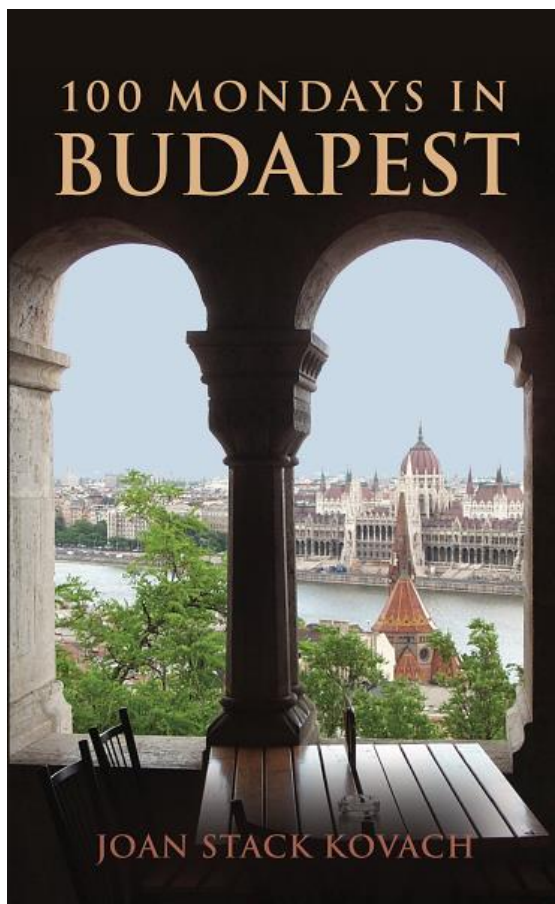




100 Mondays in Budapest is the story of a family's two years in Hungary. It's a mother's memoir, a love story, a travel narrative, and a meditation on how we manage what we have, what we fear, what we lose, and what we ultimately gain.

100 Mondays in Budapest
By Joan Stack Kovach

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100 MONDAYS IN BUDAPEST



JOAN STACK KOVACH

100 Mondays in Budapest

Joan Stack Kovach



BookLocker

Trenton, Georgia

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Chapter 1

Saying Yes in Noe Valley

October 1997, San Francisco

George leaned back, one arm stretched across my chair, and rubbed my neck. “What if we live someplace totally different from Cohasset?” he asked as we munched on thin crust loaded with cheese, mushrooms, and pepperoni. “What if we just pick up and move, try someplace new?”

The Kovachs were gathered around a table at Haystack Pizza in Noe Valley. Rosemary-infused air breezed through the French casement windows that opened to a street-side patio and a view of century-old buildings. Funky head shops and bead stores surrounded the pizza joint.

We traveled west to attend my nephew’s wedding in Bolinas. It was earlier that year that we lost his sister Katy in the car accident. We were all eager to leave town, to hang out in the unfamiliar houses we rented in Stinson Beach, to soak in hot tubs, swim in lagoons, soothe our grief. Perhaps it was both the wonder of this different environment and the real possibility of sudden loss that encouraged George now, in the pizza shop, to pursue an idea that flitted in and out of our life plans.

The cuffs of his blue button-down shirt were folded back, twice, in his precise way. He’d been doing this thing with his cuffs since high school, where we first met. Oh, that handsome boyfriend, who took me for rides in his father’s white Ford Falcon station wagon. Dark blond hair waving in the wind and eyes the color of faded denim, he would tell me about his

Hungarian heritage as we drove along. I found it exotic. I'm mostly Irish, like everyone else in my Catholic school was. All I knew about Hungarians was that they invented goulash, which I'd never had, and that in 1956 my third-grade class was praying for them because they revolted against "those demonic communists." George would point out his Hungarian family landmarks: the Wayside Inn his Aunt Julie ran and the Cedar Rest, a restaurant his grandmother opened against her father's wishes and where his dad was sometimes the bartender. We cruised by the quarry where his great grandfather lost his arm in an explosion, which brought him a lot of money. After that, George told me, politicians came to the house, and his great grandfather would greet them in the suit he dressed up in every day since the accident. On these romantic rides, my Hungarian prince flung his arm across the back of the bench seat to pull me closer, sharing stories about his Hungarian kin, especially that great grandfather, George Warga, *Édes Apa* (Sweet Papa), with his wooden arm and the black leather glove covering his fake hand. Little George was made to take that hand whenever he visited. He told me how he shook with fear each time.

I would slide as close to him as I could get, gushing something like, "Oh, wow. Your family stories are like a historical novel of royalty!"

"Right, I'm blue-blooded Hog Hill, Tomkins Cove, real Hungarian royalty," he'd say, sticking his chest out with mock pride.

Most guys at our school wore short-sleeved shirts when the weather got warm, their skinny arms jutting out of the flailing sleeves, their shirts unbalanced by the big, ugly ties required by our Catholic high school uniform. But George wore long-sleeved shirts with the cuffs folded back, year-round.

What I saw of his arms was beautiful—tan skin from outdoor weekend work, hair bleached golden, and that signature rubber band on his left wrist, a small peculiarity that sent my heart into a flutter. When I got to know him, I asked why he always wore it. He spoke with an air of mystery. “I just do,” he said, head tilted, blue eyes fixed on mine. I was smitten.

The rubber band was gone now, but the folded cuffs and some of the mystery had stayed. I still don’t know his rationale for either. His eyes were still a special blue, Hungarian blue. Those eyes, a smile girls dream of, his quiet understated way, and that mysterious addition to his wrist—it all captured me back then and he still held a compelling attraction. In high school we began an on-again, off-again romance, married after six years, and here we were now, twenty-six years and three kids later.

I bit into my pizza and looked over at our three boys sitting around the table. So far, they’d all done well in school, held their own in sports, and collected a solid set of friends. I’d expected that we’d have kids who resembled us—healthy, smart, good kids. I was still adjusting to an all-boy family—so different from the girl dominated household where I grew up. Nor had I adjusted to such a made-for-TV town as Cohasset, the picture-perfect town common with the duck pond surrounded by all the white clapboard houses, perfected lawns and gardens, multiple BMWs and Audis in the driveways. I never imagined a family life with extra income either, enough to fly five of us to California for a family wedding, then fly to Arizona for a week to see the Grand Canyon, Sonoma Valley, and some of Navajo land, exactly our plans for the next few days. Because life was this good, we could take some risks and mix it up.

“Move where?” Sixteen-year-old Steve sat up from his signature slouch and tuned into the conversation. His wavy hair and ruddy complexion made him more Stack than Kovach. But that’s not why, next to his father, I thought Steve was the coolest kid I’d ever met. Like his dad, he said no more than necessary. Since the onset of adolescence, he mumbled, so most of what he did share was still a mystery. I know it’s silly for a mother to say this, but the way he kept me guessing gave me the erroneous impression that he was a hundred percent confident in himself. He was awfully particular about his food (bananas banned from his lunchbox) and his clothes (pants with five pockets, please, and cuffs he’d carefully pegged since second grade). His brothers looked up to him for clues on what mattered in life. He perfected a sullen persona. At the mention of a move, he didn’t grace us with one of his rare smiles, but leaked an uninhibited spark of interest. His support for this idea of moving would create great momentum in our crew.

Middle guy Peter was thirteen, tall, thin, with a head of floppy dirty blond hair, and was the most Hungarian-looking of our family. George resembled his Irish/English mother’s side. Peter resembled George’s brother Tom and the Hungarian side. In an instant, he was out of his chair dancing around, chanting, “Gonna move, yeah, gonna move, yeah. Awesome! Let’s do it! Where?”

“Sit down, Peter,” George said in a low voice, adding his signature stern look that reined Peter in.

“Oh. Yeah. Oops. I’ll be right back.” Peter asked the waiter for the men’s room and disappeared around the corner.

