what is taken in during the first year or two. Or three. And it's reeeeeealllly difficult to change any of that early stuff.

I once met a woman at a group gathering. We didn't know each other, and just started chatting a bit before the meeting started . . . and I was struck by how present, open, genuine, and *natural* she

seemed. And it wasn't that she was *acting* friendly and open; she *was* friendly and open. It was refreshing to talk with someone like that; like a child, but one with an adult mind. Not knowing any better, I blurted out something that I think sounded weird but was nothing other than candid and direct question. I said, "Who ARE you?" -- with an emphasis that revealed great surprise on my part. She didn't answer, and the meeting started, and we stopped talking and sat down, and that was that.

I happened to meet her again at that group's next get-together, though, and she came over to me and told me that she'd been thinking about the question I'd asked her, about who she was. She told me that she'd had a brutally abusive childhood and that, until recently, *she hadn't known that she'd existed*. More of late she had discovered that she did exist. And that was not so much for doing something, but simply that *she existed in the sense of actually taking up space. Of actually being here*. That is a statement that I've never been able to forget. She had just told me that she had been so unconnected to herself that she had no sense of self whatsoever. I never saw her again after that meeting. I've never forgotten her. I hope she's gone on to have a good life.

I felt that I'd been told something important . . . but I didn't know what that was, at that time. It came to me later that I, too, had often felt that I didn't exist; or, rather, that I didn't know that I existed -- which is the same thing, really. My parents had never treated me as though I were a person; instead, I learned from them that I was something . . . negligible. Something faulty. Well, along with not feeling that I meant anything it was easy for me to accept that I had no right to speak or ask or do anything else. I mostly learned that from my father; he was an abusive monster whom we were all terrified of. He ran the household like a concentration camp guard would have acted toward prisoners. He'd learned that style from having himself been brutally mistreated in the camps that he had been in, of course . . . and just barely survived. All in all, it took me a long time to really understand that what that woman had said about not having felt that she existed . . . applied to me also.

MY MOTHER WHO WASN'T THERE

A few years before my mother died she gave me an album that she had assembled, filled with photographs of our family life early on. These were photographs of my mother and father, and me, in Austria and England and Cuba. They were photographs of "people living a normal life": pets, outdoors, sitting with friends, social activities, mothers with their children, and so on. In not one of the photographs did my mother touch or hold me, and in none of the photographs did we even make eye contact with each other. Yet this was not true of the other mothers and babies shown in the photos; they touched, held, and looked at each other. Each of mom's photographs was carefully mounted and labeled as to date, place, and who was being shown. She also spelled my name in two ways, Ervin and Erwin, as though she didn't really know who her son was. Of course, she was fluent in German, and in that language "Erwin" is pronounced "Ervin"; so maybe it was a kind of dyslexia. For that matter, everyone in the family spoke English, Hungarian, Spanish, and German by that point. My father spoke Greek and Latin as well: he'd learned these in the gymnasium school he'd attended many years earlier; at least, he told me so several times. But I never heard him speak Greek; and I only ever heard him say a few words in Latin. On the other hand, my sister told me, many years later and after I'd left home for College, that dad once blew everyone away when, having been invited to lead the prayers at a nearby temple on one of the Jewish holidays (and he agreed to do it!),

dad knew the prayers and incantations by heart! She also reported that he was reading the Hebrew in the Torah, out loud -- even though he hadn't been near to anything having to do with Judaism in decades! In his own way, dad was full of surprises. Mom: not so much. But, in any event, I was talking about one of the repeated challenges my parents faced as we moved around all over the place as refugees -- and needing to learn a new language as we moved from country to country.

