

The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum, Bedford

Transcript

RW17_3

Name: Gabrielle Dobrady

Gender: Female

Date of Birth:

Place of Birth: Budapest, Hungary

Occupation:

Date of Interview: 23 March 2017

Interviewed by: Laura Dehaan

Length of interview:

Transcribed by: Antaya Lendore

0 mins

First of all, Gabrielle, could you tell me where you're from?

Originally I'm from Hungary, from Budapest in Hungary.

How old were you when you left Hungary?

4. 4years old.

Do you have any recollections at all from you time spent in Hungary?

Probably not before we left. Subsequently, I have been able to go back on holiday and to visit family and so on.

Okay, so we'll start with your journey from how you ended up from Hungary to the UK. How was the decision made to leave Hungary?

I'm aware that my mother was the driving force. She was the one who very much wanted to leave and come specifically to England. This is- There's a long history to this starting within the Second World War when my mother was a young woman and her father was very much against the Hungarian position in the Second World War. He harboured a Jewish family and my mum, one of her earliest recollections is taking bread to the Jewish quarter for the people who were there. And so ever since then, she has been very pro-British. So when there was a revolution in Hungary in 1956 a lot of people were refugees from Hungary and came out and I think my mother at that time thought that this would be her opportunity to get out from the Russian occupation. So she was the one who very much wanted to come to England specifically believing that this would be not only a safe haven but a country where she could be free.

What was it about the Hungarian position during the war that your father didn't agree with?

That my father didn't agree- My mum?

Your Mother.

My Mum. Well the Hungarians were fighting on the side of the German army. So a lot of the Hungarians on very right wing and pro-Germany and my mum was very much against this through her father who, as I say, was well aware of what was happening to the Jewish population the start of the ghetto in Budapest and that's where they used to go and my mother used to skip school in order to take food to the ghetto. And as I say, her father harboured a Jewish family in his cellar. So she was very much in a minority or rather they were very much in a minority at that time.

And why specifically Britain?

Well, because Britain was the opposition. That's who they saw as the free and the fair and on the side of the oppressed.

How as the news to move to Britain received by the rest of the family?

Now, that I'm not quite sure about. I think actually they kept it a secret until the last minute because they knew that the rest of the family, grandparents, would be resistant to this idea of us taking the risk in escaping and also leaving. We've a very small family. Both my parents are only children. I'm an only child. So we left the grandparents or the two grandmothers entirely alone so naturally they were not very happy about that situation.

Do you remember when you heard the news you were leaving Hungary?

I don't remember. I don't think I was aware that we were leaving Hungary. I was told that we were going on holiday actually. Whereas in fact, we went to- By the time we left, I should explain that the Russians had reoccupied Hungary. At one point it looked as if the revolution was going to succeed. But the Hungarians chased the Russians out.

5 mins

But they came back in again. And that- by then the borders were closed down so it was actually very difficult to escape when we left because it was already after the borders had been closed. So to even travel anywhere near the western border of Hungary was quite difficult. So my parents made up this story that I had T.B and they were taking me to a T.B sanitarium on the border. I didn't know that. I thought we were going on holiday.

How did they come up with the T.B story?

I think they knew somebody who was a doctor at the T.B sanitarium and that was- they could say that they were travelling there which was the only legitimate way of getting anywhere near the border. Apparently, I looked like a very healthy child so they thought that this was a joke because nobody would believe that I was really ill. But anyway that got us to the sanitarium and from there I think they used all the money that they had to pay somebody to take us in the dead of night- It was quite a dramatic escape- to the border which was a frozen river.

So we walked, we walked whoever it was, the guide showed us to the river and if you cross that river you will on the other side you will get to Austria and you will be out of the country. And my mother, I remember my mother telling the story that it was quite a very scary night, a very scary night because at any time they could have been shot for trying to leave the country. It was also extremely cold. The river was frozen and when they had crossed they weren't sure whether they had crossed back again into Hungary because it's a very windy little river. So she tells the story, or she told of the relief when they realised that a light that was coming towards them actually spoke to them in well German, Austrian because they weren't sure whether they had crossed back into Hungary or not.