It’s not that Peter couldn’t stand still. In front of a video game, he was like a statue with moving fingers. Peter hadn’t yet met a video game he couldn’t master. He outplayed his

brothers and beat the games as well. But the way he fixated on the screen seriously worried me. He'd be so engaged; he could be on fire and not notice. He acquired a batch of buddies he'd known since nursery school, kids he played alongside on various, victorious sports teams. He was the fun guy who played first string in soccer and kept them laughing when on the sidelines. Although left-handed, he fielded balls at third base and caught at home plate. He'd grown to be a notable lacrosse midfielder and played with an innocent passion. Back at the table, continuing where he left off, he chimed in. "So, did you decide where we are going? Can we live anywhere? Argentina plays great soccer. What about Mexico?"

"This place looks pretty cool," Steve offered, eyeing two girls in halter tops and feather earrings walking by the gaily painted Victorian homes that lined the street.

"Sure. What about out here?" George proposed.

Jake was scanning the menu to see if Haystack served any pasta he might order after finishing his pizza. Jake never met a noodle he didn't like. With George's square build and twinkly eyes, he'd been called by George's coworker a "Xeroxed reduction of Mr. Kovach." He didn't compete with his brothers yet, but seemed to take notes on what would or would not work once he was older, like them. He was the kid everyone high-fived after an at bat or soccer header. A head shorter than his classmates, he had good friends but was known more as a favorite of his friends' parents.

"Wait. Are you serious? We're really moving?" Jake tuned in at last. "Wait. Come on, I'll miss my friends! Can we still live near a beach?"

"Anything's possible, right George?" I said, taking his hand. I was thankful Jake brought up the beach. It wasn't a

priority for George, who was more of a fresh water and woods man. He grew up in Stony Point, New York, near mountains and lakes where he fished and hiked, and relished Boy Scout camping trips. But it's the coastline that's logged solidly in my DNA. My family spent all or part of every summer at the beach. Riding waves, warming our tan bodies in the sun, putting away coolers of sandwiches and jugs of lemonade—these were sacred, seasonal rituals.

Years back, at my cousin's mid-summer wedding, I heard my mother grumble under her breath, "What a waste of a good beach day this is!" Beach days were more than recreational in my family. They were spiritual. Medicinal. "How can you be sick when you were pumped with Vitamin D all summer?" Mom would challenge us, if we caught a cold in the winter. All but one of my siblings have settled within a few miles of a shoreline either in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Florida, or out west near the Pacific. Only my older brother Bill, out in Missouri, calls the Midwest his home.

Cohasset's town beach was a mile from our house. Could we afford to live in Stinson Beach for a few years, I wondered? I'd even settle for the foggy, cool neighborhood of Oceanside, California, if I must. We finished our meal with no plan pinned down, just a world of possibilities opened. Somewhere in my subconscious, I may have been weighing the safety of such places for teenagers.

The next time the idea was seriously considered was two years later, when George's job ended. Instead of switching to some other department to do work that held no interest for him, he took the severance package and some time off to plan a next step. In a perfect world, George would have been an academic, teaching poetics, literature, perhaps publishing his fifth volume

of poetry. But he was drafted out of college and went to Vietnam when he was twenty-two. Mucking his way through the Southeast Asian jungle, it wasn't his literary dreams but the goal of building a life with a family and making enough money to support them that sustained him. Anyway, when he returned in 1970, PhDs in literature were plentiful and teaching jobs so scarce that potential professors and poets were driving cabs and bartending. He took a different turn, left a literature master's program, and began work first as a carpenter, and then as a paralegal in the field of commercial real estate, eventually becoming an investment manager for pension funds, thus affording us the life we were living.

I'd moved on from the idea of moving out west, or anywhere in the States. If we did move, I wanted us to experience a real difference, not just a lateral move but a paradigm shift. Maybe a more old-fashioned place, safer, without fast cars, teenage drinking, and even video games. Maybe we could get far away from a world where Nintendo commanded more respect than a parent.

"Supper's ready! Come on and wash your hands," I'd yell on a typical weeknight.

Nothing.

I'd repeat myself, calling into the TV room from the kitchen; charge into the TV room and stand between the screen and my two oldest sons, who each held a control. Steve would look around me, me! the intrusive obstacle blocking his vision. Nintendo kidnapped my sons, commandeering their soft, spongy brains.

"Supper!" I'd say with an edge to my voice.

"I just have to get to the next level." Peter would shift his torso, crane his neck to look past me and add, "Please, mom."

"How much time do you need?" I'd weaken, I know.

"Just a few more minutes," all three would say in unison. That was never true. The next level could take hours, weeks, or forever.

"I'm counting to three and pulling the plug—"

"No!" Jake, who wasn't even playing, would plead. "Mom, they'll lose their places and have to start over." As if that was some world tragedy.

"I'm counting. One. Two..."

Peter and Steve would finally push whatever buttons saved their standings.

"Is it off or paused?" I'd demand, wise to these guys. "After dinner, you do homework, remember?"

"Pffff, it's off," and Peter would look at me, undertaker sad. Slowly they all would slouch into the kitchen, with brains still moving at some hyper speed.

I'd lay forks and plates on the table, while Steve, robot-like, spewed words at the pace his fingers moved playing video games: "Where's-dinner-you-said-dinner-was-ready-I-don't-see-any-dinner-anywhere-where-is-the-dinner-you-said-was-ready-looks-like-it-isn't-ready-and-we-came-in-here-for-nothing-so-where-is-dinner?" Grrrrrr.

Maybe we could move to Central Europe, say to Hungary where I saw teenage boys walking hand in hand with their mothers, carrying her groceries. Maybe they don't even have video games there.

I was in an Artist's Way group the year before we left. When directed to name our dreams, I had five, my list forming

the word BEACH: I wanted to write a Book (I was working on a novel about a single mother who marries her Polish chimney sweep); I wanted Enough money to not have to worry about money; I wanted to live Abroad, a goal George and I shared for years; I wanted to write a Column again (for five years, I wrote a column for a monthly nursing publication until it folded); and I wanted Health and safety for my family.

With George's severance, there was now Enough money, and with this break in his work, living Abroad was possible. Maybe we could move someplace quaint, old-fashioned and inexpensive, like Central Europe, a world just climbing out of years of communist oppression. Maybe we could live in Hungary, find some Kovach and Warga relatives, give our kids a really different experience. So far, we were all Healthy and safe, though not that safe, if one considered the dangers of teenage driving. Statistically, driving was less of a risk in Hungary. I looked it up. With this move, I could realize three of five dreams—E, A, and H—and wherever we went, I could write a Book about it. Four out of five's not bad, I thought. And who knows. Maybe somebody would want a Column by an expat mom.

Having enough money to do whatever we wanted was unusual for us. I continued to meet with all my groups, my school committees, church ladies, writing friends, the Artist's Way group. I kept both my part-time jobs, teaching and the ER work, because I enjoyed them and because even if we moved away for a spell, I wanted to come back to them. During his break from work life, George studied with a Hungarian tutor and went hiking and camping, self-care adventures he certainly deserved after fifteen years of 60–70-hour work weeks. We

were each doing our own thing, going to movies and dinner together, and getting along fine, but we weren't particularly close the way you are when you have some struggle in common. We took a fabulous reconnaissance trip, traveled to see some of those Eastern and Central European countries under consideration, visiting Prague, Warsaw, Budapest and Vienna too. While in Budapest, we visited the city of Kalocsa with a driver/translator, searching for some Kovach (*Kovacs*) or Warga (*Varga*) relatives, but we had no success there. George read up on the status of the business community adjusting to the new capitalism, formulating ideas of how to use his skills there. We had dinner with the finance and medical directors of the American Clinic in Budapest who said they had plenty of work for me. As the spring of 2000 approached, our plans became more focused. We would move to Hungary for two years. There, we could find work, experience something really different, show our kids another part of the world. I applied for a school nurse position at the American International School of Budapest (AISB). If I was hired, Peter and Jake could attend the school tuition-free. George made plans to return to find us housing and look into opportunities for a consultation role.

George told Steve about this idea of moving as he drove him back to school from spring break. "He lit up," George told me later. "He wants to come with us. He's miserable up there. He could take classes wherever we wind up and then see if he wants to go back. Like a sophomore year abroad. Why not?"

