

## Helen Alexandra Szablya

### **The Strong Legacy of 1956 in the Szablya Family**

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It was frightening sitting in the back of the truck on the dark and rainy night. It was November, 1956, and I was four years old. I was balancing on a big green canvas knapsack. There were no seats on the back of the truck, so everyone was balancing and I didn't even know the people I was riding with. My Mother was sitting in the cab of the truck with the baby and my Father was way up front with my two-year old brother. I had been told not to say a word. The sound of the rain was deafening and the canvas that was draped over the metal frame of the truck was flapping in the wind, so I could see the muddy road running along the side. All I could think about was that we would hit a bump and I would fall out where the canvas was not tied down. Because I was not allowed to say anything, no one would know that I had fallen and I would be left behind.

That is one of many memories that I had as a four-year-old escaping with my parents and brothers in 1956. We tried it three times before we were successful. I remember when we spent the night in jail, after one of our captures. There were only eight beds for more than 100 people, but we got one because my Mother had just given birth and the others felt sorry for her.

The Revolution of 1956 was the single most significant life-changing event in my life. It was not my decision to escape: it was my parents' decision. And, they certainly didn't do it for themselves; they did it for their children – the ones already born and the ones that would follow. I owe everything to my parents because they had the courage to do what so many could not do. The terror of the escape, the fear of being caught, the fear of being separated, the fear of being sent to Siberia, of being tortured, of being killed, would live with my parents for years. Nightmares and insomnia were common.

#### **Family values**

When something this monumental happens to your family, when you are uprooted from everything you know and are thrown into unknown situations, it is very helpful to have parents who considered everything an adventure. You see, it was an exciting new world we were exploring and we children were being taken along for the ride. My Father and Mother loved each other so deeply and so romantically that everything we did was fun and educational and adventurous, even when it didn't deserve that kind of attention. Whether it was a Sunday family drive in the car or an evening at the opera, everything was to be extremely appreciated. And, if you didn't appreciate it, an attitude adjustment was in store!

Not all of my young Hungarian friends were so lucky. Some had parents who continued to be fearful of the unknown. Some were depressed. Some questioned their decision to leave their homeland.

My parents were very strict about many things. Education, church and faith were most important. Both were raised in high society and came from privileged backgrounds. This meant that they spoke several languages and were well-versed in history, culture, art and music. However, they both lost everything. The houses their families once owned were now properties of the Hungarian State and they lived in one or two rooms. And although my Father was a professor of Engineering, it took a while before they could afford to move into their own place, so they lived with my Grandmother and Great-Grandfather.

My parents wanted many children, which would have been prohibitive in Hungary during that time for many reasons, not the least of which was that there were no apartments available that would be big enough to accommodate a large family. The family of three children my parents escaped with was considered a big family in Hungary.

## **Canada**

My Father's motto was "in Rome, do as the Romans do." So, when we first arrived in Vancouver, Canada, there were many new things to learn, including speaking English. Since both of my parents knew how to speak English, we never spoke it at home. So one day, one of the neighbors told my Mother that I had told her something and my Mother's reaction was: "Helen speaks English???" I had managed to pick it up in the neighborhood without my parents' help.

At home my parents spoke Hungarian and we were expected to do the same. Our traditions were Hungarian and Roman Catholic. My parents did, however, adopt Thanksgiving because they liked what it stood for. While living in Canada, we were a part of a very active Hungarian community that included scouting and church. I loved the scouts. Girls and boys were instructed together, not separately as with American scouting. I also thought that all churches had big halls where parties were regularly organized with a live band, dancing, drinks and food, and where babies and grandparents mixed with the young people. I was very surprised when we later moved to the US to a small university town that had a tiny Hungarian community, that those days were over.

Hungary was very far away. It was impossible to telephone and letters had to be carefully worded so as not to raise suspicion. The world felt huge: we were on one side of it and Hungary on the other side.