So there had been an Austrian border guard who had been watching these figures coming towards him and anyway it was a great relief when my parents met him and he took us to his hut and gave us cocoa. I remember them telling the story.

So from Hungary, you ended up in Austria first?

We did indeed. At first we were in a refugee camp. And then we had some very distant relatives in Austria who took us in and in fact we were there for I don't know how many weeks while my mother travelled up to Vienna to negotiate with the British to see if we could get asylum in England. As a measure of how much she wanted to come here apparently these Austrian relatives were saying "Stay. Stay. You can take part in our business. We can find you a home." But as I say my mum was very much determined to come to England.

So she was very determined to leave Hungary in the first place. Can you tell me about the living conditions in Hungary at the time?

I know that my parents lived with one of my grandmothers. I don't remember very much about the situation. I know that all Hungarians were very resentful and angry about the Russian occupation and the revolution was a spontaneous uprising to try and get rid of the Russians from Hungary. When that failed, I think my mother realised that she did not want to be part of the regime there and that this was her only opportunity to get out and come to the free world.

And going back to the journey, when you arrived in Austria, how long did you stay there?

I'm not quite sure. I think it was definitely a matter of weeks until we got- until the British said that we could have asylum in England. As I said we spent part of the time in a refugee camp and part of the time with these relatives. And then when we got agreement from the British that we could come to England, we came by train.

10 mins

So you went straight from Austria to Britain.

That's right and again my mother remembers that on that train as we were passing through Germany and Belgium people were at the railway station inviting the refugees because there were a lot of refugees on the train to get off there. Quite different from nowadays I think to refugees being invited to stay. But at that time, they were inviting us and saying "Get off the train. Come and stay here and live here."

How did your mother get permission from the British to travel there?

I don't know. She went up to Vienna to the British Embassy.

Do you have any recollection at all from the train journey from Austria to Britain?

Not really. I was only 4 at the time so I wouldn't say. I have a mental picture because of the stories I was told.

What does that mental picture look like?

Well, I don't know if it is the mental picture but I imagine being on the train and people standing at the station inviting us to get off apparently they said things like "Why are you going to that Protestant country when you people are Catholics?" and they gave us little Catholic medals to hang on our necks. Now my parents were not particularly religious but that was one of the thoughts.

You say you had a warm welcome here in Britain. How did that manifest it?

Again, I suppose in many ways, for me it's because I don't remember any trauma whatsoever. I remember it as an adventure but my parents talked with great gratitude about the reception that we had in Bedford. They both got jobs very quickly. My parents were engineering draughts people for which you don't need to speak particularly English. You don't need to have a lot of language. So they got jobs very quickly at an engineering firm here in Bedford and were given a house that belonged to the firm. Now, that was an empty house but it was completely furnished by the WRVS and again my mum remembers that the WRVS which is the Women's Royal Voluntary Service came with not just a table but with a table cloth on it and maybe a vase with a bunch of flowers or something like that.

So all in all she felt she was received or we were received with open arms.

So your parents and you got off the train. Did they have any idea of where to go?

Again, well first of all we were up in the north of England again for a short time in a refugee camp but we had a contact in Bedford who was a friend of my mums who had been here since the Second World War and it was through him that we came to Bedford, that we got jobs, he translated and we settled in Bedford.

What difficulties did your family face when they first arrived here?

Again, this is very hard for me to answer because I don't know. Okay, I think one of the difficulties was my father's homesickness. I think in terms of material things we were looked after and helped tremendously and as I say they got jobs. Now my mother had a little bit of English already from school and university but I think my dad didn't know any English so he had difficulty with the language but he also had tremendous homesickness and I think, I believe that there were times when he really wanted to jack it in and go back.

You were told it was a holiday. When did you realise it was something more permanent?