Steve had started college in upstate New York, but it wasn't going all that well. "Frats matter up here at Hamilton way more than they advertised," he told us in an email. He didn't want to join one, but frats were the only place where anything happened. He described his weekends as sitting

around while one roommate went home to his parents and the other—a legacies jock—was out partying. One night the jock came back so drunk he peed all over Steve’s shoes and laundry bag.

Steve had made it onto the lacrosse team, showed up for every freezing cold, early morning run and late day practice, but had only a few minutes of playing time the entire season. In a phone call, he told us, “I had to buy a fake ID to get in anywhere, but the guy I bought it from got caught. He gave the names of all the IDs he made, so I lost the money I gave him and have no ID now.” We hadn’t yet read the reports that say nearly half of all college freshmen feel they’re at the wrong school at first, and a third of them look to transfer someplace else. We’d told him to just stick it out. This move could be a relief for him.

Peter was then a high school sophomore, playing great lacrosse. “He could be looking at a Division 1 school,” his coach said, “but he’s falling off in his grades.” With Steve away, Peter had taken over his brother’s third-floor bedroom, where he spent huge amounts of time doing small amounts of homework. A major change might be what he needed too.

“Yeah, sure, I’m in. I’ll try out living someplace new,” Peter said, but in the months before we left, he refused to consider any goodbye parties and was arrested repeatedly for stupid rule-breaking, like helping some underage girls hide their beer in the dunes late one night and getting caught. These arrests required court appearances that threatened our departure. You would think a psych nurse would have recognized that her son felt otherwise about leaving. But I ignored what his

behavior was telling us and let myself believe his words, believe he was a hundred percent on board with this plan.

Jake caught the love-of-foreign-travel bug when he was six and we took a trip to Cohasset's sister city in France. He was the most realistic and excited of all of us. He started packing, talked about how sad he was to leave his friends, sold off his rock collection at our pre-move yard sale, and enjoyed a string of goodbye parties rich with gifts, a scrapbook, and wonderful cards from his friends, saying things like, "We hope you don't get Hungry in Hungary."

Meanwhile, knowing I would miss the proximity of the ocean in this landlocked country, I walked the beach as much as I could, drinking in and trying to store in me the salty air smell and expansive view.

A few weeks before we were to leave, George interrupted my clearing the table after dinner, pulled out a folder of papers and sat me down for a serious conversation.

"I don't think we can do this, Joan, leave here. I mean, I ran the numbers, and we can't afford it." The AISB hired another nurse, an American who happened to be fluent in Hungarian. Now, besides living on whatever paychecks we might get over there, we would need to come up with the outrageous cost of two kids at the American School besides all our living expenses.

George was always more conservative, more careful about things, questioning possibilities, while I'd bounce around saying, "Why not?" I wasn't surprised when he raised his concern. Still, without any supporting evidence, I was sure we could make it work. Immediately, my busy brain began listing reasons why "of course we could, and would, go." I reminded

him that he and I always wanted to spend some part of our lives living in Europe. We missed out on the year abroad thing, me in nursing school and he drafted out of school sophomore year. Each year, when we celebrated our wedding anniversary, we would list some goals for the next year: take a trip, have a baby, put shelves in the boys' closet, live in Europe. A year later, we'd find the cocktail napkin or business card where we recorded these goals, check them off or reorder them for the next year: live in Europe, buy a house, have another baby. And then the next year: get a dog, put shelves in the boys' closet, live in Europe, have another baby, get a boat. We accomplished these goals, one by one: the house, the three kids, the dog, the boat—all but the shelves and the live-in-Europe. Then came this trip to California, when living somewhere else appeared on our screens. Europe was far from our minds then. But as life raising teenagers in the US made me feel increasingly worried—my peers seeming to take in stride happenings that freaked me out—a bigger move made sense. The newly liberated Eastern European countries were nicely situated, so we could easily visit lots of other countries from there, yet they were far less expensive to live in than any in Western Europe. Another excellent rationale for the move: We might be able to successfully track down Hungarian relatives, no small feat since all contact between the Warga and Kovach families and the old country had died out decades ago.

I faced George and reminded him our house already had a renter lined up, and the kids were already registered in the International School and the goodbyes were in progress. I just couldn't stand the idea of reversing our plans. The time was right. His job had ended and he had that severance package. My jobs were both part-time contract work. The kids were all

teenagers, in those years of discovery, so why not challenge them with a new culture?

I made the case that I fully expected to supplement the funds we had by working at the American Clinic, and he would surely succeed in whatever he tried. "If we don't go now, we'll never be able to pull this off," I persisted, knowing he really wanted to go as much as I did. So we went.

Chapter 6

Egy Baba Kezét Fogva (Holding a Baby's Hand)

The warm air of the subway station was rich with mingled smells of sour human sweat and sweet pastry treats from the underground Pékség bakery. Brilliant yellow anemones, pink gladiolas, and red carnations peered over the edge of the tall florists' buckets that lined the station walls. Hawkers' racks of silky scarves lent more splashes of color to this subterranean mall. Above all this, on the surface of Deak Ter, buses converged and departed to all the city's twenty-three districts.

We had just passed Monday #5. Strangers bustled past me in all directions. I headed for the train that runs north to Duna Plaza and studied the text on the wall over the tracks.

Ujpest-Kospont

Kobanya-Kispest

For the first 52 years of my life, I could grasp things quickly, read fast, see a few letters, and understand where the word was going. This style served me very badly in my new country. I thought I knew phrases but didn't. Because to my untrained ear, *zárnak* and *szerda* were similar. Instead of *Mikor zárnak?* (What time do you close?), I said, *Hol van szerda?* (Where is Wednesday?) at the ticket office for the Zugliget. Somehow I was given the information I needed and only later realized why my question was so confusing to the agent. At the blue line stops, I would spot the capital Ks in Kospont and Kispest, trains heading in opposite directions, confuse them, and head the wrong way. I had to slow down to better navigate

this city. It was not coming easily. That night, I worked hard to get it right.

A train slid into the station, Ujpest-Kospont bannered across its forehead. I double-checked my map to be sure it was the one I wanted. The doors sighed open, as if bored with their routine. I stepped in, looked about, found an empty seat, and joined my fellow passengers, studying the muddied floor. That's what everyone did in 2000 in Budapest. We looked at the floor. One exception was a woman who sat next to me on the tram to Hungarian class. She saw me reading an Agnes Polce novel about a woman in wartime Hungary and surprised me by leaning over to say that story was too depressing and I should read some Harry Potter. Such connection in public between strangers was rare. Jancis explained to me that forty years of Soviet oppression taught Hungarians that if you looked up, started a conversation, or even shared a smile, somebody in the hated AVO (Hungary's State Security Agency) might notice. This dreaded policing force was made up of Hungarians' fellow countrymen working for the occupying country. They could detain you, accuse you of practicing your religion or of criticizing the government or of some other crime against the state. Should that happen, poof, you could be whisked off to the gulag, never to return. The Soviets left eleven years ago, but the habits my fellow passengers developed for survival died slowly. There were few random smiles, harmless glances, or cheerful hellos anywhere in public, but it felt very different from the stranger shunning one experiences on the New York subway. In New York, people just don't seem interested in each other. They rush by, radiating an I'm-important-get-outta-my-way way. Here, it was more like an I'm-scared-of-what-you-might-do-to-me-so-I-won't-look-up way.

My train car was half full. I tried to keep looking down, tried to find interesting designs in the swirls of mud on the floor, but I could not. At the next stop, I slipped up, and looked up and around. A young woman boarded, carrying a little baby on her right hip. She sat down next to me. When the phone in her right pocket rang, she shifted her baby to her left side, my side. What a rush! I didn't blend. Hungarian babies were off limits for me, but here was one close enough to touch, staring at my dangly earrings. I lifted my right hand and moved my fingers around, playing air piano.

