

WHILE I WAS THERE

... and NOW

Susan Gimesy

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Susan Gimesy

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DEDICATION

*To my grandchildren
Brittany, Matthew, Benjamin and Nicholas
So that you know where you come from.
With love.*

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“Your life is what your thoughts make it.”

Marcus Aurelius

1

MY LIFE NOW

Finally, I am retired. All my life I worked and I loved it. Now I have a wonderful home which I share with my grandchildren and my daughter, and my sons-in-law, and my dog 'Pheobe'. I have a lovely garden and now I can relax and reflect on so many things that happened to me.

I keep busy because I have always been a very busy person. I research things, read, keep up my correspondence and listen to music, which is a very important part of my life. I enjoy the fact that I don't have to get up every morning at 7 o'clock or earlier. So in that sense I feel very different – relaxed.

I have a wonderful family with my daughter, Pam, and her husband, Mike, and children, Benjamin and Nicholas. Brittany and Matthew, the children of my daughter, Amy, who died, are also very frequent visitors. They stay over with me and I'm trying to give them as much love as I possibly can as their grandmother, because to lose a mother is tragic, especially as they are still so young.

So I am concentrating on my grandchildren and my garden and my music and my reading and all my health problems. I'd never been to hospital before I was 65 years old except to have children. But I'm trying to keep fit. I'm 78 years old which is not young anymore. My daughter once said, "Mom, you are not old anymore, you are ancient." And she said that when I was only 45 years old, and she was a little girl.

So this is my present life, concentrating on my family and all my friends. I am very fortunate to have so many friends around the world. I lived in Canada for 20 years and my girlfriends are all there, and we talk frequently. They are taking turns to keep in touch.

I have travelled a lot in my life, but this is the first year that I have not. I don't want to go anywhere for a while. I did a very big trip last year around the world with my grandchildren - Amy's two children - because Amy wanted to show them where I was born in Hungary and where she was born in Canada. She did not make it, so I wanted to do that for my grandchildren while I still could.

I call my place my sanctuary because I can get away from all my sorrows, such as the loss of my parents, my husband and Amy. I had a late but very wonderful marriage with my last husband, Oscar. Since I lost him I can't really relax or enjoy life, or laugh heartily as I used to do. But you just have to learn to live with it.

What is my motivation for wanting to record my story at this point in time? I started writing because I thought that the children should know where I came from. I wanted to tell them about the terrible times that we went through during the Second World War. God-willing they will never experience anything like it. We didn't think it would happen to us either.

I am Jewish, though I've never been religious. But on Friday nights I light two candles. My grandmother did that – she said she was praying for her children's health, the family's health.

My mother did it, and I'm doing it now, and my daughter, Pam says that once I'm gone, she's going to continue the tradition.

I am writing this so that my family should know a bit more about the world. Living here in Australia we are so blessed. We are protected from so much of the ugliness that's going on in the world. They should also know what life can be like at its worst.

I also think of my brother, Peter, as I write this, a fellow survivor of the Holocaust. He also lives in Australia. It gives me great satisfaction that I was able to arrange for him to come here. He is married with children and grandchildren, happily settled. We are very close, even though the age difference is quite large. When all these terrible things started, he was only 8 years old.

I sometimes think of this book as a 'cleansing of the soul'. It's not that I want to cleanse myself of 'sins' as such, but rather I feel it is something I need to do in order to be free. It is an obligation I must fulfil.

I believe that we should record the things that happened to us during the Second World War. The world should know about the Holocaust and how it could possibly happen that millions of people like us were killed. It should never be forgotten. It should never happen again.

2

CHILDHOOD IN BUDAPEST

I was born on March 9, 1929, in Budapest. My grandmother, who was very religious, said to my mother, “Just don’t give birth on a Saturday because I won’t be able to come to see you in the hospital.”

And of course it was Friday night that she had to go to the hospital, but she made the best of it by saying that this was a blessing to be born on Friday night or Saturday morning. And my blessing with my own two children was that I wanted them to be born on a Sunday – because Sunday is a lovely day – and they were both born on a Sunday.

My mother and father were both city dwellers. Their families had always lived in Budapest. My ancestors had been in Hungary for a long time, I don’t know how long.

