

CHAPTER 8

When my parents finally were able return to England in 1947/48 they managed to do so without the necessary papers. Well, many people at the time didn't have papers or had lost their papers or couldn't get papers. And papers were very important. We had been in England for about six months when my father found the "friend" from their first visit in 1938, to whom he had entrusted the jewelry he'd brought out of Hungary, and asked for its return. The friend said that he didn't have it any more; he'd used it to start a business. But he offered my father a job. A few days later, when my father showed up for work, the police were there waiting for him. His "friend" had reported my parents as illegals; and my parents and I were on a plane to Cuba within 48 hours, having been speedily deported. Who has ever known a bureaucracy to work that quickly? Ours certainly doesn't these days. Unless you're Latino or some other minority.

Besides this being a betrayal, it was a shoddy deal all the way through. For one thing, we didn't know anyone in or anything about Cuba. We had arrived without any preparation for nor knowledge about housing, food, work, or money. And we didn't speak Spanish. My family and I were balled up and thrown away. I'm guessing that there *must* have been an immigrant-helping agency somewhere. But all in all it was an unforgivably shoddy deal they got, for just trying to survive. Thinking of it makes my testicles shrivel up.

I remember actually stepping off the plane in Havana; I found myself in a hot climate such as I'd never experienced before, and I didn't understand anything anyone was saying; that memory has stayed with me. Another prior and contrasting memory that I've kept is of the fogs in England. The fog was so dense that *I couldn't see my hand if my arm was outstretched* – even though my arm was shorter and my eyesight better than they are now. Wow. And, as icing on the cake, the very same four-propeller aircraft that landed us in Havana was never heard from again after it took off from that airport *en route* back to Europe. Wow. If whatever failed on that airplane had done so an hour or two, or four or five, sooner, we'd have been in it. No one ever knew what happened, or when, or where; and our bodies would have been found. *Were we a lucky family, or what?*

A SIDEBAR ON THE METAPHYSICS OF LUCK

HMMMMM. REALLY? . . . this is LUCK??? . . . REALLY? . . . are you JOKING with me???? . . . *THIS IS THE KIND OF LUCK that would be found in the bargain-bin-and-remnants-section of some store in one of the not-all-great-parts-of-town, that's having a clearance sale!* . . . ARE YOU SERIOUS??? . . . YOU HAVE TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME!!! . . . DON'T YOU HAVE ANY ORDINARY NON-LIFE-OR-DEATH-LUCK THAT ONE CAN ACTUALLY FEEL GOOD ABOUT??? Huh??? Duh??? Really??? IS IT YOUR IDEA OF LUCK THAT ONE HAS TO BE TRAUMATIZED AND BEATEN-UP A LOT FIRST, BEFORE THE LUCK KICKS IN??? **THIS** is God's way of supplying us with **LUCK**!!!! Huh? **THIS** way!!!! **REALLY**??? Just what the hell am I missing here?

CUBA

Anyway, we got kicked out of England sent to Cuba, where we would spend the next two years. A lot of displaced people went to Cuba in those days, because it accepted immigrants in without any quota limits. So Cuba became a de facto staging area for refugees to catch their breath and figure out the next move – which was usually to get into the United States, or Canada, or South America, or Australia, or Palestine, or even back to Europe. There must have been some immigrant relief agencies in place to help brand new arrivals, although I was never made aware of any of that. What I do know is that we wound up living in an apartment house that was two blocks of the ocean, and that was full of other refugees. It must have been some kind of cheap housing. And it was as far away as one could get from central Havana and still be dry.

I befriended a boy named Rolf in that apartment house. We were both five years old and we hung out together . . . and I have brief memories of a few events that happened while my family and I lived in that cheap housing. One was that one time, as Rolf and I were playing, he shat in his pants. We were both wearing shorts and no underpants, so his turd just fell out and landed on the floor. I experienced a revulsion so intense that I gagged and almost threw up. I remember this because of the intensity and unexpectedness of my response to seeing shit. I wonder whom I learned to have such disgust from, at the sight of shit? Who would have been cleaning me and my diapers up until then . . . and reacted with such nausea at what young people do until they learn to shit in a place that just gets flushed, and not laundered? And I'd certainly learned how to react when seeing shit. Even now, many years later, when I watch any internet pornography the anal stuff really turns me off.