I coped with my home life as well as I could. Interactions with my mother, for one thing, were elusive and hard to pin down in that I never *quite* knew what she wanted. Dad could occasionally be very nice, and even when he wasn't his tantrums were time-limited. But when he wanted anything he was THE BOSS, and a demanding one. As far as my mother was concerned, though, she never changed. I tuned her out as completely as I could, for many years; I went into a fugue state whenever she was near. I just shut down. I'd be having a phone conversation with her, and there'd be some kind of interruption in the middle of the conversation; or I'd go deal with something . . . and I'd forget that I'd been on the phone. Once, I forgot I was in the middle of a conversation with her and went to get a glass of water or something like that, and I completely forgot that I was still in the middle of a conversation. I went and did something else, and she waited on the line for more than half an hour before my sister noticed the un-hung-up phone and picked it up . . . to find mom on the other end waiting for me. My sister had to tell mom that I'd gone to take a nap. I don't remember this; my sister told me about it. But why would I ever remember a fugue state? I still blank out sometimes when I'm very frightened or feel unsafe. It should also be a clue to you that she waited on the phone for more than half an hour. She had that level of blindness about, and need for, me. Or what comfort she could get from me. And one of the comforts that she got the most use of was to badmouth dad to me. My mother complained ceaselessly. She couldn't rebel openly, but she was really good at being passive-aggressive. She didn't take up much space in our family life in the way that dad was always the center of attention. She never was that. But I always felt that she took more than she contributed. As for me, I did not survive such unspoken pressures on me, day in and day out, in one piece. Not at home. Not in any meaningful sense.

SOME MORE ABOUT MY DAD

I'm not divided in my opinion of my mother. My father, as I've been saying, is a different story. He could be nice and friendly with me, which I of course liked. But he was also the rageful bully I've described; he could throw tantrums that lasted a long time, or give us the silent treatment for several days until we apologized for "whatever we had done" to set him off. He'd be screaming at us and stomping around the house.

Then the telephone would ring; those calls were almost invariably work-type calls. And when dad picked up the receiver he instantly turned into the most pleasant, conscientious, and even-tempered soul. He could switch from one to the other in the time it takes to pick up a telephone receiver. I'm told that such behavior is characteristic of a Multiple Personality Disorder. So while a part of me has loved "him" he was, really and functionally, two people . . . and I really disliked the bad one. When he came home from work and walked in the front door, I never knew which one of them was coming in.

AUSTRIA

We were in Austria from 1946 to 1948. My dad had met up with the advancing British forces in early 1945, after his escape from the transport to Mauthausen. The Brits took him in, and he worked for them as a translator and as a censor . . . and maybe a few other things such as finding difficult-to-find food and alcohol for the officers -- from the Black Market. He could do that because (1) he could speak German and (2) he could charm his way past anything. I might add that in his work as a translator for the British my dad helped many displaced refugees to tell their stories, find shelter, acquire Identity Papers, and hopefully find home and family, and survive.

FROM AUSTRIA TO ENGLAND

I'd mentioned that we lived in Klagenfurt for two years, and that we left Austria for England when the British forces were being withdrawn from Europe and repatriated home. My parents certainly didn't want to be stranded and isolated in a place where all the flags had swastikas on them. So we moved to England -- although without the necessary permits and papers . . . which left us vulnerable.

I have two memories from our travel from Austria to England. We had packed everything we were going to take with us and were headed toward the train station. I'd had a favorite toy then: a little metal toy-steamship that would float in the washtub and emit smoke from its smokestacks if someone dropped a lighted match into one of them (the match would extinguish itself and make smoke). It was fun for a 4-year old. It was the only toy I remember having had; as you might imagine, the children's toy business had not exactly been anybody's priority in post-war Europe. Anyway, we were on our way to the train station with our boxes and suitcases and I asked my parents if they'd packed my little toy boat. My dad said no, they hadn't packed it. I was hurt; packing that toy (which was small to begin with) would have taken seven or eight seconds. I was smart enough by then to perceive that as a sign of being considered a negligible member of the family. An afterthought of sorts, really. I'd learned that from a lot of other disappointing clues too.

Given my father's wartime experiences in addition to his childhood experiences, he'd been made to feel deeply unimportant and negligible a lot more times than I had. What else may someone who'd been brought up like that, and then survived unimaginable things during the war, have known? May he rest in peace. As far as the forgetting-my-toy incident, it's possible that my parents were sick with uncertainty and anxiety about pulling up stakes and landing in some other country in which dad would have no job or friends or housing, and that they didn't know how they'd fit into. Making me feel like Nothing didn't feel good; but I think they felt exactly the same way and I can cut them some slack. But also, while I have very few mixed feelings about my mother, I still have very mixed ones about dad, because he was in fact the better of my two parents.