As a young man, my father tutored to make a little money, and he tutored one of my mother’s brothers. That is how they met. My father had a wonderful sense of humour. We had so many

laughs, but my mother was very naïve. My father had to explain things to her occasionally. My mother was much loved. I think that later young men came to visit my mother rather than me. She was so popular with people because she cared about them.

I was a wanted child. My parents really wanted me to be a girl, which is quite unusual, boys being preferred as first born even today. They named me Zsuzsanna, Zsuzsi for short (Susan in English). They felt they were blessed with me and I brought them both happiness. Our surname was Barta.

We were not middle class, but lower middle class I think I would say. But the family was lovely and warm and I had a happy childhood until I was 12 and the war came.

We lived in a two-room apartment in the city. It was nice and clean and we had a maid because everybody had a maid in those days. The maids came from the countryside. They loved living in the city. Our maid was also named Zsuzsi. When my mother called, we didn't know which one of us had to run, so we called her Balogh, her family name, to differentiate her from me.

It was good to live in Budapest at that time. I enjoyed school, our extended family life and the excursions we went on. There were certain things we couldn't afford but nothing important was missing from my life.

We had our daily routines. My father went to work and came home at lunchtime. We all had our main meal at that time. My father went to rest a little bit, and then got up and went to his second job. I adored my father. He was my idol. My mother was a typical, wonderful mother. She took care of everybody; her heart went out to everyone.

Then my brother, Peter, came in 1936. He was special because he was the only boy; all our cousins were girls. So he was the only one to carry on the name 'Barta' which was important to

us. There was nearly a 7 year age difference between my brother and I, but we were close always.

So we just had a very happy life with our friends, going to a movie occasionally. We went on holidays, but very brief ones, and not too far away because we couldn't afford much. But we always got whatever we wanted essentially.

We went on holidays to a lake. My Uncle Jenó, who was a solicitor, had a villa in the country. It was about one hour away on a trip by train, but we thought it was a big excursion. We went there every year for a week or so. We were given the villa and our cousins came at the same time, so it was a very nice holiday.

My grandfather had died early leaving Mamushka with five children and the eldest boy, Jenó, was the one who had to receive the education. He eventually became a chartered accountant and a solicitor with a doctorate. He was the first Dr. Barta in the family. (Peter, my brother, much later became the second.)

When my brother, Peter, was born, Uncle Jenó sent us a telegram to congratulate us on his arrival. He added, "Please do not circumcise him."

We were really surprised. Why? But my grandparents and my mother wanted to have him circumcised and so he was, because in those days Jews were always circumcised. I don't know about Europe generally, but in Hungary definitely. That was an easy way to find out if a man was Jewish. You just took his pants off and you knew he was a Jew. I guess my uncle was more observant of the political situation than most, or perhaps he had contacts who warned him of what was coming.



In Budapest we lived in a very mixed area. We had Jews and non-Jews in the apartment building in which we lived.

It was a very nice area, not too expensive, just a nice medium neighbourhood.

As I have said, my mother's family was religious, but my father's was not, and when they married, my father said that he didn't want a kosher household or anything like that. He respected the religion, but we were not religious. So my grandparents came to visit us, but would never eat at our place because we were not kosher. Other than that, being Jewish or non-Jewish didn't make any difference to anybody at that time. At least when I was a child, I didn't feel it made any difference.

I had no sense of being Jewish. None at all. Only when I went to my grandparents' place for Friday night dinner did I feel any difference. But that was tradition rather than religion. We had special food, fish and wonderful soups. That was the only way that we thought of ourselves as being Jewish at that time.



One of my earliest memories concerns the wife of Admiral Horthy who ruled the country in those years. It is funny to think of Hungary being ruled by an Admiral because it is a landlocked country. His title went back to the days when Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and it did have a navy.

He became the leader of Hungary not long after the First World War. After that war, there was a great deal of political turmoil and bloodshed and people welcomed Admiral Horthy because he was a 'strong man' who imposed order. Although history has seen him as a controversial figure because of the role he played during the Second World War, in the days when I was a child, he was generally respected.

We respected the Horthy family, as all Hungarians did. These were the days of our innocence, long before the unimaginable events of the Second World War. In those far off days, we Jews were all very patriotic. My grandmother insisted that when the

National Anthem was played, we all had to stand up to attention, even at home. We were totally Hungarian.