Was this child a little boy or girl? He or she sported a dark green, hand-knit sweater, tiny brown leather shoes, and a blue knit hat. Baby clothes were more androgynous here, but I was going with my guess. A boy. He studied me with serious eyes set deep in his little head. He looked, well, not like a cherub, but like a diminutive man who understood everything. His gaze shifted from my earring to my moving fingers as I kept the beat to my silent tune. Then—hallelujah!—he grabbed my pinkie in his tiny fist. Ecstasy! Baby joy! Kid touch! A satisfying morsel of what I had no idea I would miss so much. The utter delight of this tiny taste of being accepted surged through me. I could not contain my smile. I continued to wave the finger he held, his dark, glossy eyes staring at his prize while I tried to stretch this glorious moment to forever.

I boarded the train alone that night, in this city of 1.7 million people, none of whom I knew, all of whom spoke a language I didn't. George hadn't wanted to come along. I didn't have any friends in this city and nobody in my family wanted to join me. Yes, I had met some people, (the people who had recommended this movie to me) and I had some neighbors, a

medley of people from the world over with whom I tried to form a nodding acquaintance, but I couldn't possibly say to them, "Yo! Wanna hit the Duna Plaza tonight for a flick?"

The line up of those in our building included a single Japanese embassy worker in the top right flat, a Swiss embassy guard in the top left flat, and on the ground floor, a woman who rode horses every morning before work and woke me with the loud clapping of her riding boots on her terrace. She was Austrian and, in a terribly brief conversation with me, made a point of saying she was a descendant of the royal Austro-Hungarian Habsburg family.

In the flat to our left lived a strikingly handsome British man and a breathtakingly beautiful Hungarian woman who had just married. Our boys watched her walk down the driveway in her wedding gown and fell in love with her. Our landlord told us there was a Japanese family—father, mother, and a daughter—living the other side. The daughter attends the same school that Peter and Jake would attend soon, but the family was away for their summer holiday when we arrived and we had yet to meet them.

I really shouldn't have had opinions about my neighbors yet, having barely had more than a solemn nod with any of them. Well, maybe a weather comment. But I'd decided to not like The Habsburg Princess because she drives past me the days when I ambled down the street the half mile to the tram stop and has never offered me a ride. (Oh, for my own car!)

On our second Monday, I decided to greet my neighbors. Perhaps if I was friendly, I could get to know some of them. The sun was bright, the air clear and as I walked down the road, marigolds from a neighbor's yard gave off their strong and familiar scent. I saw that golden retriever being walked, and the

sight of him unleashed severe nostalgia, and a longing for Cohasset where goldens are rampant. I attempted to make eye contact with the owner.

“*Viszontlátásra*,” I said in my best Hungarian.

His face tensed, no eye contact, no smile but a response more like a wince. I comforted myself by imagining something else was going on with him, a stone in his shoe or something.

I continued on, determined, walking past all the gated yards. Kurusclesi was a dead-end street. Somewhere behind the gates were my neighbors. Wouldn't you have expected that anyone driving or walking here lived there? A car came along and turned in front of me. I put on a bright smile, looked through the window at the driver, a woman, and tried to catch her eye. But she was looking up at the remote clipped to her car visor, which she pushed before driving past invisible me into her garage.

I spotted another couple, both of them young and thin, walking down the street toward me, deep in conversation.

“*Viszontlátásra*,” I said again in my best Hungarian.

They kept walking, eyeing me briefly, saying nothing.

Back home, I had a nodding acquaintance with the majority of the Cohasset population. There, people who don't know each other will at least give a “Hi, how are ya.” But I had learned to not say that here. When I said it to the lady in the supermarket—*szia, hogy vagy*—she held her back and began a long monologue I didn't understand but assumed was an inventory of all her ailments. I listened and nodded for a while to be polite, but when she asked a question and paused for a reply, I confessed, *Nem értek magyarul* (I don't understand Hungarian) and moved on, trying to look apologetic.

On my walking effort to meet neighbors that day, I heard a car slow down, and my automatic response was of course to turn to see the familiar face of someone who wanted to chat with me. But the car only slowed down for the annoying *fekvő rendőr*. When I made it back to the flat, I told George about my failed adventure. He asked how I was greeting people: the formal *Jó napot kívánok* (I wish you a good day) or the less formal *sziasztok* (hello)?

Neither. I had wished them all *viszonzlátásra*, a nice farewell. I'd smiled and said goodbye to them all.

Soon I was salivating whenever I saw a car. It wasn't that I wanted one more than finding relatives or being vigilant for my kids and creating a warm functioning home, but I thought a car would make all of those things easier. I really wished we had one. Oh, Cohasset! Where I left my endearing and aged Volvo station wagon, the sand and dog hair made the memory of it even more endearing. I missed all the conveniences of the good life, the life I was so eager to leave. Were I in Cohasset tonight, I thought, George and I would likely go out for dinner and a movie, unless I was working my shift in the local ER.

I never thought I could work in emergency psychiatry. I'm more of a community mental health/family therapy type practitioner. But someone asked me to bring a flyer advertising an ER evaluator position to a gathering of nurses I was attending. Reading it over piqued my interest. The part-time hours appealed to me. I applied, and to my surprise, was hired. I asked the woman setting up the program why. She knew I had no ER experience, but she said she also knew I had other skills from over the years, skills she liked. "I'm confident I can teach you what you don't know," she said. And she did.

I missed that job and the competence I felt when working there. Tonight, no ER shift. And no date with George. He was setting up his home office fax machine and email. I was heading to the Duna Plaza *Mozi* (movie theater) because I'd been told this three-hour Canadian film, *Sunshine*, would help me understand Hungary and Hungarians. I was in serious need of this understanding. I wished George was with me. The film would surely have interested him, but I knew better than to try to cajole him into it. He was focused on starting a business. Venturing into the entrepreneurial world where he'd never walked made him increasingly tense.

Just the day before, as I made my way up to the second floor, I heard him use an uncharacteristic loud voice. "What are you doing in here?" he shouted at Jake, who was sitting at the desk he'd set up in the guest bedroom. "This is my office and I have work to do!"

Jake's face crumbled with fright, near tears.

"It's the only place the kids have to email their friends back home," I jumped in as Jake abandoned the computer and scooted past me.

"Well, that can happen when I'm not using it. How about after supper, Jake?" he called after him, more gently. "That's daytime back home anyway."

We were all leaning on George so much for everything. I couldn't seem to make any decisions without him. We asked him to show us on the map where we were going and for the words to use if we needed something. We were getting better, but I believed he was feeling weary of our new dependence.

George hadn't wanted to come with me to the movies tonight and I hadn't asked my sons to join me either. Oh, I'm not above forcing family members on outings. Over the years,

on Veterans' Days, because I wanted us all to honor my husband and wanted us all to be together, I'd organize a hike. And each year, the boys grew more reluctant to join in, even with promises of mozzarella sticks, pizza, burgers, fries, and/or pasta at the end of our day. Getting them in the car took great energy on my part. We called it "forced family fun," but it always ended with laughter and a good time.

My sons wouldn't have accompanied me to a movie back home anyway. I did join them when George took them all to *Star Wars*, but that recently published book on parenting—*Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me & Cheryl to the Mall?*—said it all. Back in the States, while teenagers tried hard to *not* be with their parents, the car rides they begged provided some—sometimes the only—opportunity for contact. Silent Steve protected himself from even that and once instructed a friend of his I was driving home to "Sit in the back and don't talk to her."

In Budapest, I wouldn't be driving my kids anywhere until we had a car. I would have to talk to George about that soon. During the Budapest part of our reconnaissance trip, I noticed teenagers walking alongside their mothers, chatting, carrying groceries, maybe even interlocking their arms. Children of all ages—teenagers, too—holding hands with parents and grandparents as they spent Sundays walking the hills of Buda. How envious I was, witnessing these scenes of intergenerational closeness. Okay, maybe that was more than I expected, but venturing out alone at night wasn't my vision of life in Budapest either. I continued to hope it would pull us closer together.