The second memory is from when we were aboard that train. It had made a stop somewhere along the line and my father went to the freight car to check on something that he'd packed that

might not have been packed well enough. I went with him; my job was to be the lookout to tell him when the train station's departure-light went on to signal to anyone who'd gotten off to stretch their legs or get a coffee that the train was starting up again. My father was futzing with some things that looked like rolled up bunches of paper or canvas when and I saw the light go on and I started excitedly warning him that the train was about to get going again. He finished his futzing and we went back to the passenger wagon to continue our trip. It was only years later that I understood that those rolls had been valuable Renaissance paintings by famous painters. I daresay that Europe was an open 24-7 black market in those days, with lots of valuable things floating around and bought and sold. My father was enough of a wheeler-dealer to have gotten a hold of some choice items that didn't exactly have a fixed market value – and he'd gotten these valuable Renaissance paintings. Dad shipped them to my uncle, who was living in the U.S., for safekeeping.

MY UNCLE

So, those valuable Renaissance paintings wound up in my uncle's (who lived in the U.S.) hands, for safekeeping. My uncle, you may remember, was the person who would later bring us out of Cuba with the offer of a job for my father . . . on the condition that we live on the Mexican side of the border. So, we lived in Mexicali from 1950 to 1959 . . . and my dad worked for my uncle from 1950 until 1958

My uncle was not a nice man, as I was to find out when I got older. For one thing, he stole the paintings that I just mentioned, from my dad. He denied everything and never gave them back. My father, being an immigrant and having no documentation for anything, didn't have much of a leg to stand on, legally. At that point he wasn't even in the same country in which the theft had occurred! I remember, from the times when my cousin Bob and I got together to play at his house, seeing the large-and-much-more-splendid-than-anything-we-had-and-beautifully-framed oil paintings that hung in my uncle's living room. I didn't know their history. There was a lovely small statue of an elephant on one of the shelves there too. It was pretty; I liked it. And my dad told me it had belonged to me; it was part of the bundle of smaller things that had accompanied the paintings. I don't know what "belonged to me" meant; my little boat that he'd left in Klagenfurt had belonged to me too; and what did that get me? But I knew nothing about how any of that stuff wound up in my uncle's house. I don't know how my dad behaved toward others, but I learned not to trust the things he said to me. There may be some decent Hungarian males . . . but I've not ever known or heard of one.

MEXICALI, FROM 1950 TO 1958, and CANADA in 1958-59

We were granted entry into the U. S. in 1959. It was a double-new-experience for us, as my uncle had just fired my dad the year before and we had been going through some harder-than-usual-times on account of that. My dad had started working for my uncle in 1950, right after we came over from Cuba. And he worked hard. My dad's boss -- that uncle -- was a rigid, authoritarian, and demanding asshole . . . although I didn't see that side of him until I was in my teens. But I'm guessing that that was one of the main products as far as being a Hungarian male in those days was

concerned. As I said, my dad had worked hard, dutifully, and loyally for my uncle since 1950 . . . but was humiliated a lot in lots of little ways. The Hungarian revolution of 1956, which was brutally quelled by the Russians, made it possible to lots of Hungarians to escape from Hungary. One of them was a nephew of my uncle. This nephew was immediately given a job with a higher position and salary than my dad had even after having worked there for six years. And the guy didn't speak any Spanish. That stung.

In 1958 dad wanted to take a trip to Canada to meet a cousin of his who had left Hungary years before, who had initially settled in Calgary, and who had recently relocated in Vancouver. The cousin's name was Mike Sommers, and our families wanted to meet. My uncle said no, you can't go. Dad went anyway -- with mom, my sister, and me. We drove up in our brand new 1958 Chevy Imperial with the "aero-stabilizing tailfins" that were getting popular then. We went North, through Oregon and Washington. And that was the first vacation time my dad had had since he had started working for my uncle in 1950.