Probably when I went to school. I started school without any English so they'd help me but they say-and this shows how little children can learn very quickly- within a term my first school, I believe that I was speaking more or less like the other children. So it's easy for a small child. It's much more difficult for an adult.

How did your parents keep in touch with the people left in Hungary?

I think it was simply through letters because I'm sure they didn't have phones in those days.

15 mins

And moving on to when you got a bit older, how did you keep in touch with the rest of the family?

Well, it was- how many years would it have been? I don't think that I really became aware of having an extended family until the first time that I went back to Hungary which would have been when I was about 13. I know that they gave an a- You see when we left, we didn't know if we would ever be able to go back again because we were political refugees and once we had escaped at that time they didn't know that they would ever see their families again. But some years later they gave an amnesty to those people who had left as a result of the revolution mainly because the Hungarian government wanted foreign currency so they encourage people to come back because then we had to bring a certain amount of money with us.

Anyway at the first opportunity, obviously my parents wanted to go back to see their relatives, their mothers both of whom were widows and on their own. So that time we went back for a school summer holiday and that's when I really discovered that I had extended family, aunts, uncles, cousins and so on.

How was it for you to meet your extended family?

It was wonderful because as I say being an only child, I felt it and I mean obviously although I very quickly learnt English and settled in at school at home we still spoke Hungarian and I was still very much aware of being foreign.

What made you so aware of being foreign?

When I was a teenager there would be people who would say "Bloody foreigner" because my name was so different even though I am white. At that time Bedford was not the multicultural, multiracial city or town that it is now certainly not on that side

of the river where we lived. So school there was some mention of me being different and foreign whereas now, it's very nice to see that were very much of a multiracial multicultural society I think.

You said your family still spoke Hungarian at home. What other Hungarian things would you do at home here?

Well, the way we celebrate Christmas, Easter and things like that would still be Hungarian and we would still talk about going home to Hungary.

So how do you celebrate Christmas?

Well just that we celebrate Christmas Eve. I think a lot of people in Europe do celebrate Christmas Eve rather than Christmas day and so that's when we would put up the Christmas tree in our tradition and for little children the Christmas tree is brought by the angel presents are given on Christmas eve rather than Christmas morning and I don't think we really have father Christmas a such.

Okay, so going back to the first time you went back to Hungary, you met your extended family. Can you just explain to me how it was to see them for the first time?

Oh it was wonderful. It was wonderful. I mean I was a teenager and to get a sense of belonging to a family, to an extended family which I didn't have here in England, and to discover especially that I had cousins my own age so that was very nice for me.

Also the place, the place has a lot of significance because of the climate. Going home had to do with being on holiday from school. It's usually very warm and sunny over there. We had holidays by the lake, Lake Boleton and so yes it was very special.

Which members of your extended family did you meet at the time?

It think it was mainly my cousins who are my age and meeting them for the first time and having summer holidays in a very rural area, swimming in the lake and so on.

20mins

I should say that subsequently, I had very different feelings about my cousins mainly because of our conflict- it's interesting, it's intergenerational, this conflict of political conflict within my family. My mother had conflict with her cousins at the time of the Second World War and now I have one with my cousins about the situation at the moment. It hurts me very much that the Hungarian government, the way they have responded to the current refugee crisis.

How would you say your relationship is with other members of your family?

Well as I say, for me, because I don't have brothers, sisters or anybody else there is a certain love with my cousins and yet there is a great deal of political difference which makes me realise how British I have become because obviously, being brought up here, I share the views that we have in this country and I can only repeat that I find it very difficult being back there in terms of being aware that that country has become

very right wing or certainly has a very right wing government at the moment and I still feel very angry and passionate about the way that they are treating the minorities in their own country, in their country.

You only really spent four years living in Hungary, but your parents would have been there for much longer. How important was it for them to keep in touch with their Hungarian roots, as it were?