Another memory is of Rolf and me playing. There was another girl who lived in that apartment house; she was a bit younger than we were and she got us to sneak behind some bushes and she took her panties off and showed us her crotch. She wanted to show it to us. Well, I'd never seen a female crotch before. This one looked red and rubbed raw, and that raw area was rather rectangular instead of roundish or oval. Not knowing any better, I assumed that that was where her penis had been before it got cut off. The redness suggested something like that. It was not until many years later that the thought occurred to me that what I'd seen was evidence of child sexual abuse. I guess that her eagerness to show her crotch to us was on account of the fact that she'd learned that it was an object of interest to someone. I think it really must have been so. I never saw her again. But I wonder sometimes what kind of a life she went on to have. I hope it was a good one, in spite of her having been traumatized early on in a way that would mess with her adult sexuality.

A third memory is of my brushing my young teeth, and dad commenting to me that I should not put so much toothpaste on my brush, because if we used less of it we wouldn't have to buy it more frequently than once a month. The reason that I remember that bit is that I figured out that if we got a tube of toothpaste once a month of that meant 12 tubes of toothpaste per year! Twelve months to a year was an abstraction to me . . . but 12 tubes of toothpaste per year was something I could understand!

We spent two years in Cuba; I was ages 4 to 6. I had sufficient cognitive capacities by then to know that I had to watch out for which way my dad would jump. He could be triggered over the edge into violent rages by lots of seemingly little things. And then, as I said, he acted like a violent prison guard attacking helpless prisoners. It's not past me to think that one reason my mother was able to sink into a hermetically sealed narcissism was from fear of her husband, my dad. One memorable example of the lack of communication in our family was that my dad took me to a building once, when I was six. I had no idea of what the place was or why we were there. No one had said anything to me. And I of course had learned to never express curiosity. I was led into a room, and laid down on a bed, and they put a mask on me and I fell asleep. I woke up later with my little penis bandaged up. I'd been circumcised. No questions. No warning. No consideration for what I might have felt or thought. No explanation. Nothin'. "Go pee now; I've done my job".

My dad's instability really could break loose with no warning. One time my mother had bought a steak and was starting to prepare it for dinner and my father walked in. Remember, this was in 1948-49, before food was sold pre-packaged and stored in refrigerated display cases, as is the case today. Also, Cuba has a Tropical climate, and refrigerators were not in every home at that time. We certainly did not have one. And the air-tight plastic food-storage containers that are so plentiful today weren't around yet either. Dad smelled the flesh and blood of the raw meat (this was also before saran-wrap had been invented . . . and meat was sold freshly cut off, blood and all, from some animal that had been recently killed) and went berserk. The smell of dead flesh instantly pushed him into some intolerable memories from the war. He went crazy. He flung the offending piece of carcass out the window . . . and . . . eventually . . . calmed down. He frequently had no memory of these altered states afterwards. As I've said, that kind of thing used to be called Multiple Personality Disorder, and today it's called Dissociative Identity Disorder. It's when you become someone else, explode, and after you calm down you have no memory of the event. My father deserved better than to have that degree of violent instability. So did we.

Outside of that, I didn't know what work my father did in Havana, to bring in money. I think that he took whatever or however short-term jobs he could find. I do know (from my mother) that one of these jobs had been that of installing air conditioners. Dad didn't know anything about doing that and electrocuted himself, but not fatally. I don't think that job could have lasted very long. And if dad had been killed, or incapacitated, we wouldn't be having this conversation now. That was lucky, no?

By the way, my father received yet another trauma while we were living in Havana. He had been having bad headaches for a while . . . which shouldn't be surprising considering the murderously chaotic stuff that was no doubt churning around in his brain. I'm guessing that he thought that he might be having some dental problems. Or maybe he was having headaches *and* dental problems. I mean, oral hygiene wouldn't have been a priority during and after the war – and maybe even before. And did you ever try to buy a tube of toothpaste in the middle of a war? So dad may well have had genuine dental problems. He went to see a dentist . . . and he came home one evening without any teeth. The dentist had told him that his headaches were due to widespread dental problems and that the solution to that was to extract all the teeth. My dad allowed that to happen. All of his teeth got pulled out -- in one visit. His teeth may have had a lot of decay, and the

extraction of all those teeth must have hurt like Hell. And he might have been charged a lot. I've thought about this, but that dental visit is something I cannot really imagine. And have never been able to. And did Cuban dentists have dental anesthetics of any kind back in after-war-1948-9? My dad wore full upper and lower dentures from that time on.

All of the above aside, I have three other impressions/memories from that time to further illustrate the disconnect between my parents and me -- not to mention the chasm that existed between themselves. For one thing I never knew what my father did for a living in the two years we were in Cuba; you'd think a kid would know what his dad did. But dad never spoke about what he did outside the house. Whatever that was, he made enough money, in the second year, to afford a maid who did a lot of the domestic chores -- including some cooking! Ditto our longer stay in Mexico afterwards. I don't know how much money was involved, but it does leave me wondering what mom did with her liberated time. She did not spend it with me. My recollection of her, in all those years, is that I have no recollection of her. I cannot find her in my memory banks.