I had made one close friend: The Metro. So far, my best and only dependable companion. The red, yellow, and blue

underground lines-- these three the only ones in operation in the year 2000, before the green line appeared-- were frequent, reliable, and well-marked. I rode the trains everywhere, emerging from their deep, cool stations to hop onto their above-ground cousins, the overland buses and trams that were equally kind to me, delivering me wherever I wanted to go.

Back on the Metro, the little probably-boy-baby was still holding my finger. His mother hadn't yet noticed that we were touching. I was certain that if she did, she'd shift him away from me and it'd all be over. But she was as deeply engaged with her phone as I with her child. Then he giggled. Wonderful, but risky. Would his sound draw her attention? I broke Budapest protocol and glanced at her, just briefly, and yes, she saw us. She didn't join in the giggle, but she offered no scowl. Amazing! She returned to her phone and left me to my blissful encounter. I let my breath go, and we rode along, this little guy and me—can I say it?—holding hands. Oh, the sensation of his touch.

A recorded voice sang out the names of the Metro stops as we sped up to them and stopped—*Lehel Ter, Doza György Utca, Arpad hid*—strange words slowly growing familiar to me. As the train continued north, the crowd thinned. Too bad the public transit system was so reliable. My baby was soon at his stop *Logach utca*. The mother stood up and moved toward the door. The little one released my finger—reluctantly, I liked to think—still watching me over his shoulder. The doors opened. I held his gaze. The doors closed. I lost him into the night. But, oh, those few moments of skin-to-skin contact. I was starved for the random human touch I took for granted back home—a hug with a girlfriend I'd run into, a snuggle with one of my

sisters' little grandkids. Thinking about it now, I suppose George and I weren't spending a lot of time hugging then either, as we tried to find our footing in this new life. Our train left the station, but I remained in the balmy afterglow of the encounter. Then the voice sang out *Gyöngyösi utca*, my stop.

It was nearly seven when I emerged from the Metro at Duna Plaza to see the movie I trusted would enlighten me. I climbed the steps from the underground to face a vision unlike any I'd seen before: *Bevásárló Központ* (Duna Plaza). To me, it was a baffling sight, but who was I to judge? Hungary's first Western European-style shopping mall, finished in 1996, proclaimed a new era for the country. Patient Hungarian architects, who'd watched grimly for four decades as their city's elegance was compromised by ultra-pragmatic and artless Soviet construction, were let loose. As if a giant toddler cast some monster-sized toy blocks out of a bag, and they landed side-by-side, a series of buildings in various shapes lined up in rows along the street to form *Bevásárló Központ*.

The first building was a six-story, silver-blue inverted cone imbedded side by side into a silver and blue rectangle, just as huge. Next, a tall, vertically sliced cylinder, then a set of juxtaposed rectangles of different dimensions and hues, one leaning a bit off kilter, another one with a street level entrance topped with a playful wavy awning. The plaza continued down the avenue, its mammoth, unorthodoxly shaped and colored structures connecting to form a home for Western chain stores, Hungarian boutiques, international fast-food restaurants, and a ten-screen movie complex. I drank it all in, the wonder of something so different.

I'd left our flat in the Buda hills around 5:00 p.m., plenty of time to get to someplace I hadn't been before and be on time for a 7:30 film. At the ticket counter, the cashier looked up at me with a frown as I said, "One for *Sunshine*." He might have been one of the technical college students I saw in District XI on my way to language class, or one of the tech wizards from the electronics shop who helped me sort out a problem with my computer plug. I was confident he could speak enough English to cope with the likes of me.

"Are you certain you want a ticket for the film *Sunshine*?" he asked, studying me. He added, "This film began one hour and fifty minutes ago already, at seventeen-thirty."

"Right. So it will start again soon. It's only 7:15, right?"

"It is 19:15, yes, 7:15 *p.m.*"

Ouch! Of course. Seventeen-thirty is 5:30, not 7:30. The young man, neither warm and comforting nor cold and judgmental, following standard protocol, I suppose, for dealing with ridiculous expats, delivered the disappointing news with polite neutrality. I came all this way and failed at my goal, foiled by the difference in the way time is expressed.

"Oh, right." Feigning nonchalance, I backed off to browse the posters for other movies that might be playing, trying to look like I was not on a tedious mission to see a particular one, but up for any random movie tonight. I found a bench in the lobby where I could sit and regroup. I pulled a trusty English language *Budapest Weekly* magazine from my purse. I carried one with me because the centerfold had a great map, but the issue had only last week's movie listings. I took one of the Hungarian language *Pesti-ests* from the rack on the wall, confident I could get the information I needed from it: what's playing, what's dubbed in Hungarian, and which ones have

subtitles. If dubbed, there would be Hungarian voices, and I'd have to tune out the sounds and lip read. That was a lot of work. If subtitled, I could just listen, in this case to Madonna and Rupert Everett speaking English in *The Next Best Thing*, while folks around me read the Hungarian subtitles. The film would start at 20:00, eight o'clock. Great. Forty-five minutes to kill wandering around the inside of a silver cone.

My hand still warm from the baby's and my soul still smarting from my mistake, I walked past multiple mobile phone vendors, a home goods store, a high-end home decorator shop with upholstered Victorian couches and massive matching drapes. Should I have looked in there to solve my drapery problem? That great room with large, glass sliding doors and windows offered a great view but allowed powerful late summer sun to blind us and overheat the space? I was not remotely confident enough to enter that store.

I continued on, found a stationery store, a crowded little place with colorful notebooks stacked high, and decided to buy my boys some school supplies. But of course, I stumbled. I selected a package of that funny A6 paper they used over there that's a little longer and a little narrower than what we used back home and therefore would fit none of the binders we shipped over. I found some cellophane tape, but in the checkout line, I realized tape-dispensers were sold separately. I got out of line, found a dispenser, and looked about, certain my incompetence was obvious to other shoppers. It was worse than that. No one seemed to notice me. Purchase completed, it was time for the movie.

Madonna and Rupert relieved my homesickness the way a hot fudge sundae relieves hunger: too good and too short-lived. The quirky Madonna character reminded me of my should-

have-been-an-actress younger sister Mary, and it was lovely listening to all that good old American English.

The movie over, I took myself back home, retracing my journey on the blue Metro, then the red, then the tram, back to the Buda hills. Along the way, no one seemed to see me; no one smiled or held my hand. I let myself into the quiet space of our flat, tired from an excursion that used up six of the empty hours I had to fill. The guys were still out, George still in his office, playing that wailing vocal Gypsy music he'd taken a liking to. I was in no hurry to recount my latest failure. I collapsed on the vacant couch.

In the end, neither the movie nor the shopping meant as much as that baby who grabbed my finger and held on. When I did catch the eye of the baby's mother, the fact that she didn't pull him away was a major gift. I finally scored in this new life. Yes, it was I who initiated the encounter, held my finger out to the little one as he flapped about. He was only grasping at whatever was in the air, but oh! how nice for me.

As for my part, that action was as normal as breathing. Wouldn't anybody do the same? Perhaps not. I was slowly beginning to understand how spending the first half of my life tucked into my large family led me to go out into the world expecting everybody to see the things just as we did. The Stack family way. The *right* way. The Cohasset way differed only because of the high-income level, but in Budapest, few if any of my norms were universal. I'd thought of myself as an adventurer, eager to explore and experience differences, not to be foiled by strange buildings, silent people, marvelous and unimaginable twists of reality. I came to Hungary exactly to experience the different. But the differences came on at a nonstop video-game pace, wearing me down. Things I used to

know as surely as my own name were no longer certain. Joan Kovach was Kovacs Joanne. Mistakes spilled over into everything I tried to do-- buying beef that would turn out to be pork; getting on a tram going in the wrong direction, saying goodbye for hello. I was no longer a woman of curiosity and mastery, just one trying hard to manage. Ouch.

At least a baby grabbed onto and held my finger with his own tiny fist, and for a few moments, his mother let us touch. At least that happened. I laid back on the couch in our silent living room and remembered that sensation. I let the hardened shell of the defenses that were getting me through these tough first weeks crack open; my insides turn soft and runny as a soft boiled egg as I thought only of that baby.