I think it was particularly important for my father because he was, he was a great patriot. I think my mother was always, never felt so patriotic because of the political differences that she had but my father was a big patriot and I think it, as I said, he found- he was very homesick and he found it hard to leave. When he had been in England for a long time he- obviously he settled and in some ways, he became more British than the British but at first it was very hard for him.

You say he was very patriotic. How did he express that?

Well, simply, mainly the culture I would think and the language. For him it was much harder to learn English. He was always very witty in his own language which he never was in English because it's a second language. And he loved the places and the customs. I think he missed it a great deal.

How much did you bring from Hungary when you arrived in the UK?

Right, well this brings us to the objects. We came with the clothes that we stood up in and my mother was carrying the bag which was one of the objects that I lent to the museum last year. It's a brown leather bag; shoulder bag that is made out of very thick leather that almost looks like a saddle and that was the only thing that she carried with her.

I was carried on my father's shoulders when they crossed the river into Austria and because the snow was very deep, they were actually walking through thick snow and they couldn't bring anything much with them. They were lucky that they could manage to bring themselves across the river. So as I say, we didn't bring anything.

Why did your mother choose to bring that specific bag?

I think it was just the handbag she was using at the time.

You've always kept it with you?

I have kept it with me because it's one of the few things that actually came from there at the time and because it's actually still in very good condition. It's a nice bag.

How long has it been in your possession for?

60 years. Actually this year in January would be 60 years since we left Hungary.

25 mins

The other object is the teddy bear and this teddy was given to me while we were refugees in Austria. She's a very warm teddy, getting bald in places and it was thanks to this project that she was saved from the attic because I had almost forgotten about this teddy but I knew that she was in the attic and as a result of this project I went and found her and I'm glad I did. She's back in circulation.

How did you get the teddy at first?

I think that it was given to me by one of those distant relatives in Austria so that when we were in the refugee camp, they came to find us, these relative and I think they brought the teddy for me then.

Why have you always kept it?

Well, I think it was thanks to my parents really that it has been kept because of all the childhood toys, this one is one of the few things that was kept and, like I say, it was up in the attic with all the other childhood things

End of 3.1 – 26:19

3.2

Omins

So your family lived in Hungary for four years. Can you tell me about the place you grew up in?

I can, because we have been back since then of course. We started going back to Hungary, visiting family when I was a teenager and right up until now we have been going back to visit family. So I know that where we lived in Hungary was living with my grandmother in a big old fashioned apartment block with a courtyard in the middle and many apartments all around. So it was a big apartment block with a cellar because I do remember, one of my earliest memories is of actually going down into the cellar, in the coal cellar at the time of the revolution because when they were shooting outside, all the people in the apartment block fled down into the cellar and that is one of my earliest memories because of the smell of coal and wood down there and we were down there for a number of hours. I do, strangely enough, I do remember that.

What was the place itself like, where you grew up?

It was Budapest. It was the capital city of Hungary. I don't actually remember very much else about the town. Obviously, going back, I happen to think it's one of the most beautiful capital cities in the world. It's a very beautiful city so I still have a feeling for the place, for Budapest, for the climate. So I do enjoy going back to the place.

I do have a problem with the politics there at the moment. For instance, I mean, I use to think sometimes that when I retired, I might retire back to Hungary. I have a summer house there by Lake Bulaton and I had thought that I might be able to retire there. Since the refugee crisis, I'm quite sure that there would be no way I could live

in Hungary ever again. It's very nice to have the opportunity to go back to have a holiday but there is no way I could live under that political system.

And when you went back to Budapest with your family, did they tell you about how things used to be?

Yes. Yeah, indeed. Well my mother told me why she wanted to leave at the time of the- well it was behind the iron curtain when- during the Russian occupation and my cousins have told me about how difficult life was, that they were taught one thing at school and another thing at home so they were very conflicted. We are- I am not religious, my family are not religious but my cousins in Hungary are and they found it very difficult not to be able to practice their religion. So they had hardship under the communist era.

What places in Hungary were particularly important to your parents?