The second memory from near the end of our stay in Cuba is that dad showed up after work one day, and announced that he had gotten a jar of mayonnaise! I'd never heard of the stuff, and dad and mom clearly hadn't seen any in years . . . and he was so excited! That word, in Hungarian, is pronounced like "*muhyon-naze*". Well, I'd never heard that word before, but it sounded like words that I *did* know: "*muhyom*" & "*maze*", that were spoken as one word -- just like "mayonnaise". But in Hungarian, "*mayom méz*" means "monkey honey". I thought: monkeys make honey??? . . . well, I'd never seen or heard of monkey honey before . . . much less that it was white, whereas regular honey was amber-brown. But I soon learned that I'd gotten it wrong. The point here is the fact that I never asked what "*muhyonaze*" meant. Can you imagine a young child not asking "*what's that?*" I'd learned to not ask questions.

The third memory is, likewise, of dad coming home from work one day and excitedly telling mom (as I've said, he never spoke to me) that we were going to see a *show* that evening! Seeing dad be excited was unusual in itself, and I didn't know that dad was using an English word in the middle of a sentence that was otherwise in Hungarian, telling us that we were going to see this . . . "show". We went. I'd never seen a "show" before; and I'd never heard the English word "show" either (in fact, dad didn't speak any English with us while we were in Cuba; we communicated 100% in Hungarian). Well, this SHOW was in a theater with a stage on which people in colorful costumes were singing and making music and dancing around. I'd never seen anything like that before, and I remember not being able to make sense of it, loud and colorful though it was. The fact that my father had used the English word "show" in his announcement threw me, though, because "*show*" sounds like the Hungarian word for "salt" -- which I did recognize. So I thought it strange that my dad was so excited about us seeing some salt. But, as I've said several times, I was not allowed to ask questions. So I didn't. I just kept on being alert for a pile of salt all evening. I was five at the time. And, quite honestly, I don't know why they didn't just go by themselves and leave me at home. They did that a lot when I got older, and they did it without telling me where they were going or when they'd be back.

MY DEAR SISTER and THE ROAD TO LUTHERIE

My sister was born in Havana in 1949. I'd noticed my mother getting bigger, but no one talked about it or explained what that signified; and I'd learned to not ask questions. One morning I woke up and there was a new baby in the apartment. I remember being surprised by this; no one had explained to me what was going on or what to expect. Once again: have you ever known a child who has learned to not ask questions about something so glaringly obvious as mom's tummy getting bigger? But it was like that; my parents did not talk with me, and I never talked with them. I was at their beck and call, but they were unavailable to me. They were custodial staff. They were wardens. But, parents? Not so much.

Being so neglected *was* very confusing for me. I had no guidance for things. I needed to learn and figure things out by myself as best I could. And, as I was alone a lot of the time, I'd entertain myself by . . . uh . . . staying busy . . . in gluing kits and models together; I put jigsaw puzzles together; I whittled wooden things; I made things with Erector Sets (if you recall what those were); I played with plaster and modeling clay; I did paint-by-the-numbers; I assembled things of all kinds; etc. That activity has, in fact, been my template from early on, and I've brought that mindset to my guitar making work. With kits, I'd start to make them by following its instruction sheet, and I'd put the parts and pieces together as the picture showed. I figured the steps out. All of these pastimes were quiet ones, too. I want to point out that, along with everything else, such calming and self-soothing activities were no doubt useful in helping me not feel the anxieties that I lived with.

I graduated from U.C. Berkeley in 1966 and have a degree in English, that laughably fungible certificate that people joke about because it's not all that directly useful for anything unless you want to teach. But studying English Literature turned out to be helpful to me. Reading and paying attention to things is a method of thinking about something and figuring out what the various parts of it mean, and how they fit together. It's not all that different from assembling a model airplane, really; all the pieces need to be arranged in the proper order, in the proper sequence, and done correctly, and whatever-it-is can't come out as a piece of unintelligible junk. This hands-on kind of learning problem-solving skills is something that most people are not given any training in. They are taught other things, many of which are shortcuts to something. As I said, I learned all these skills on my own, without help. And these hand skills have become my career.