Once when I was very small, I went for a walk with my mother in a very nice part of Budapest. It was an alley with trees, and suddenly we saw a gathering outside a house. These houses all belonged to very rich and influential people. Mrs Horthy was just leaving one of the houses.

She came out, and we made way for her to pass. She stopped and looked at me and said, "Isn't that a nice little girl", and stroked my face.

She was a beautiful woman, a very elegant person, and greatly loved in Hungary at that time. I don't really remember the incident myself, but my mother told the story so many times that it must have really happened.

When I was a little bit older, around six or seven, we often went to see the changing of the guard on Sunday afternoons at Admiral Horthy's Palace. That was an extremely colourful and picturesque event. Looked at in retrospect, it was like people playing at being soldiers. Later they would become real soldiers.



When I was about four years old, I had lots of problems with my ears, and my ear doctor, Emery Pick, my father's best friend, was a frequent visitor to our house. We also visited him in his rooms. I was always frightened of him because I associated seeing him with pain.

But I often had earaches. Apparently my ear looked healthy which was a mystery. Our family doctor said it would go away, but Emery insisted that there must be a serious reason, and maybe there was pus behind my ear bone. Remember, this was the early 1930s, when not nearly so much was known about

these things as it is today. He recommended an operation to cut behind the ear.

While my parents were making the decision, I contracted scarlet fever which is an extremely dangerous and contagious disease, and I should have been transferred to a hospital. But my parents did not want me to be in an infectious diseases hospital, so the alternative was to stay at home in quarantine. Everyone else, save my mother and the doctors, was locked out. Dear Balogh insisted she would not leave Mother and me alone so she stayed with us.

By then the decision was made that Emery should operate; we trusted him fully. The preparation started as it was to be done as soon as possible and word went round the Jewish General Hospital where Emery worked. The case was discussed as it was not common practice to transfer an operating theatre to a private apartment. It seemed that many doctors asked permission to attend as observers. This was a unique case with the scarlet fever on top of everything else.

The kitchen table was moved into the dining room, the walls were covered with white sheets, and Balogh was in the kitchen keeping the wooden stove hot for boiling water to sterilize equipment.

All went well; Emery was right. Behind both ears there was infection, but towards the end a thrombosis occurred, and he had to speed up the operation before anything else could go wrong. The crisis lasted two days and nights; nobody slept. The whole family was outside the apartment waiting for news. Only Emery, Mother and Balogh were inside. I survived. I was deaf, but at least I lived.

Slowly I was nursed back to strength, and one day I sat up and told my mother, "Can you hear, Mrs Fried upstairs is playing the piano?"

At this point, Anyuka (Mommy) realised that I had not lost my hearing, and with all the exhaustion she had suffered promptly fainted. So did Apuka (my father) when he heard the news outside! Dear Balogh had her hands full nursing us all back to health.

Emery wrote an article about my case on the basis of which he received an invitation to California. He left Hungary in 1939, urging my father to do the same as there was war in the air. He believed this as did many other wise men. But we stayed, as did thousands of others. At that stage, Emery could get to Baghdad, and eventually after going around Australia, he arrived in California. He became one of the most distinguished ear doctors in America and wrote many books as well as curing thousands of people.

Our friendship lasted the long distance, and one day decades later, when I was travelling through Los Angeles on my way from Australia to Canada, he came to the airport to meet me. We spent a couple of hours together at the terminal chatting. Suddenly, he grabbed my hand. His went cold and he died in my arms.

The paramedics were there in seconds, but nobody could help him. He had suffered a couple of heart attacks prior to that, and in those days by-pass operations were still unknown. At least I knew he was happy when he died. He told me so when we were talking. He loved my father so much and I had a special place in his heart because of that operation so long ago.



I loved skating as a child. I think I was about six years old when my Mother put me on skates. In those days of course, skates were attached to your regular shoes, and one had to carry a little key like pliers to turn and fix the skates to the shoes. When you were 'in the money', there were men who did the fixing for you and that was a real treat!

One day I was watching the professional skaters practising, along with those who aspired to be like them, and I was thinking, I will never ever make the grade of having a pair of skates that are attached to the shoes.

