

Marika Epstein
Hungarian Displaced
Person and Holocaust
Survivor
Fairsea
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Excerpt from Marika Epstein's book "From the Soil of My Past", reprinted with the authors permission.

With many other displaced persons we traveled on a train to Salzburg in west central Austria, our first stop. Salzburg is a splendid city with spectacular mountain scenery and a medieval fortress which rises above the Salzach River. It is the birthplace of Mozart and, although it offers much in the way of culture, our exposure to this captivating city was very limited. I recall only that we were put up for one or two nights in a dreadful place where there were so many bedbugs that in the morning we were riddled all over with vicious bites.

Continuing on the next leg of our journey, we proceeded to Bremenhaven, Germany, bordering on the North Sea, where we stayed for about two weeks in a crowded displaced persons camp run by the International Relief Organization. The camp was divided into blocks and rooms, our designation being Block 42, Zimmer (Room) 7. There was little to do except wander around and talk to other people who were also emigrating. Many hundreds milled about, biding their time, waiting, wondering, anxious. Food was rationed.

It was here, at this camp, that one of the most poignant and meaningful experiences of my life occurred. With stark simplicity and power it reveals the essence of the man I had once affectionately known as Izibasci, the man who became my darling stepfather. It explains why I loved him from the start, why he had commanded my respect and admiration, why I could so easily share Mummy's affections with him. But I was yet to really know this special person in my life. I know Daddy remembered the incident all these years, but he never spoke of it to me. I think of it often.

Mummy and I were taking a walk through the camp, as we did every day. People streamed by, heading nowhere in particular. Some nodded in mild greeting. Others just went on their way, their faces weary, and their eyes tense. Occasionally Mummy stopped to exchange a few words with someone we met. In the course of our rounds, amongst the many strangers we passed was a man holding a small pad of paper in his hand. I noticed it immediately. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. So many sheets all neatly tucked inside a cover, with a spiral binding holding it all together! Of course, I had used paper at school in Vienna. And I had managed to stash away my own tidy, little nest of papers, but it consisted merely of old bills of different shapes and sizes which Mummy had given me from time to time. I had carefully smoothed them out and then stored them away for safekeeping in a crude, little pouch. But this little pad of paper was something very different, and I instantly became filled with childish longing.



Turning to Mummy as we walked on, I asked, hopefully, "Do you think maybe one day I might be able to have a pad of paper like the one that man was holding?"

After a moment or two, she responded with a deep sigh, "Maybe one day."

To my great surprise, the next morning Mummy placed in my hand the very pad of paper I had coveted the previous afternoon. I looked at her, bewildered. What did this mean? Mummy smiled and assured me that the pad was mine to keep. It wasn't until many years later that I learned how I came to be the proud owner of such a wonderful gift.

That same afternoon Mummy had shared the experience with Daddy. Somehow, amongst the hundreds of men in the camp, Daddy managed to find the very man we had seen and offered him a barter arrangement, to which the man agreed. The barter: his supper ration in exchange for the pad of paper. My dear, loving stepfather suffered hunger pangs for the sake of his little girl's smile. This is the true and noble man, who loves me like his own.

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Near the end of December 1951, along with perhaps a thousand other people, we finally boarded The Fairsea, the Italian freighter that was to take us across the vast ocean to Canada. The two-week long voyage began.

It was a rough journey. The seas were turbulent, heaving the ship first one way, then the other. In a steady rocking motion it cut through the water. Since The Fairsea was a freighter rather than a passenger ship,



our quarters were makeshift. The women, about 500 of them, slept in a huge, bare room, probably a storage area, which had been roughly converted into a dormitory. Row upon row of metal

beds with thin mattresses had been set up and underneath each one was a potty . . . a risky, though necessary, arrangement I daresay, given the circumstances. During the night I awoke to hear the rasping noise of countless round repositories sliding haphazardly along the cement floor. In noisy confusion they migrated here, there and everywhere, resulting in frequent collisions and numerous sloppy 'mishaps'. Makes one think of bumper cars at an amusement park. In the morning we usually found our potty had disappeared, with one or more in its place under the cot. It quickly became apparent that little could be done to prevent this unseemly potty exchange. Of course, the act of getting out of bed had to be undertaken with great caution. It didn't take me long to find out that if I moved too hastily, without first making sure the coast was clear, I could easily find myself with a foot submerged. Daddy says the accommodations for the 500 or so men was pretty much the same (although I don't know about the portable potties).

As comical as this sounds, it was really rather undignified and humiliating. There was no privacy. It was awkward and unsettling to be sharing a communal room with so many other people, but having years

before lived under conditions far worse, no one complained. Everyone adjusted to the set-up and made the best of it.

The summons to meals was made through loudspeakers hung in numerous places throughout the ship. We soon became accustomed to the blaring announcement, "Tutti mangiare! Tutti mangiare!" ("Everyone eat! Everyone eat!"). It echoed in all the rooms and down every passageway, and propelled us in a swollen multitude toward the long rows of tables and benches where the meals were served. Perhaps unexpectedly, given the rather crude accommodations, the food was plentiful and better than we had had in a while. For this we were grateful.

After several days on the high seas, the ship ran into a raging storm and Mummy and I spent the remainder of the trip in the infirmary, violently seasick. Nomi bunked with Daddy then. Thankfully, they fared quite well and did not experience any significant ill effects. Mummy lost a great deal of weight throughout this ordeal and when we left The Fairsea at our destination, she was very thin and pale.

But we were all together. And we had made it.

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We disembarked at Halifax, Canada, on January 8, 1952, the passage having taken some four days longer than expected due to the storm. As energized as we all felt, it was, sadly, not an auspicious time. We were directed into a large room, lined up, so many people in a row, and sprayed through hoses with DDT. It was a strange, demeaning experience.

"Mummy, why are they doing this?" I asked.

Her eyes were downcast. She hesitated a moment or two before responding, and instinctively I knew she felt shame. I looked at her inquiringly, needing her reassurance. I could barely make out her subdued reply.

"They think we are dirty", she whispered to me. Suddenly I felt very unwelcome. I clung to Mummy's hand.

With that, each family was given \$5 and we were sent off, to make our own way.

Our life in Canada had begun. I couldn't help but wonder. Do the people here think we are so very different? Aren't we just ordinary

people, like they are? Why do they treat us this way? Don't they want us to live here? I didn't understand. A strange sense of discomfort filled me. To this day I have not forgotten the hoses and the DDT. There is still the same anger, humiliation . . . the same aching heart.

We stayed overnight in a small room somewhere and with the money we had been given Daddy went to buy some food. He returned with what was our first meal in Canada . . . a hunk of cheese and a loaf of sliced bread packaged in plastic, an unfamiliar commodity to us. I felt out of place, disconnected and separate from my surroundings. Staying close to Mummy and Daddy, I tried hard not to cry. I needed to be strong for Nomi and to set her a good example. Still, I missed Oma and Ega and Frau Meder. I missed our old apartment. What was to be in store for us in this foreign land?

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We went on to Toronto where we were to make our home. Daddy's brother, Willie, and his wife, Boesi, lived there and we stayed with them for the first few days. They had sponsored us so Mummy and Daddy felt a deep debt of gratitude to them. Their home turned out to be a lovely,



tastefully furnished apartment which reflected Boesi's charm and refinement. In every room there were such beautiful things to see . . . rugs, chairs, bookcases, lamps, china and bric-a-brac. As I looked about, I was vaguely reminded of Pola

and my visits to the antique shops in Vienna. I decided the apartment was a comfortable place. And I liked my new uncle and aunt. Willie had an edge to his humor, and Boesi was kind and solicitous.