My parents had always put a great deal of pressure on me, with expectations that I be brilliant and achieve great things . . . so that they could find their really horrible lives to be redeemed by what I could become. I tried for years to meet their expectations, but I never succeeded in pleasing them or making them happy. Not really. I think that they'd lost the ability to feel such things in any event. I might add that I got away from my deadened and full-of-forbiddens early life at age of 17, when I left home to go to college. And if anyone had thought that College would be interesting and engaging for me, it really wasn't. I wasn't able to connect with it or see that it had anything to do with anything that I wanted to be doing. I was in College because it had never been a possibility that I wouldn't. I'm pretty sure that if I'd taken a gap year between High School and College I'd have gotten something out of that.

Compared with me, my sister never received any encouragement/ pressure to amount to anything. In the culture of our parents' day women were not expected to be significant and have a life outside of the home. They weren't expected to be smart or do things; they were only supposed to marry well. In those days that was the common attitude. But my sister was and is very smart. She went to college, became educated, learned skills, and later became a counselor in a dialysis facility. She recently retired; but she was good, and respected, and also very useful because she spoke (and speaks) Spanish -- which a lot of the dialysis patients and their families, in Southern California mostly spoke. She also speaks Hungarian.

The most important thing my parents accomplished, in the way of marine creatures that leave their young in a safe place, and then die, was that they brought my sister and me to a land where people weren't out to kill us, no questions asked. That's a huge accomplishment. And they taught me that education is important . . . so I did well in school. That's an accomplishment too. On the other hand, they really were unbelievably insensitive to each other and to both of their children. My sister reports that dad mellowed out as he got older; it would have been nice for me to have seen some of that, but I'd left home by then. Mom never grew more than five or ten brain cells for sensitivity while I knew her. But, of course, living with my father wouldn't have given her any opportunity to.

My sister married and had two children. Her husband, John, was an engineer. They met in a bowling alley. She had told me that she had been going through a bout of serious depression, and was at the end of her rope, and had been thinking of ending her life . . . or going bowling. She decided to go bowling instead . . . and that's where she met her future husband. I must say that a choice between bowling and suicide is difficult to say anything about to anyone, particularly if they hadn't been there. As for myself, I met my present partner through a singles ad. I had a conversation with my sister and brother-in-law, about the difficulty of telling a reader useful information about your life in the three to five lines that most of the ads were (they charged by the word). I commented that that would be a relatively easy task for an engineer; his ad would consist of the word "engineer", followed by a phone number or a p.o. box address. (NOTE: this was before the internet and computers.) My brother-in-law gave me a serious look and agreed. He said "*yeah. Of course*". And, really: what else would anyone want to or need to know?

(1) TO THE UNITED STATES . . . ALMOST; AND (2) MY UNCLE

In 1950, when I was six, we moved from Cuba to the United States. Actually, it was a transition period; we were only In the U.S. for about a month. We were actually transitioning to Mexicali, Mexico, where we would spend the next nine years.

As to why we went there, my uncle-in-law Maurice (my father's sister's husband) offered my dad a job. Maurice owned a furniture store in Mexicali, Mexico, which is a Siamese twin town together with Calexico on the U.S. side. These are really one city with a fence running through it, and the commute from one to the other was easy; Americans had not yet learned to be afraid of Latinos. My uncle had contacted my parents while we were in Cuba and had offered my father a job in his

furniture store . . . and it came with strings attached: we had to live in Mexicali, on the Mexican side of the border. We could have lived in the U.S., but my dad was talked into not doing that. A mistake, that one, but the only other choice was to stay in Cuba . . . or immigrate into the U.S. – *without* a job or income, housing, knowing anyone, support, or contacts or family, really . . . and without enough(?) language or work experience/resumé.

I haven't said much about my uncle other than that he stole a bunch of valuable things from my dad. My uncle already owned a prosperous business; but we were broke and that wealth that my uncle stole could have gotten us off to a better start than the one we had. No such luck. My uncle and aunt lived in Calexico -- on the American side of the border. Mexicali and Calexico (whose names are amalgams of the words Mexico and California) are actually, as I said, one entire urban center with a boundary fence through the middle of it. So we moved across the border to the Mexican side, where we immediately moved into a slum that my uncle had lined up for us. I didn't know that it was a slum, but I know that now; and bit by bit I figured out that there was enmity between these men. Had my uncle not stolen the paintings from my dad, their value would have enabled us to not live in a slum. As it was, we had nothing except some clothes, and not many of those. And there *was* enmity between these men.

That enmity stemmed from my uncle's marriage to my father's sister. Back in the 1910s and 1920s my father's father ran a small furniture-making factory in Budapest. He was killed in a streetcar accident in 1930. My father, being the next male in line, was expected to take over command of the family enterprise and keep the family going. I've received two accounts of those events at those times. They may both be true. The first account is that dad wasn't interested in running that business; and he allowed it to run itself into the ground and fold. At that point, with no income for the family to count on, my aunt had to go find a job and bring in some money. And she did. But now, being a working-class woman, her status was thereby reduced to that of a second-class and less desirable wife. Her prospects for a "good marriage" were ruined. She loathed my father after that and, as far as I know, made no attempt to get in touch with either her parents or my dad throughout the entire war.