Chapter 21

Finding Family

We had less than twenty Mondays left until our final departure from Budapest and, in many ways, we were doing better. What we accomplished on our Easter trip to the USA cheered me more than even the Kennedy Airport daffodils had. Our suitcases returned with us this time. Peter finally looked at his email and declared he had been accepted to UMass. We had a meeting scheduled with the headmaster and his teachers to see if he could still pull off not just a high school diploma but maybe even the International Baccalaureate diploma.

Steve seemed in a good place when we saw him. He looked a little bit stressed at first, climbing off a bus after the six-hour ride to Cohasset, but he lit up and relinquished his usual reserve when he shared a beer in Roger's living room and told us about his roommates. At last, he'd found three other guys he really liked, kindred spirits who, like him, hated *a cappella* singing and loved poetry. They'd scored a great living situation, a suite with a working fireplace, on the top floor of an old building on campus, ancient by New York—not Hungarian—standards. He was in an English seminar, small and intense, and was learning like never before. He had plans to work with his girlfriend's dad on Cape Cod that summer after coming to Budapest for a few weeks when school got out.

Meanwhile, Jake had been part of the cast of the *Fiddler on the Roof* performance at AISB that spring and had traveled to Sweden with the drama group. George and Jake had signed up for a community service trip to the Kalahari with the school.

I was working with other moms to plan the annual senior dinner at a downtown hotel. Life felt somewhat normal, familiar, and I let those feelings carry me along.

Exiting the bleachers after that lacrosse game, we'd embraced folks, which gave me a rush. They all smelled like America. Even at 6:30 on that chilly April evening, the Tide that washed their clothes, the men's morning Gillette or Noxzema shave cream, their Right Guard deodorant, their Dial soap; and the women's Dove antiperspirant, their Jessica McClintock or Chanel perfume all found me through hugs and handshakes. Oh, the memory of those smells. I wanted to hold them longer. We flowed into the parking lot amid a crowd of folks decked with daringly bright woolen scarves, not the blacks and browns of Budapest, but colorful wool hats with braided earflaps, not the knockoff windbreakers with awkwardly translated phrases like "Team, Cheer" or "Go, Win, Sport" on my fellow #56 tram riders, but logos I understood. I remembered how in Budapest those jackets broke my heart because they were one of those *almost* experiences. When my semiconscious was longing to see Cohasset Girls Soccer, Scituate Lacrosse, the words I knew and missed that were all around me at that game back home, I saw knockoffs.

In the parking lot, I said so long to people who had known me not just months, but years. David and his wife Paula, the couple who spotted our dangerously drunk son one night a few years back, the Paula who drove us to the airport eighteen months before. We waved to Sharon and Steve who made us that amazing dinner Wednesday; to Meg and Bob, who were taking Peter home with them to hang out with his good friend Jay for the evening; to Amyra who was heading home, too, with pretty little Ava, the daughter of Amyra's recently deceased

friend. And to Bonnie who was there without Alan, who'd died while we were gone. Bit by bit, the context of their lives muddled up my idealizations. For all the beauty and security of the town, like everywhere else, people had troubles. I needed to remember that. People have troubles, no matter where they live or how far away they run. I was not alone in mine.

Back in Budapest, George and I began to search in earnest for relatives. "Wow, I didn't realize that now Hungary is only the size of Indiana. Once it was an empire," George mused, flattening out a road map the morning of our first mission. "It looks like we can drive to any town in this country and back in a day." So, on weekdays, when the boys were in school, we'd drive all over, sussing out towns he thought might be where his grandparents were from. So far, no success.

Disappointment hung in the air. "I give up. We're not going to find anyone." George lit the gas flame under the espresso maker to brew a second pot of coffee, the dark strong kind he'd taken a liking to since we moved to Budapest. I was finishing my morning cup of a milder brew and studying the photograph from his dad. A handful of New York based Hungarians stood frozen in time behind the couple celebrating.

"What if you wrote to the return address on that letter?" I mused, tucking the photo away.

"That old letter from Czechoslovakia? How could that help?"

The letter we were speaking of had come to us in a cookbook from his grandmother's kitchen. When she died in 1976, her grandchildren roamed her house before it sold to take whatever interested them. George took a few things we still have today: a large blue clay mixing bowl, some restaurant cookware, and a cookbook titled *Paula Neni Könyve* (Aunt

Paula's Book). Somebody's Aunt Paula had written it, in Hungarian, published it in Cleveland in 1948, and had signed the copy we now had. I kept it with all my cookbooks on a shelf in our kitchen in Massachusetts. I couldn't read it, of course, but having it there made me feel more connected to George's family and to a faraway land I knew little of.

A letter had fallen out of the cookbook when we first opened it. Frail, written in fading black ink, on flimsy onionskin stationery. On the tattered envelope, the name—Mrs. Steve Kovach (George's grandmother)—and the postmark, 1952, survived through the years. The letter writer, Arpad Tobias, had inked a return address of Veľké Kapušany, Czechoslovakia.

When we hosted a Slovak high school student visiting the US back in 1991, George dug out the letter and asked him to translate it for us. "This isn't in Slovak. Or Czech," he told us politely. "I'm sorry, but I can't read it. It looks like Hungarian to me." When we moved to Budapest, George packed up the cookbook. We had the letter with us now. We could read the addresses but had no clue about its contents.

"You remember that nobody, not my father nor Aunt Terry could tell us who Arpad Tobias was, right?" he said that morning. My husband's negativity, that bit of sad, tell-tale pessimism, was a cultural phenomenon he shared with his ancestors. It is said, "Hungarians make merry by crying," and there is even research demonstrating that Hungary is among the countries prone to depression and pessimism. His always fired me up to try harder, to balance it out, so I pushed on.

"Well, what do we have to lose by writing to that guy who wrote it? Don't you want to try everything we can to find them before we leave here?"

He shrugged his shoulders, letting me know he thought it a crazy idea.

When we first searched for his relatives in 1999, on our reconnaissance trip to Central Europe, we sat in the dim parlor of the Kalocsa Calvinist Church rectory surrounded by thick aromas of cooked cabbage and boiled coffee. My husband paged through oversized ledgers, looking for evidence of the Warga family. The minister had kindly retrieved these books at the request of our bilingual driver, Ferenc, who told us that town records would have been ravaged during wars and political upheavals, so any records from the 1800s would be found in churches. Since the outbreak of World War I, Hungary had lived through nine different and contradictory political and ideological regimes, including one that forbade any religion at all, but religions, predominantly Catholicism and Calvinism, had survived in secret and remained a constant.

We'd chosen *Kalocsa*, because it sounded like "Kalachan." George's grandmother's father, *Varga György* (George Warga), was protestant, which in Hungary usually meant *Református* (Calvinist). We assumed we were in the right place and naively expected to find a record of his great grandfather's birth or marriage with just an afternoon of effort. We did not.

"Must have been the wrong town," George mused as we rode back to our hotel in Budapest. "She said Kalachan. Kalocsa sounds like that, doesn't it?" I nodded, taking in the miles of Soviet era block apartment buildings, sometimes side by side with gracious Victorian and art deco structures we passed on our way into Budapest. We agreed then to continue to search if we went through with our plans to move here.

We'd resolved to search again before we left Hungary for good, but all we had were those sounds. That word Kalachan, or something like that for the Bodner and Warga families; and the word "Boy" for the town where George's paternal grandfather's family of Kovacs and Maczkos had lived. We studied the map and made a list of the towns that we thought qualified: Kerecsend, Kalocsa, Kocsola, Kecskéd, Kecskemét. And for Boy, only Baja, Bura, Baj, Böny, Bana, and Bóly counted. When Hungarians pronounced the names of these towns, Bana and Bura didn't quite pass. Bóly sounded exactly like "boy," but to us, so did Baj, Böny, and Baja.

Gassing up our little red car, we set out with only those long-remembered sounds, a map, and some determination.