Nothing could be more illustrative of my parents embracing North America and the Northwest in particular than their many attempts at camping. Here were these two Budapest-raised sophisticated people with a big canvas tent and lots of camping gear, traveling through some of the most remote parts of Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas and the Canadian plains. We knew the stories of Deadwood and Spearfish long before they were popular. We saw ghost towns that were real, not re-created. Both of my parents reveled in the romance of the adventure. As each of the seven children came along, we kept on going. We even camped for a week at a time in Idaho with no running water or outdoor plumbing, with all of us children and the baby in a playpen in the center of the tent. And we never missed mass on Sunday.

The legacy of 1956 has been a defining moment in my family's history, and my parents have told the story of their escape hundreds of times to schoolchildren, at conferences and seminars, in lectures and in articles.

## **Opportunities**

Growing up in Canada and the United States definitely made me a different person than what I would have been like growing up in Hungary. The freedom I had to pursue the theater for more than 10 years would not have been possible had we stayed in Hungary. The freedom to listen to whatever music I wanted, read whatever author I wanted, to travel and explore different parts of the world would not have been afforded me. After I moved away from home, my parents took all six of their other children on two sabbaticals: one to Braunschweig, Germany; and the other to Trinidad & Tobago. One of my sisters even married a Trinidadian. A Hungarian girl would not likely have done that.

When asked to speak at a Leadership Seminar, I began by saying that while I was growing up, there were two things that I was absolutely positive about. One was that I would be married once and stay married for my whole life and the second was that the Iron Curtain would not fall within my lifetime. By the time I was 37 years old, both turned out to be wrong. I was a divorced Mother of two, and Hungary was free. I was also living 3,000 miles away from all of my family.

When I finally had the time and money to go to Hungary, it was 1992 and my Mother had already visited twice. She was interested in helping the government to flourish and get North American investments, so she was busy! She was soon to become the Honorary Consul for the northwest region of the United States.

## **Heritage**

For the three weeks I was in Hungary, not a day went by that my parents and I didn't cry so hard it hurt and that we didn't laugh so hard that we cried. The emotions were so extreme. The deep sadness I felt that I had not grown up Hungarian in Hungary was acute. The fact was that growing up I had been denied my heritage of all of the marvelous history, architecture, traditions, music, art and culture that are uniquely Hungarian. We visited all of the historic family sites all over Hungary. We visited family crypts and restaurants and houses and people. I imagined what I would be like had I grown up in a free Hungary, not a communist Hungary. I felt robbed!

It took a week or so after I returned to the United States to realize that I was very happy with the person I was, and that I had not been robbed, but rather, enriched. I had the benefit of my Hungarian, Canadian and American heritage. Both of my children, Anna and Alexander, were born and raised in the United States. It is the path we have taken.

***Helen Alexandra Szablya***

*Helen A. Szablya has worked as a communications professional for the past 25 years including in key management positions at The Enterprise Foundation, The Fannie Mae Foundation, the Mayor's Office in Baltimore City; the State of Maryland and the U.S. Department of the Treasury, as well as in the private sector. She has also served on numerous nonprofit boards, as a volunteer and as a mentor to young people. For her professional work and civic involvement Szablya was named one of Maryland's Top 100 Women in 1996 and in 2001. Prior to her work in communications, she worked for 10 years in the theater, creating original theater pieces for multi-racial companies and touring the United States. For more than two years, she was a Rockefeller Fellow at the Center for New Performing Arts at the University of Iowa.*

*Helen was a refugee from Hungary with her family in 1956. She grew up in Vancouver, B.C. and Pullman, Washington, where her Father was a professor and her Mother a writer. She is married to E. Charles Dann, Jr., a partner in a law firm in Baltimore, MD, and has two children, Anna Meiners, 29, living in Hollywood, CA, and Alex Meiners, 24, living in Baltimore. Both are artists.*

*Helen A. Szablya is the daughter of Helen M. Szablya.*