Maurice (a.k.a. Maurizio, Móritz, and Mauricio, depending on which language was being used), was a businessman who owned the biggest furniture store in Mexicali, Mexico -- a city no one in Hungary would ever have heard of. He was one of the Hungarian expatriates who had managed to leave Hungary in the late 1920s, and he had gone on to grow a business in Mexico. He returned to Hungary in the mid-1930s in order to find a Hungarian wife. He wanted one quickly; he didn't have too much time to waste. The second account I've heard is that my late grandfather's business had died because of the world-wide depression that had started in 1929, and that lasted an entire decade. LOTS of businesses failed during those lean times. And that would explain at least part of my dad's furniture-making-business failure.

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Maurice had wanted to find a wife quickly; so he entered into an arranged marriage to my aunt, that now-second-class woman by virtue of the fact that she worked. She married a man whom

he'd not ever met before and didn't know, and who would not have been suitable under any circumstances. Some arranged marriages can work, and some can't. Edith and Maurice's marriage didn't. They were mismatched. She had settled for less; and he was exactly that. And they soon seriously disliked one another. It was an unhappy and loveless marriage . . . and my aunt hated my father because he had ruined her life.

Maurice was now my uncle-in-law. My dad had survived the dislocations and traumas of the War; he'd lost pretty much his entire pre-War life, and friends, and family, and home. He was stuck in Cuba, having been deported there . . . and he really didn't know where to turn or go to for help. As I said, Maurizio got in touch with my parents then, and he offered his brother-in-law, my dad, a job in his business -- but the offer came with strings attached; our family had to live in the Mexican side of the border. My father accepted. Maurice was going to be my dad's boss in the furniture store . . . and we moved to Mexicali a few months later. I was a young child at that time and Maurice seemed friendly and warm and charming . . . until I saw, later in life, that he was a hard-nosed tyrant and only charming when it suited him to be so. I feel sorry for my aunt Edith, in retrospect, because Maurice really was an insensitive and authoritarian asshole boss and husband. I'm not surprised at this, in retrospect, because Maurice had undoubtedly gotten the same kind of Hungarian macho & entitled cultural upbringing/ indoctrination that my dad had had: that is, make sure that the people over whom you have power know that. The Male is always right, and not to be questioned. Not unlike the Nazis, actually. Unfortunately, in my dad's case, he was never in a position to boss around or be mean to anyone other than his family.

This was all made worse because -- working by then for Maurice -- Edith prevailed on her husband to make life for my dad as miserable and humiliating as he could. My father wasn't the most sensitive person around, either, and these circumstances didn't help anything except maybe reinforce Edith's sense of resentment. And, not least, as he was working for my uncle, my dad was once again in the position of being under someone's unforgiving thumb. I'm inclined to think that at least part of the trauma and rages that my family suffered at home, while we lived in Mexicali, was due to friction between all of these individuals. But dad had no leverage with them. He could only lash out . . . at us.

My father's living in Mexicali was to my uncle's advantage. My dad lived close by and he worked hard. But being in Mexicali really didn't work for my dad. Mexicali had a worse culture to live in than he would have had on the American side of the border. And dad hated and had contempt for Mexicans and didn't like living among them. Maurizio was also a strict and demanding boss and my father felt humiliated, unappreciated, and passed over . . . but he had no power to make that different. Dad came home one day with a bandaged-up nose. There had been a robbery at gunpoint at the store he worked at, and had tried to take the gun away from one of the robbers. That robber smashed his face in with a gun and broke his nose. My dear uncle never voiced appreciation for what dad had done in an attempt to protect the store.

Also, we were living in a slum for the first few years, and there was nothing about Mexicali that felt good to my father. The fact that he and my mom could speak four languages, and were widely traveled, was useless in Mexicali. As to Maurizio's resentment toward my father for his

having been a factor in Maurizio's having married a woman whom he'd learned to dislike intensely . . . it never seems to have occurred to him that he had, as an adult, and without having been forced to do so, had agreed to enter into that marriage. To top it all off, he and Edith couldn't have children; and that must have felt bad too. My cousin Bob, their son, was adopted . . . and -- as had been the case with me -- he never really received any caring attention. My uncle and aunt spoke Hungarian with each other so that Bob couldn't understand what they were talking about. He was excluded. Well, I knew what that felt like.

