

The Wall

by Eszter Szentirmai

“It was our chance to get out. We had everything lined up, the car that was supposed to pick us up, the driver ... Our bags were packed with the essentials. We knew exactly what we had to do, how to hide, how we were going to make it across the border into Austria. It was risky, but it was possibly the least risky time to go. So many people were leaving then. And the Communists were much more preoccupied with squashing the revolution and didn’t have the manpower or the time to pay attention to the mass exodus. We had only a tiny sliver of time before they would organize and bring in more people, so we knew that if we were to leave, it had to be fast. This was in 1956, ten years before your father was even born ...”

I had been spending entire summers in Hungary with my grandparents since I could remember. But it was at sixteen years old that I first heard this story. We were in Salzburg, Austria on a weekend trip, sitting on the patio of our pension hotel at a wooden table. Every windowsill held potted geraniums in red and white. Our table had been recently cleared of tableware, including dinner plates that just an hour ago had held *wiener schnitzels* larger than the plates themselves, garnished with twisted slices of lemon and sprigs of parsley. My sister had taken off to our room because she didn’t like to get into heated arguments with my grandfather, which is usually how these after-dinner conversations ended. The man in front of me had aged considerably, but he was still formidable. Tall and broad in stature, my grandfather also had a remarkable face: big bushy black eyebrows, now mixed with gray, that extended from the corner of one dark brown eye to the corner of another; an imposing nose; and smooth skin that liked to hold onto a tan. He had a booming voice that commanded everyone’s attention when he told his stories or bad jokes. He was intelligent, proud, chauvinistic. He and I were similar in many ways, but separated as we were by gender and generation, we got into

not infrequent spats. I could absolutely imagine this man meticulously arranging an escape from Communist Hungary. He had the cunning to grasp an opportunity when it arose, the bravery and arrogance to take on a calculated risk and assume it would succeed, and the sangfroid to see it through. But I knew the ending to this story, and I wondered at what point the plan had been foiled.

“So, Pista Papa, what happened? Why did you end up staying?”

“Ah well, the night before we were going to leave, your grandmother just could not stop crying. She didn’t want to leave her family, see? She couldn’t communicate with them that we were going to go so it would seem like we had just disappeared. And even if we were able to let them know we were okay once we were on the other side, we knew we could never go back while the country was Communist. She might never get to see her family again. She was begging to stay. So, well, then we stayed.”

I looked to my grandmother for confirmation of this story. My grandfather was known to exaggerate.

“That’s how it happened,” she said matter-of-factly.

My grandmother was also tall but with slender bones and a knack of tripping over her own two feet. She had a round face with arched eyebrows and thin lips that were almost always stretched in a grin that gave her a look of semi-permanent amusement. She was even-tempered and unperturbed by most of what was thrown her way. She would try anything once, and easily saw the bright side in things. As believable as it was that my grandfather masterminded an escape plot, it was difficult to accept that this was how it ended. For one, I couldn’t imagine my grandmother breaking down and begging my grandfather to stay. My grandmother was up for *anything*. She navigated international airports by herself knowing only Hungarian, she went down water slides in her seventies, she even tried sushi. She was devoted to her family, but she was a career woman and her own mother did much of the raising of her children. But even more than

that, I couldn't imagine my grandfather yielding so easily to my grandmother's will. He was the one who dictated what happened in their family, the head of the household in every way. I would periodically get angry at him for the way he bossed her around, expecting her to indulge his every whim and demand. And to let her make the biggest decision of their lives? It seemed out of character for the both of them. I decided for once not to ignite a fight by remarking on this.

"But you know, your dad would have never been born if we had left, nor your uncle. We might have had different children, or none at all," my grandmother said, referencing her difficulties getting pregnant, "and once we had them, we couldn't leave anymore. We couldn't take young children across a dangerous border." She shrugged.

"That's why I really encouraged your father and uncle to go wherever they found the best opportunity. I helped set up your dad's internal medicine residency in Cleveland, Ohio where some friends of mine from university lived. I pushed your uncle to go to Canada," my grandfather continued.