I think Budapest, the capital city, obviously, the area around where my family lived. They also had an orchard; you've made me think of that, that one of the things they had to leave. Not long before they had escape from Hungary, they had bought a plot of land above the city and they had built, with their own fair hands a little one roomed house, summer house, weekend house and they had planted a lot of peach trees. Now that orchard, they had to leave that and I think that was a source of sorrow as well.

Did you ever go back there?

5 mins

Yes. It's still there and it was a source of sorrow because it of course is completely over grown and bushy and derelict now but as a matter of fact the piece of land still belongs to me.

So you said it was bushy and not well maintained. Can you just imagine for me, you're standing there right now, how would you describe it?

It has a beautiful view because it's on a hillside, overlooking the outskirts of Budapest. It's a very hot and sunny place. Unfortunately there is not water or electricity up there at the moment. It is, it's used as a weekend house and a lot of people have plots there but because it doesn't have water and electricity it's very difficult to manage.

You say you have a house there as well. What made you decide to get a house in Hungary?

My house is a summer house and it is by Lake Bulaton and that is partly because it is next door to my cousins, so my extended family are there and because returning there for the summers has been a sort of family tradition and it's a very pretty place, a beautiful place and it's a great place to have a summer holiday.

What inspired you to retire there rather than here in the UK?

Well I thought that I would retire there. I have since changed my mind. Mainly because it's a rural place and a quiet place not an urban area and in my old age I thought that would be a good place, a nice place to retire.

What made you change your mind about it?

The politics. I realised that there is a huge difference with my western upbringing and outlook and my family and obviously not everybody in Hungary. I'm sure there are many people who are more liberal and not supporting the prevalent(?) government but unfortunately my family are rather right wing and their attitude to the refugee crisis which started in, I would say roundabout 2015 when I happened to be there that summer, really upset me.

They are nationalistic and the present Prime Minister has said 'Hungary for the Hungarians' and this is why I am happy, very happy to be part of England and the British Society that still says we are a refuge for people. We are multicultural, multiracial. And even though, in my opinion we could do more for some of the refugees that are stuck in Europe or are still trying to get out of dangerous places around the world we are still tolerant and that makes me very happy to be part of this society rather than one that builds raised and wire fences to keep the refugees out.

How often would you say you go back to Hungary now?

I could go back at least once a year although because I'm caring for my 90 year old mother, I haven't been back for a while.

What kind of things do you do in Hungary when you are there?

I do the gardening around my house and swimming in the lake so much the same as I did as a teenager.

How important is your Hungarian identity to you?

It's very conflicted and I think that anybody that has been a re- who is a refugee, I don't know about everybody but I certainly, mixed feelings. It's very, very mixed feelings because on the one hand it's still regarded as inverted commas 'home' but in another sense to repeat I realise that my education here in England, my upbringing, my values, my political outlook are British and that there is a conflict.

10 mins

So, can we just go back to the teddy that you brought? First of all can you just describe what that looks like for me?

Her name is Dorca (?) and she's, how tall would you say, she's about a foot tall, yellowish and was obviously quite furry when she was new and is now very bald in many places. Her arm had fallen off and has been sewn back on again and she's wearing a little white woolly dress knickers and booties, woollen booties.

How did you choose her name?

I don't remember. I don't remember at the age of four.

Does it mean anything?

I think it's just a girl's name. So she's obviously a female bear.

And you kept her in the attic?

Of late. I'm sure that- as a child, I'm sure that she was not in the attic. She would've been in bed. She would've been one of my most treasured possessions as a child. She's a very cute bear.

How did you feel when you found her again in the attic?

I was very pleased to find her again in the attic. I was pleased and I thought 'What a shame that she's been in the attic for so long but, yeah.

What made you remember that she up there?

This project, this project, because they asked- I was under the impression that we had to bring objects that we had actually carried with us as refugees so I knew then about my mums bag and this teddy bear.

How did you feel when you found her again?

I was very happy to see her again.

What memories did it evoke?

End of 3.2 12:02