JUMPING AHEAD A FEW YEARS CANADA, 1958-59

My dad worked for my uncle, in his furniture store in Mexicali, for eight years -- from 1950 to 1958. In that year my dad wanted to take a trip to Canada, to meet a cousin of his who had escaped from Hungary years before and who had lived somewhere in central Canada until then, and who had recently resettled in Vancouver, on the West coast. 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, in our brand new 1958 Chevy Imperial with the "aero-stabilizing tailfins" that were getting popular then.

Visiting Vancouver was a novel experience for me because I'd never met any Family outside of my dad's sister. 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; aside from that, he was Mike. But he, too, was a Holocaust survivor, and a troubled one. He and his father had been captured by the Nazis at one point and were being marched, in a long column of prisoners, probably toward some concentration camp or holding facility. Mike's old father couldn't keep up with the column . . . so they shot him. Right then and there in front of Mike's eyes. He never got over that. And no doubt some other things too.

Visiting Vancouver was, in addition to it being novel for me, a bit strange. We stayed in cousin Mike's house, with his family. This consisted of his wife and a son (little Mike) and a daughter. I got a sense that there was some conflict between my dad and big 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. Along with that, he was trying to put the make on the young daughter (who was just barely an adolescent). Dad was playful, teasing, and playful with her! I'd never seen him be playful and teasing with anybody; it was pretty obvious, and out in the open, and no one seemed to pay attention to that. Even stranger: Big Mike and Little Mike were in a loud disagreement and dad stepped in . . . by slapping little Mike in the face. Openly. Without warning. And hard. I was shocked to witness it. Dad hadn't said anything, either: he made no verbal intervention. He just walked over to little Mike and whacked him. As though he owned Little Mike. Neither big Mike nor my dad seemed . . . I don't know . . . bothered by the incident. If big Mike was upset by dad's charging in and without a word smacked his son, he didn't say anything. My guess is that he was intimidated by dad.

I was used to my father savaging us . . . but I'd never imagined he would assault someone else's kid – and certainly not for reasons that didn't involve him at all. I never imagined he'd acted like he had the hots for an adolescent, either; but really, I'd never seen him act so playfully and seductively with anyone before. The daughter was just a few pounds heavier than ideal, and dad in the most playfully loving tone of voice (such as I'd never ever heard come out of his mouth) called her his "*zhirpatzni*", which means "*little ball of fat (or lard)*". Watching him behave like that felt . . . well . . . who *was* this person, anyway? Well, whoever he was, he had really poor boundaries with family members.

Little Mike from Vancouver, who had been assaulted by my dad for some infraction or annoyance had, unsurprisingly, been brought up by a troubled father who had just as few parenting skills as my dad had had. I don't think big Mike and little Mike got on too well. I was 14 when I'd met little Mike in Vancouver, and he was a few years younger than I was . . . and I am inclined to believe that his family life was just as empty and surreal as mine was. I cannot think of any reason to believe that there was any more meaningful communication between members of Mike's family than there was in mine; our families had both come out of a meat grinder.

In due time young Mike got married, and had two boys, and at one point he and his family moved to Las Vegas – where we once also visited them. But he was not well. He was very skinny by then. Gaunt. He didn't eat, and he kept on losing weight . . . until he died, mainly from starvation . . . and, I think, from a lack of desire to live. May he rest in more peace than he had in his lifetime.

I'd mentioned that I'd been part of a Children of Holocaust Survivors discussion group a few years after these things happened, and that I'd noticed that all the others' families had histories of major dysfunction. Well, everyone that I knew of in my own family certainly fit into that troubled group. The relationship between violence and dysfunction has got to be one of the most obvious things on Earth; there's been and there is so much of it everywhere. Certainly in Western countries. But, interestingly, I've not ever heard anyone mention that pairing -- and that includes hearing or seeing references to it the media. Have you? I never heard it mentioned in any school or classroom I was ever in . . . except in some of the psych classes.

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We came back from Canada after a few weeks, to find that my dad was unemployed. My uncle had fired him, for his disobedience. 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, though, and having gotten to know many of the regional furniture makers 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. Well, it takes time to get to know buyers, and be known by them, and so establish a friendly commercial relationship. And dad was good at that.

It helped that this was happening within the general post-World-War-II era of prosperity that lasted until about 1970; population was increasing, towns and cities were growing, houses were being built, and there was high demand for domestic furnishings. So dad was able to make a living

and not be under my uncle's thumb. And, on top of all that, within a year of these things happening, in 1959, we were granted entry into the United States.