There was a girl named Marta who was one of the aspiring professionals. She did not yet have the 'white' shoes or boots, as they were called, but only the beige ones. One day, her mother decided to sell the beige boots, hoping her daughter would graduate to the white ones. My mother bought the beige boots with skates for me. I thought I would be Sonia Henni overnight! I felt like a million dollars. Who would believe this today when children have so much more?

Many decades later I returned to Budapest for a visit, and met my lovely old school friend Aniko (Buri to me) and spent a couple of short but very nice hours with her. Where should she take me? she asked. How about the ice rink? We walked and walked and relived memories of days gone by and the hours, days and weeks we spent on skates. How we loved it!

When we were children, in order to get to the rinks we had to go by the underground. But we used up our weekly tickets going to school and back, so we had to find a scheme to avoid the conductor punching our ticket in the mornings, so we could still use the ticket in the afternoon.

One of us gave the ticket to be punched, retrieved it, and passed it secretly to the next one, who showed it, already punched and so on. I don't think the conductors were so stupid as not to notice it. I think they appreciated the fact that we could not afford to buy another return ticket.

The skating rink was the lake at City Park (Varosliget) which in winter became frozen over so we could skate. They also made artificial ice, so it could be used all winter, even on warmer days. Go and have a look one day - you will know what I mean!



I am constantly aware of how my parents loved me. My father hugged me all the time and my mother was so gentle and such a wonderful person. We had an oven and in wintertime we would start the fire with logs, and put some potatoes in it to bake. My mother got my blanket, and put it around the oven to warm it up, and then put it on me when I went to bed.

Nowadays everything has changed – I think the whole world climate has changed -- but at that time we had four distinct seasons. I liked March the best. That was when spring began. It was my birthday for a start, and then out came the violets and the lily-of-the valley with their special scent, and we would walk on the promenade down by the River Danube. The fragrance of those flowers was so beautiful.



I was quite happy whenever I was sick because my father always bought me books, and I had quite a nice library. You see, he was a believer in the value of reading and he thought I should follow his example. Sometimes I even pretended I was sick, because then he came home earlier, and he would embrace me and bring me a book and read it to me. It was very nice contact between us.

I remember once he sent me – Peter was just born, so I must have been about eight or nine years – on a holiday. I had to go on doctor's orders. My grandfather was entitled to go to a summer resort because of his service to the Hungarian National Railways, and we could also go there for very inexpensive holidays. But this was a place for grown-ups and my mother was a bit concerned that I was going alone.

My father came at weekends to visit me and I remember that we went into the dining room one evening and the manager

came over because he knew who I was. He said to my father, “People are making comments that maybe that young lady is too young for you.”

I was only eight! But I looked grown-up. My father taught me to dance; he was an excellent dancer and in the evening in this place there was music and people dancing. The song I most remember was the ‘Teddy Bears’ Picnic’; he taught me to dance to that and I still recall that evening every time I hear the music.

We also had a relationship with our extended family, going out with our cousins, and attending family gatherings. Birthdays were meticulously observed. But the best part was on weekends when we all met on the boulevard, and promenaded up and down with our cousins, ending up in the park where people were drinking beer and enjoying themselves.



I think I was eight or nine, when father wanted me to start learning languages. He told me I had a choice; I could learn music or languages.

I asked, “Can’t I have both?”

He replied, “Even one will be a strain financially.”

“Which one do you suggest?” I asked.

And he said, “Considering the situation in the world, I think stick to languages.”

And that’s when I started to have private lessons in English and German. German was quite commonly spoken in our home. My grandparents still remembered the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



1926
My parents after their wedding



1931

L to R: Me, Vera Porjes, Zsuzsa Porsolt and Marika Ferenczi



1938

Family photo at Lake Balaton



1941 Cousin Roses's wedding

Back row L to R: Feri Katona, wife Annus néni (Barta), Dezső bacsí (Barta), wife Irén, Erzsok, husband Jenő bacsí (Barta), Irén néni (nee Barta, mother of the bride, mother of the groom, cousin Rose (the bride), the groom, two unknown (probably from groom's family), Margit néni (mother's sister), my mother.

Front row L to R: Cousins Vera, Edit, Klari, Gyuri, me, my father.



1942

Peter and I in front of our apartment in Hegedus Sandor Utca