About my father's driving: I must say that his driving was very skillful (well, he'd been a daring motorcyclist when he was young, and had had some injuries to prove it; he would have learned quick reflexes and good coordination), but he would be subject to frightening episodes of road rage. He'd chase cars that had cut him off -- or done something else to anger him -- at *very* high speeds, and over winding roads, sometimes up in the mountains. He caught up with someone once and beat him with a belt or hose that he had. When I was a passenger with him, there were times when I was certain we'd be killed. We weren't, because he really was a skillful and lucky driver . . . but I didn't really want to have learned about just how skillful he was, in that way. The worst of the chases that I remember was a car chase in the dark of night, sometime in my teenage years. The only light to see by came from our headlights. And this was on a windey mountain road. Our car was careening and screeching back and forth, at high speed, with mom and my sister and me in the car, and with a mountainside on the left and a cliff/chasm on the right. I was petrified with fear. We were petrified with fear. There were no seat belts or airbags then . . . not that they would have been all that useful in that high-speed chase through mountain roads . . . with nothing to stop a car if it went over the side. I was sure we were going to die. Dad didn't catch up with the other vehicle despite his best efforts, though (and if he had . . . what kind of violent outcome could there have been???) My dad was flat-out enraged *and out of his mind*. But he eventually slowed down . . . and that other car's licence-plate number is forever etched in my brain: JDF 729 . . . with the JDF furiously mouthed in Spanish and the 729 in adrenaline-soaked Hungarian. Oh my God. As I've said before, *JUST HOW LUCKY CAN YOU GET????* Sheesh.

VANCOUVER

Visiting Vancouver was a novel experience for me because, while I'd had quite a bit of experience in going to new places, I'd never met any Family outside of my dad's sister & family -- who were somewhat like plutonium to us. Dad's cousin Mike was a furrier by trade; he made fancy and expensive fur and mink coats and made a living from that. He'd changed his surname from Somogyi to Sommers when he arrived in this country; but aside from that, he was Mike. And he, too, was a Holocaust survivor. And a troubled one. He and his father had been captured during the war,

and were being marched, in a long column of prisoners, toward some concentration camp or holding facility. Young Mike's old father couldn't keep up with the column . . . so the guards shot him to death right then and there, in front of Mike's eyes. He never got over that. And undoubtedly some other things too.

Visiting Vancouver was, in addition to it being novel for me, a bit strange. We stayed with Cousin Mike's family -- which was Mike, his wife, and a son (little Mike), and a daughter. I got a sense that there was some conflict between my dad and Mike, because dad began to act strangely. I don't know what that was all about . . . but if I were asked to tell what I think, on a stack of Bibles, I'd say that dad was acting as though he was the head of Mike's family too. He seemed to think that he was the boss of both families. For one thing, he was trying to put the make on the young daughter (who was just barely an adolescent). He (and also I) overheard a not-too-loud disagreement between big Mike and little Mike -- about something that was their business and had *zero* to do with my dad . . . and dad stepped in and smacked little Mike in the face almost hard enough to knock him down. He did it openly. As though little Mike was his kid and he had any right to do that. I was shocked. Neither big Mike nor my dad seemed . . . I don't know . . . bothered by the incident. At least, I wasn't aware of any discussion of that afterwards. I was used to my dad savaging us . . . but I'd never imagined he would assault someone else's kid. Young Mike was not his to abuse! I never imagined he'd act like he had the hots for an adolescent, either, as he hung around young Mike's sister like a puppy dog. I'd never seen him act so playfully-seductively with anyone before. Watching him behave like that felt . . . well . . . who *was* this person, anyway? Least of all, if dad could slap little Mike around, then big Mike could slap me around too, no? And if he had, I would have had no right to object; I'd been trained in taking in what adults dished out.

We came back from Canada after a few weeks and stopped by the furniture store even before we got to our house. Dad went inside to check back in, and came out a few minutes later, white and shaking. My uncle had fired him for his disobedience in taking a vacation. Well, with my dad suddenly unemployed, tensions rose in our household, and we tightened our belts from lack of income. Having been in the furniture biz for so long, though, and having gotten to know many of the regional furniture makers, dealers, and suppliers, dad *was* able find work as a traveling salesman, selling these various companies' products. He worked long hours, and eventually some money started to come in.

Hungarians -- and almost all males, at that -- are regarded as the smartest minds of their generation. There are lists of such. But from everything I've ever heard or learned, I don't recall ever having heard of a single Hungarian Male who was just a plain nice guy. That culture seems to be quite toxic. On top of what I just said, within a year of my dad's being fired on the spot (without any notice given!), we were granted entry into the United States.