IMMIGRANTS ONCE MORE, BUT FOR THE LAST TIME

We were granted entry into the United States in 1959. As newbies, we had green cards. As I'd said, my dad had had experience in and with the furniture trade in the Southern part of California, and he was on his way to making a living from then on as a traveling furniture salesman -- through which he got to know people in the furniture trade from San Diego all the way to Phoenix. He was -- as with the Lion's Club -- funny with the people in that network, and interesting, and he could be gently insistent in matters of business. He was liked everywhere. Every so often he would take me on his rounds, to meet and be shown off to his "clients". Those were really boring experiences for me. But sometimes interesting, too. I once accompanied dad to a store that owed him money, and I got to witness my dad in persuading mode. That was an eye-opener for me. The owner insisted that he was in difficulties and had no money to pay him with . . . and my dad gently and patiently, without ever getting angry, and in a friendly but firm voice, repeatedly assured this man that non-payment was unacceptable; that he had to pay the debt. He didn't take no for an answer. And he did that very skillfully and patiently. At the end, the man gave in and made out a check to my dad. I'd never seen that side of my father before. And I never did again. Well, there was a lot I hadn't understood about how much flexibility and subtlety there can be in business (and, I guess, other) communication. Flexibility and subtlety were something I'd never seen at home.

MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER

My mother was a young girl during World War I, when her father went off in the army. The family didn't see him again for three or four years. My mother's mother was left with four children, a house to run, laundry to do, food to cook . . . and she wouldn't have had the resources to pay what we would call attention to her children.

Her own lack of household and family skills was largely on account of the fact that she herself had had a very deprived early life. She had been left on the front steps of a church shortly after she was born. The church's priest passed the baby on to a nearby convent. My grandmother never knew anything about her own family. Or any normal family, for that matter; she had been left on the doorstep of a convent and thus become an instant orphan. She lived among and was brought up by the convent's nuns until she was eighteen years old . . . at which point she was let go and told to find her way in the world. I cannot imagine what kind of, or how much, preparation for life she could have been given by the nuns; certainly regarding men, children, families, money, etc. I imagine that she was taught to read and write; but I can't imagine what kind of other upbringing she could have had than to clean and cook and pray. And I'm told that in those days nuns were strict in how they ran things, too.

The culture of bringing up children, in those times and places, was severe. I only know that sometime after she left the convent she met my grandfather, married him, and gave birth to my mother and her two sisters and a brother. That brother was killed in World War II. His body was found in a mass grave after the war, and my grandfather had to go and identify his son's decaying and putrescent body. That was grandma's son, too. Her story makes me sad. By today's standards, she never had much of a chance to have a life that we'd call a life. I have no reason to think that nuns treated the young with anything that we'd recognize as a happy upbringing, or even young boys and other girls to play with. I imagine that any "happy upbringing" would have been more fun than daily praying to God and Christ. From what I know, neither one of these showed good will toward my grandmother.

Grandma traveled to the U.S. in 1961, a few weeks before I left for college. And she stayed with us for a few months. She had gnarled hands and swollen finger joints from arthritis, and she sat quietly and knitted doilies all day long, every day. Eventually every piece of furniture we had was covered with doilies. My father didn't want her around at all, and never spoke to her . . . and my mother (her daughter!) ignored her as well . . . in fact, much as she had ignored me from early on. I was surprised by that, as mom had always spoken of her loving home life. As far as I know, my grandma stayed in our home 100% of the time she was with us . . . knitting doilies. I don't think she ever left the house. My parents never took each other anywhere, and they certainly didn't take her anywhere. Grandma spoke only Hungarian . . . and I don't think that either one of my parents ever said more than a hundred words to her. I feel badly for her; she suffered more than my mother ever had, to the end of her life. And that short grandparental meeting I had with her was the bulk of my experience with any of my own greater family – with the exceptions of two second cousins of mine who live in England and whom I've visited.

ON (MY) EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT, if you can call it that

I've been telling you that my father was a troubled man. But to put this into a more realistic perspective I'll tell you that my sister knows three women whose fathers were much worse and more violent than ours was. Our life could have been worse. Still, my parents fought all the time, and sometimes intensely; my dad would be exploding and screaming, and mom would have been crying and trying to fight back. When my father yelled you could hear him from next door.

I learned a weird straddling-act at an early age. My biggest role at home was to be invisible. Given the crazinesses we lived with, and despite the need for touching and comfort that all young people have, I was actually happier as long as no one noticed me. My other role was to be the calm adult-surrogate whose job it was to separate my parents and calm them down. I acted as a sort of family referee from an early age on. Well, my parents were damaged by their war experiences -- and no doubt also their own difficult childhoods; they were both born around World War I and no one got away from that intact. And then there is the matter of European child-rearing culture that I've mentioned. So, my parents were not adults on the inside; they just looked it from the outside. Now that I am older and know what they lived through, I know that they really did the best they could,

with remarkably few resources. I try to honor them as much as I can. But sometimes I quite honestly hate them.