Bóly is southwest of Budapest, on the way to Croatia, and was first settled in the Stone Age. It became an official town in 1093. The shady town center, public bulletin boards posted with historical information for tourists, the dress shop, bookstore, and inviting *cukrászda* (sweet shop) gave it charm. I really hoped we'd find Kovach relations there, but George rejected *Bóly* as a possible birthplace of his great grandfather.

"They left because they were poor," he said, staring at the town's carefully curated information board, "so they must have left a poor village, not one like this."

Each time we found a town, parked, and walked around, George would sniff about the place, scratch his head, and end the investigation, pronouncing, "No, not here. It doesn't feel like the right place." I wondered how he could know that, but he projected a certainty I didn't challenge.

As a little boy, George spent time with his grandmother, bustling about her kitchen, and with his grandfather picking tomatoes in their garden, and visiting his great grandparents in

their grand house beside the Wayside Inn. He must have been listening to them speak of the old country. He learned they didn't want to look back or talk about the old days, but as a child, playing quietly nearby, he'd have overheard some things: a few swear words he managed to remember, the exclamation *jó isten* (Good God) said every so often, the words *Kalachan* and *Boy* and bits of information about those towns. I guessed that with each town we visited, George recalled another vague tidbit he absorbed when he was much younger.

By mid-April, just past Monday #88 we had been to Kalosca and Keresend and ruled out Kecskemet and Kecsked. We had tried Böny and Bóly. One chilly day, we found our way to Baj, which sounded more like “bye,” the way perhaps an Irishman might say “boy.” Two hours northwest of Budapest, on the way to Vienna, Baj is near the coal mining regions of Tatabánya. Since George's great grandfather worked in the quarry in Tomkins Cove when he came to New York, we thought a town near a mine was a good guess and we would be victorious. After checking out the town cemetery with only a few Kovacs (Kovacs meaning “smith” and being as common a name) and no Maczkos, Baj was rejected. “Can't be this place anyway,” George said. “Doesn't feel like the place they talked about. It's probably too far west. Now I recall something about them being in the eastern part of Hungary.” Sighing, he climbed back into the car.

The historic Esterhazy castle sat only a few kilometers from Baj. I suggested we drive that way and check it out. The guidebook said Emperors and kings had overnighted there, armies had marched outside, and commanders had held war councils, planning the Revolution of 1848–49, which Hungary lost but still celebrates every year on March 15.

Why does Hungary celebrate efforts that failed? The anniversary of the 1956 Revolution against the Soviets, also a defeat, is celebrated every October 23rd. They celebrate on the date of the start of the effort, not the date of the unfortunate outcome. Perhaps it's a celebration of resilience, persistence. Maybe one day I'd be celebrating this adventure we couldn't possibly call a success.

Just past the castle, a small, newly painted restaurant boasted an *Üdvözlöm* (welcome) sign. "We may as well eat here," George said, breaking a glum silence that filled our car. We slid into a booth, the only lunchtime patrons. A young man in a suit, a mop of dark brown hair falling over his forehead, sprang to life, came to our table, and introduced himself in perfect English as the new owner.

"Hello. Hello. This is the first day we are open for lunch. You will try everything, yes?" he said in accented but very clear English, which was a relief. I caught a whiff of red onions sautéing in bacon fat with paprika, the ubiquitous starter for Hungarian dishes. His expectant look and that seductive aroma had us both nodding yes. Very soon he brought us small portions of nearly all the dishes on the menu: *halászlé* (a well-seasoned fish soup); *gulyas*; *gombaleves* (that heavenly mushroom soup); *csirke paprikás* (food for the soul); and *hortobágy palacsinta* (savory crepes filled with a spicy chicken floating in sour cream and paprika, a comforting dish we had come to love). He served up the dishes whose recipes lay in that cookbook I couldn't read. We repaid his generosity by repeating over and over, "*Finom! Olyan finom! Nagyon jó!*" (Delicious! So delicious! Very good!), which earned us each a dessert.

The food worked. George smiled as he bit into the crisp crust of his *Almás Pite* (apple cake), medicine for his disappointment. I dove into the layers of sponge cake, rum sauce, and whipped cream that had been placed before me. “That’s our *Somloi Galuska*,” the owner whispered reverently as he walked by. Another Hungarian expression George taught me was *az élet nem habostorta* (life is not a cream cake). Of course it’s not, but desserts can take the pain away. Maybe we wouldn’t find George’s family, but we were seeing the country, absorbing a bit of history, and eating well. Perhaps we could learn to celebrate our efforts, no matter the result, like Hungarians do.

On Monday #89, with time running out, George woke up, rolled over, and declared to me, “I guess I will write to the return address on that letter. I found that town Vel’ké Kapušany on the map in Slovakia. It’s not too far from the border.” When he turned on the shower, I let out a loud, fist-pumping YES!

Our friend Eva translated the letter for us. She scanned through the ancient pages and surmised that Tobias wrote the letter for other people because he was literate and they were not.

“They’re thanking Ersi Neni (Aunt Elizabeth, George’s grandmother) for the things she sent but asking again and again why she stopped communicating with the family. They want to know if they said something to offend her.” The letter flowed along, apologizing profusely for a presumed infraction and begging for some communication, even saying they heard about Aunt Julie’s daughter’s wedding from someone else and it hurt that they didn’t hear it from Ersi Neni. There were polite questions about the well-being of Ersi Neni’s family, about little Terika whose hand-me-down dresses were so well

appreciated, and about the young György and his family. When she was done reading, Eva looked up at us and said sternly, “Now, this is not your guilt. Not your sadness.”

Eva knew well the stories of people traumatized by Hungary’s wars and political unrest. She’d fled to England with her parents after her brother’s suicide, during the 1956 revolution, and only returned to her home country the year we landed in Budapest. She was cautioning us, protecting us perhaps, but from what, I wasn’t sure. I knew this severe warning, whatever triggered it, was coming from her kind heart.

George was five in 1952 and remembered as a little boy, accompanying his grandmother to the post office with oversized, tightly wrapped bundles she was sending off “to the family.” During the Stalinist period in Hungary, 1949 to 1956, the population experienced rationing, shortages of basic goods, and low living standards. It’s likely those packages from the USA were never delivered. Even in 2000, our shipped containers had been pilfered somewhere between Massachusetts and Budapest, many of the kids’ video games gone for good.

With great effort, referring to his dictionary and Hungarian class notes to get it right, George wrote a response to send to Vel Kapušany. At last, there would be a reply to the imploring missive that lay quietly in a cookbook for half a century. He wrote:

Dear family of Arpad Tobias,

My name is George Kovach. I am the grandson of Elizabeth Warga Kovach (Ersi Neni) to whom the enclosed letter was sent fifty years ago. I am an American citizen but until the end of June I am living in Budapest at Lipótmezei út 8 in District II. My telephone number is +36-1-200-4264.

I will be traveling to Slovakia soon and I would like to introduce myself when I arrive in Vel'ké Kapušcany on Saturday, the 27th of April. If this letter reaches any relative or acquaintance who knows the family of Tobias Arpad, I would like very much to hear from you and hopefully meet you. I am sorry that I know only a little Hungarian so please excuse my attempt to translate this. Sincerely.

To the face of the envelope, he added, *Aki megkapja ezt a levelet, nyissa fel* (Whoever receives this letter, please open it). Our young neighbor, Szandi, proofread the letter. She covered her face with her hand, giggling at George's imperfect grammar. After a few rounds of George perfecting it as best he could, the letter was dropped in the postal box at the end of our street.

Eva agreed to stay at our home. "I will be here, boys," she said catching our sons at home one night and using the gruff manor that hid her affection, "but don't expect me to be preparing your dinner." No dinner, but I trusted there would be no unchaperoned parties either. Perhaps Eva wouldn't care if Jake moved into Cord's house or Peter brought girls in for the night, but I knew they would be tracked and cared for, so I focused on our mission and let those worries go.

"I doubt anything will come of it," George said, sipping his espresso one morning, about ten days after he mailed his letter. His predictable pessimism was in full swing.