I couldn't believe I had never heard this story before. I couldn't believe that my grandfather, the big talker, the big performer, had kept this secret to himself for sixteen summers of my life. And even in telling the story, he didn't linger on it, telling it in ten minutes and following up with an hour and a half of the role he had in my own father leaving Hungary (albeit after the Berlin Wall fell). But later that night, as I was reflecting on this new information, I heard an undertone to the conversation, a wistful unasked question underlying every sentence, every explanation: *Should we have left?*

The evils of Communism were instilled in me during those summers. I heard about how, in a Communist attempt to equalize people and overturn social strata, students who came from educated families were at a disadvantage when applying for higher education. This meant my grandfather couldn't pursue his dream of going to medical school. Instead, he became a civil engineer, earning a PhD and learning English to work for years designing roads in Nigeria to bolster his family's small income. When he

visited us in the United States, he would marvel at the interstate system, how at the juncture of the highways, the roads blossomed out in loops and curlicues. He bemoaned that such sophistication was beyond what was available to him. While this wasn't a source of fresh rage for him by the time I knew him, the dull ache of it ate its way into many of our conversations. I sympathized with him, as he had the makings of a man who could have been great. My grandmother, although more accepting of her situation in life, also lamented that her love of language and literature didn't translate to a career teaching Hungarian to high school students. Her family was also upper class and owned quite a bit of land (seized by the Communists); she would have been a threat teaching such values to schoolchildren. So instead she became an accountant and her passion was relegated to a hobby. "You couldn't write what you wanted to write, you couldn't say what you wanted to say, you couldn't be who you wanted to be," they would tell me.

We learned about my grandparents in this way--in snippets gathered from after dinner conversations, in overheard phone calls, in late nights spent talking that always seemed to be most pressing right before our flight home the next day. Growing up, the distance between us seemed to pull us together because of the necessity that we spend all of our time together at once every year. Instead of quick weekend sojourns, we had a six week block with each set of them, enough time for our stays to surpass the rush of vacation and settle into the quotidian feeling of a second home. They knew me in the way that my parents did: they knew that I wrote in journals for hours every day, was bullied at school, that I ate ice cream out of the container wrapping around the corners first to get the parts that had started to melt. And I, in turn, knew the newspaper my grandfather would read every morning and that he rode a motorcycle and the exact location of the scars of his two lobectomies that cured him of lung cancer. I knew my grandmother was a hesitant driver—and not a particularly good one—who honked her horn around curves so people would know she was coming. I knew she had a love of animals (especially dogs and excluding, peculiarly, swans) to which she would talk as if to a child. It always amazed me when I met people who lived so close to their grandparents and didn't know them at all, but perhaps it was because my grandparents

lived so far away that I was able to truly appreciate them. During the school year, we would talk intermittently on the phone, but these phone conversations were superficial compared to the time we spent physically together.

The summer after my high school graduation was the last that I spent entirely in Hungary. I gave a speech at my graduation, which my dad proudly printed out, laminated, and distributed to my grandparents. My grandfather read it aloud in English in his commanding tone, much more dramatically than I actually delivered it at the ceremony. Then, he translated it into Hungarian for my grandmother and performed it again. They *oohed* and *aahed* over it like grandparents do. “You’re a great writer. And you spend so much of your time writing,” they said,



alluding to the hours of time I spent journaling over the years, “Never give that up. We had to give up so much in our lives. Don’t give up what you love.” I probably rolled my eyes at the time: “I told you guys,” I said, “I’m going to go to medical school. That’s what I love.” “There are plenty of doctors who also write,” they said.

The next year, my grandfather was diagnosed with metastatic colon cancer. I went back to Hungary that summer to celebrate his 80th birthday and to spend time with him before he died. True to his nature, he had two birthday celebrations planned for himself, both at the same restaurant: one for friends in June and one for family in July. The

menu was carefully curated, the guest list was set, and the invitations were sent. I couldn't make the get-together in July because I was doing research in a basic science lab, so I joined the celebration with his friends in June. My grandfather experienced the party in a bittersweet way, laughing along with his friends through most of it but also giving an uncharacteristically tearful speech near the end in which he said goodbye. When it was my turn to say goodbye a week later, I was less outwardly emotional—I have always struggled with how to show emotion appropriately and default to not doing so at all most of the time. I hugged both my grandparents. "I'll call," I said, but instead of doing so, I wove my grief into words in my journal, as if writing in private would comfort my dying grandfather or console my grandmother as she held his hand through the experience. Still, like the last bite of an exquisite dish that you hold in your mouth a little longer than the others to allow the flavor to saturate every taste bud and be embedded permanently in your brain before it's gone, I treasured that last summer with my grandfather and I know that he treasured it as well. He passed away in August of that year.