Yet way back then, when they were fighting with each other, I could (somewhat) stand between them and get them to stop. Dad, especially, seemed to listen to me/hear me, and he'd disengage from fighting. Or tone it down. And sometimes he would disengage from fighting but give us the silent treatment for a few days until we apologized for whatever we had done to anger him. Then he talked with us again. Yeah, he was a concentration camp commandant in our house, with the emotional maturity of a five-year old.

MY DAD IN 1942-45

Sometime in 1942 my father was arrested by the Budapest 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 then spent eleven months in jail *in solitary confinement* for this, without a trial or hearing. Or even an explanation. He was ultimately released because no one could prove or substantiate the charge – assuming that anyone had even tried to do that. In any event there does not seem to have been, as far as anyone knows, any legal process or proceedings involved: he was just locked away and a year later let go.

It was during this time, when my father was in jail, that the first official Nazi transports of Jews out of Hungary occurred. Jews were beginning to be rounded up and taken away in cattle cars to extermination camps like Treblinka, Mauthausen and Auschwitz. They started with the educated Jews. 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. My God. *Man, how lucky can one get?* He was rounded up in 1944 in a subsequent call-up and sent to a labor camp (instead of a death camp; labor camp inmates were used for digging trenches, repairing roads, and things like that). He escaped from this labor camp a few weeks after I was born, and came home to hide for two or three days, in our bathroom . . . until he was recaptured and sent . . . somewhere. We never knew where.

The upshot of all this is that, between this and that, my parents and I lived in terror and dread such as Southern blacks, expecting to be imminently attacked and killed by the Ku Klux Klan, are sure to have felt. Me, I've grown up with a significant sense of not-being-safe, that has enabled me to have anxieties and depressions all my life. My father was hauled away in 1944 because he'd broken the law by being a Jew. And he was transported to . . . well, we never knew where. We didn't know if he was alive or dead, for a year and a half after that. And he never said anything about where he'd been or what he'd endured.

On Easter Day of 1945 my father escaped from a column of prisoners who were being marched to Mauthausen, one of the Nazi death camps. It was near the end of the war and the Germans were trying to clean up and hide the things they'd done. The column he was in was halted next to stalled train, everyone having stopped to let a long line of retreating German vehicles get through the

intersection. Dad backed away from the line of prisoners and sat down on the coupling between two of the train cars. Some of his fellow prisoners tried to call him back to return to the column. He stayed where he was. And when the train started up again dad was carried away with it, away from the death march. He was spotted by some of the railway people, somewhere along the way, and dad told them that he'd been buried under a collapsed building that had been bombed. I guess he looked the part. And, like I said, maybe no one cared at that point.

My grandmother, who had been brought up in a convent, had a feeling the night before that something bad was nearing . . . and she stayed up all night, praying for dad. And dad made his escape the next day, on Easter Sunday. It was done out some survival impulse, and also the sense that he had nothing to lose. And maybe grandma's prayers? But he'd gotten away from the convoy of prisoners, who were very likely all killed as soon as they got to Mauthausen.

Dad made his way West, mostly at night and under the cover of darkness. At one point he knocked on someone's door to beg for food; the woman who answered the door gave him some food and told him to not go on a particular road, because there was a road block there and he would have been captured; that he should take another road. She said she didn't know where her husband was, or if he were even alive, but she hoped that if he was someone had helped him like she was helping my dad. My dad traveled West for two weeks until he met up with the British, in Austria. He soon proved useful because he spoke English and also Hungarian and German, and could function as a translator in a situation that was flooded with wandering refugees who were seeking something that they recognized, from their destroyed lives.

My dad could speak English with the Brits because of my parents' abortive visit to England in 1938 that I've described earlier. They'd hoped to find a way to emigrate to England from Hungary, but didn't have enough luck, contacts, or credentials to swing that. So they had to return to Budapest . . . carrying with them the English they'd learned in their few months in England. They *had* needed to learn some English words there if they wanted to find work in England; that learning had not been useful in 1938, but it would turn out to be very useful some years later when my escaped father met up with the Brits. My parents had returned to Budapest from that excursion in 1938, carried on with their lives, and tried to survive. Times were tough there and they got steadily tougher over the next few years. I don't know what my parents did to survive; they never talked about that. It couldn't have been easy. But having learned some English during that failed trip to England years before was to become a life-saver for them. *Just how lucky can you get???*