Over the years I'd learned that to agree worked best. The more I stacked up positive sides of an argument, the deeper he went with the negative. "Oh well," I offered. "You're probably

right. But now if we leave the country without finding any Kovachs, we can say we tried everything.”

A week later, after enjoying yet another wonderful three-dollar violin concert, we returned to our flat to see a beeping light on our answering machine. A woman speaking Hungarian had left a message we could not understand. George said we should delete it, assuming it was for the flat owner, not us. But we didn’t. Who knows why.

Then, on the night before we would head to Slovakia, I came home from Moskva Ter, where I’d purchased some magazines to add to the bottle of Unicum, the imported chocolates and cookies, and card games—things Eva advised us to pack in a basket as gifts for whomever we found in *Vel’ké Kapušany*—and I found George, bent over the answering machine, repeatedly playing that undeleted message. He looked up at me with bright eyes and grinned.

“It’s the relatives! It’s the family! Listen. She’s saying, ‘The family you seek will wait for you at this address, 205 Kap Kl’acány, on Saturday, April 27.’” He pounded the map, pointing and repeating Kalacány. “In Slovak, it’s Kl’ačany, but in Hungarian sounds like Kalachan!” I looked and, sure enough, there it was, not far from Vel’ké Kapušany, in both Slovak and Hungarian: Kapusianske- Kalacány.

The next day, we danced down to our little red Opel to start our trip, heading northeast, the direction we would have been looking had we ever thought to look outside of Hungary. Once over the border, signs were posted in two languages—Slovak, with its č and those random seeming diacritical marks after a consonant; and Hungarian, with the telltale á and é, evidence of this region’s many shifting boundaries. They reminded me

of a story a Hungarian woman told me over coffee after a Unitarian church service. She said her father had lived in the same house his entire life, but his country had changed five times. In the US, no boundaries had changed since the ratification of Arizona as the 48th state in 1912, well before my time. I had no experience with moving boundaries. Central Europeans have plenty.

In 1920, under protest, Hungary signed a peace treaty in which its territory was reduced to less than one-third of its former size. Land taken from the Kingdom of Hungary became Croatia, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic. What's more, during World War II, although some of these lands were briefly reclaimed by Hungary, and then Germany occupied Hungary briefly, by the end of the war, the 1920 boundaries were reinstated and remain. In 2002, the offspring of the 3.3 million Hungarians who never left their homes were minorities in another country.

It was cool and cloudy on April 27, 2002, when we arrived at Kap Kl'ačny, Slovakia. George slowed the car but then continued past #205 and around a circular street marked Kalacány that enveloped a residential area. Back at #205, we parked on the street and made our way tentatively up a driveway bordered by purple crocus and blue scilla. A door garden with daffodils waiting to bloom prefaced the tidy, wood-trimmed, stucco home. We could see a series of outbuildings and hear a mooing cow and barking dogs. With the help of his cane, a man around my father-in-law's age, white haired and with the bluest of eyes—brighter, perhaps, because they were watering—shuffled from the open front door toward the garden gate.

We didn't yet know that this man was Warga Istvan, my father-in-law's second cousin; or that the woman behind him was his wife, Etel; or that behind her, the diminutive woman was Erika, their daughter-in-law, the person who left the message on our phone; or that the two girls, hovering in the background, silent and staring at us, were Erika's two daughters, Tünde, seven, and young Erika, twelve; or that Cousin György, the girls' dad, was at work and would meet us that evening, when we'd be sitting together looking at photos—theirs, of the girls' birthdays, and ours, the few I'd brought of our boys. We didn't yet know that we would be invited to spend the night there, or that the next morning we would attend the Reformatus church service with Istvan and Etel and meet their neighbors. We couldn't have guessed that later that day, Istvan would lead us to the nearby, once Hungarian but now Slovakian town of Bol, that sounds like “boy,” and that there, a local woman who had Kovacs ancestors would invite us into her home, serve us snacks, both *édes* (sweet) and *sós* (salty), and then thumb through some papers she had from some registry because she'd been looking up her own family history, and that just as George was ready to leave, saying with eyes down and mouth screwed sideways in dejection, “Thanks, but I knew we wouldn't find anything,” she would look up and say, Just a moment! and hold up for us to see on one of her copies of some official papers from the town of Bol, recorded evidence of the marriage of Maczko Maria and Kovacs Istvan; or that in that moment, George would slap his face in utter joy and disbelief, saying over and over, *jó isten! jó isten!* (Good god!), at our success in finding his other great grandfather's town. We didn't yet know that in June, George would make a second trip back to Kalacány with our three sons, who would drink in the

substance of their Hungarian heritage (and drink in other things, too, when cousin Gyuri took them all to the local *kocsma*), nor that these great great grandsons of the man who emigrated from Kalacány, Hungary to Tomkins Cove, New York, in 1899, my sons, would tell me twenty-two years later how much it meant to them to be in the presence of these family members.

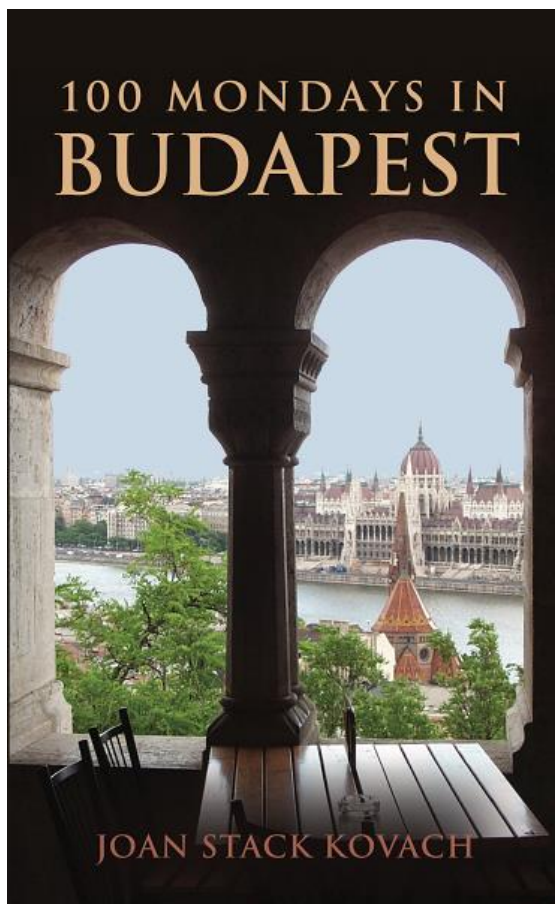
And how could we ever have imagined that in a moment, when we entered his house for the first time, Istvan would reach up to remove a large, framed photo from the wall, a black and white formal picture of a celebratory event, with twenty people, including a young man holding a ten-month-old boy, the same photo George's dad gave him on our visit to the States, or that George would have a chance to look at Istvan and say repeatedly, excitedly, pointing to the baby, "*Az én vagyok!*" (That's me!)?

What we knew was that there was a man opening a gate who was fair and had the same and faded denim blue eyes as George.

"*Várunk rád,*" he said, leaning toward us from the gate. "We are waiting for you."

Author Info

Joan Stack Kovach is a nurse and writer whose work has appeared in the professional texts *Keeping the Public Healthy* and *Peer Consultation in a Group Context*; in the essay collections *Between the Heartbeats* and *Intensive Care*; in the literary journals *Consequence Magazine* and *Wrath-Bearing Tree*; and for five years in the *BayState Nurse News* in the column “Activities of Daily Living.” Widowed in 2020, she lives on the South Shore of Massachusetts, within shouting distance of her three sons and their families, where she is working on a novel about a single mother who falls in love with her chimney sweep and a book of ghost stories that take place on Bailey Island in Maine.



100 Mondays in Budapest is the story of a family's two years in Hungary. It's a mother's memoir, a love story, a travel narrative, and a meditation on how we manage what we have, what we fear, what we lose, and what we ultimately gain.

100 Mondays in Budapest
By Joan Stack Kovach

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