As I continued through college, medical school, and residency, getting married and having my own children along the way, I didn't have time anymore to make the trip to Hungary. Five thousand miles went from being traversable and even at times advantageous to being an insurmountable distance. Unlike my grandparents, I was in a situation where I could build my life around my dream, but doing so cruelly took away the time to share it with them. I spoke to my grandmother on the phone infrequently and awkwardly, giving her the quick run-down of what had happened in my life in the months since we last talked. And then a toddler would scream in the background or I would arrive at work or I had to check out at the grocery store. "Sorry," I would tell her, cutting the conversation too short, "I really have to go now." I promised myself that I would spend months with her in seven years when I finished training ... in six years when I finished training ... in five years when I finished training ... in four years when I finished training ...

We found out my grandmother had Alzheimer's disease when she came and visited us one Christmas, making the transatlantic flight by herself as she was wont to do. She fell and bumped her head on the tile floor of the Washington Dulles airport. She had no idea where she was and frantically called her sister (who was still in Hungary) and asked her to come pick her up. Once successfully transported to my parents' house, my mom told me over the phone that my grandmother wandered away from the house at all hours of the day and night, so my parents hired a sitter while they were at work. By the time I drove up from Nashville, she had regained her wits and the only vestiges of the misadventure were a large goose egg on the back of her head and a note left on the kitchen counter: "Klári, you are in the United States visiting your son and his family. You are OK. We are making sure that you go where you need to go. If you need our help, call..." She showed me the note when I got in. "Did you hear what happened to me?" "I heard, Klári Mama," I said, but beyond that, I didn't know what to say. I was in residency at the time, so I knew that she was exhibiting symptoms of dementia, but like a dutiful family member, I denied to myself that she was really that unwell. Even so, it was the last time she would come visit us in the United States. But I would see her again, I thought, in four years when I finished training ...

Phone conversations became more difficult. She would initially ask me the same questions over and over again, but then progressed to calling me back frantically after we hung up the phone because she didn't remember saying goodbye, and then finally to not remembering I called at all. Pretty soon, I stopped calling. My parents, nearing the end of their careers, had more flexibility in their schedules and more vacation time so they went to visit her multiple times a year. She was quickly deteriorating, they told me, so they had three week-long vacations planned in early 2020 that they wanted to spend with her.

In March 2020, the global pandemic associated with COVID-19 erected a Berlin Wall of its own, right in the middle of my family, temporary but seemingly as impenetrable. The travel restrictions necessitated that my parents cancel those planned week-long trips. My grandmother wasn't doing well, barely conscious of her surroundings. She had

difficulty swallowing and was bed-bound. COVID-19 upended the lives of so many people: to some, it meant unemployment; to some, it meant a fleeting inconvenience; to some, it meant the loss of life. To my family, it meant a painful amount of certainty that we would never see my grandmother again.

One sunny Saturday in May, I spent the morning running around with my children at their grandmother's, my mother-in-law's, house in the Smoky Mountains, chasing swarms of red-spotted purple butterflies. "Hi, Beautiful," I said to a particularly large one that had landed on the gravel road, slowly batting its wings as if in flirtation. "Don't touch them," I cautioned the boys, "Remember they are living creatures, be kind to them." When I got back to the house and regained my phone reception, I saw that I had two missed calls from my mom. I called her back. "I wanted to call you to let you know that Klári Mama died this morning. You know how poorly she was. We are sad, but she is in a better place. She was never in any pain. It is better for her this way," my mom began. "We don't know if your dad is even going to be able to go to the funeral since they've shut the border down. We are trying to prolong the time until the funeral as much as possible." My dad had a video chat with her for the last time a week before. It was two years until I would finish my training.

I always assumed that my grandmother had made a wrong decision sixty-four years earlier. How much better their lives would have been had they not lived forty years under the yoke of Communism! I wondered if she and my grandfather would have made a different choice if they had had the chance, if they would have liked to rewrite their lives, if they would have turned to a different page of the choose-your-own-adventure story if they had had more information, more courage, more time. Surely, her family would have understood the decision. Surely, they would have urged her, even begged her to leave, just as she urged, even begged her own children.

My life is just about as close to ideal as I imagine a life can be. I have two beautiful children, am building a career that I am immensely proud of, and live in an adopted country that has embraced me and engraved itself in my heart. Every once in a while, I

even have the time to write. How could I not assume that my grandmother made the wrong decision to give this up? But as I heard of Klári Mama dying without us, the miles between the United States and Hungary unnavigable, a wistful unwelcome question flitted into my thoughts: *Should we have stayed?* I batted it away like an irritating fly, over and over again as it returned to torment me, until finally it disappeared.



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