

Anna-Claire Mertei
Daughter of a
Hungarian
Displaced Person
Nelly
1951



My dear sweet mother passed away on January 10th, 1994. I had just left for a ski trip to Vail, Colorado on January 5th. I had planned to call her on the Sunday evening before that fateful day but I didn't; I planned to call her on Monday. Too late. A friend of mine called me at the lodge that afternoon to tell me she passed away suddenly of a heart attack. She was 77. My world changed forever after I lost her.

I travelled the world while she was alive but I never visited her homeland, Hungary. She kept telling me that it was a beautiful country but I never listened. I told her I would get around to visiting it at another time.

What I would do to get her back; to have listened to her and gone "home"
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A year later, in 1995, I felt the need to make that journey; but before I did, however, I decided to "find my roots" by conducting a family search. I was successful in connecting with an organization in Budapest; I faxed old photographs with her maiden name on the back and her baptism certificate. In less than a week they had located one cousin. I was so overjoyed.

I took 2 ounces of my mother's cremated remains with me with the intention of scattering her ashes in a church yard in the town she was born (with the blessing of the local priest of course!), to not only bring her back home but to "complete the circle of her life".

I wrote a letter in English to that cousin and had the hotel I was staying in translate it in Hungarian (as I don't write the latter but speak it). I enclosed my mother's birth certificate and some photos and the hotel arranged for the courier to deliver it to him.

The next day my cousin Sandor called me at the hotel. I was ecstatic! I learned he was 69, was married, had two children and two grandchildren. I raced to see him that afternoon.

My heart pounding, my camera in hand, the excitement and then I saw him. I will never forget that image of a petite, sweet and gentle man, with

a head of white hair and the saddest blue eyes (like a hound dog!) standing on the stairs already waiting for me. We just stared at each other in awe. Then we embraced for the longest time. And we cried. The feeling was simply indescribable. The emotions, the tears ... -- all that wonderful stuff!

I met his wife. She just nodded and said how much I looked like my mother. Out came the cognac and baked goods -- only the Hungarians know how to be hospitable at any given time of the day!

He had not seen my mother since she was 18. He had not seen my mother since she was 18 when she left home to find employment in Belgium during the war. He walked 10 miles with my grandmother and mother to the railway station where neither would meet again.

They gave me photograph of my mother when she was 16. What a treasure that was! We talked and it was decided that they were going to drive me to my grandparents grave which was only an hour away from Budapest, in the town of Tokod where she had lived.

I had suppressed my pain, my tears and my grief for a year after my mother passed away, but it all came out in those 2 weeks!

We made the journey to the cemetery and dug up some of the earth and I buried my mother with her mother and father. We lit a candle and I said a prayer now she was home, really home. I wanted so very much to complete the circle of her life. (I should say "some of her is home", the rest of her, so to speak is here in Burlington).

I accomplished my mission. My cousin showed me the school and church she went to and where she worked and danced as a young girl. The house she lived in was still standing (without the thatched roof in those days).

It was all so overwhelming and so spiritual ... to walk in her footsteps ...

I continued my vacation on my own and explored other parts of Hungary but I did fall in love with Budapest. Like my mother said, it is a beautiful city. There is something magic about it. I feel it's my home (although I was born in Waterloo, Belgium).

When I came home to my apartment at that time, I felt very fortunate and blessed that my mother was a strong and independent woman in her time, to have not only left home at 18 but to have also made her way to Canada via Belgium and Port Bremen with a baby in tow! Life was better

here but she worked so very hard in this country to make and give me a better life. And, I have had a good life.

It turned out I had 6 more cousins and I returned to Budapest at Christmas, 1998 for yet another tearful and joyful reunion. They ranged from 48 to 68 at that time. We are all first cousins; our mothers and fathers were brothers and sisters in the same family.

One cousin presented me with the postcard of the M.S. Nelly, which my mother had written to her mother in Hungary on board the ship. She describes how she is "holding her little angel in her arms" (me!) on her way to a new country, Canada. I broke down in tears to see my mother's handwriting in 1951

They also gave me her school book dated 1927 when she was 12 (which had her name in it) along with photos I had never seen of her! All these mementos my cousins had kept in their possession over the years -- I cherish them all.

It was the most enriching experience.

I never dreamed I would find family. It's a lovely warm feeling after all those years being the only child with no siblings, aunts or uncles.

My guilt for not having done this years ago was her gift to me in the end. Now I have an extension of her family, although across the ocean.

I keep in touch via letters, emails and phone calls.

I revisited them all again in August 2000.

Had I done this earlier my mother could have seen all her nieces and nephews and her sister who had passed away in 1992

I hope she has forgiven me up there!

I did learn from her passing "not to take any one or any thing for granted" and although it's too late now, I should have listened to her!

Then came the Pier 21 project! I thought I'd do some research and find out about the M.S. Nelly which brought me to you.