

What am I again?

By Harvey Simkovits

"What!?" reverberated in my mind.

In May of 1973, I had completed my first year at MIT and was home for a couple of weeks before returning to college for summer classes. My brother was there too, home from his second year at university. Mom was happy to have us with her. I was glad too to be home from school for a week or more of mother pampering, as long as she didn't go on about Dad having left her months earlier, and as long as my brother didn't bug me or break something.

After loads of laundry dutifully attended to by our mother, she cheerfully called out, "My loves, I have your favorites ready for you." She could be sweet when she put aside the pain of her separation from Dad. They had now been apart for nearly half a year.

Waiting for us in her kitchen was her homemade Hungarian cuisine. It welcomed us back into her fold. Her cooking easily trumped the tasteless shepherd's pie served at our boarding school. Though college food was better, especially the fried clams and battered scrod I had discovered in Cambridge, it was no comparison to Mom's cook-

ing. The homeland creations she meticulously concocted and brewed all afternoon atop the stove filled the air with warm, familiar aromas of onion, garlic, black pepper, and paprika. Those aromas tied us to her heritage and returned us faithfully to her kitchen.

Along with her home-made húsleves (meat soup) and töltött káposzta (stuffed cabbage) with édes-savanyú uborkasalátá (sweet and sour cucumber salad) on the side, Mom offered us an unsettling fact about her past. Her eyes looked uneasy as she used her hand to wipe the sweat from her brow. I thought it was because she had had a long, hot May afternoon in her kitchen, but there was more.

She stood on the other side of our Formica table, a fixture in her kitchen since we had been kids. "Boys," she said slowly and calmly, "I have something important to tell you." When she saw our eyes on her and not on our bowls, she continued. "You know, I was born and raised Jewish." She then turned to put her soup pot back on the stove and to get her main course ready.

"What!?" echoed in my head. I stopped spooning Mom's soup into my mouth. She had made this declaration as if it was noth-

ing. Could that be?

Though my heart started to race, I tried not to let my confusion and disbelief show. I held tightly to my soupspoon and lowered my eyes into the beef, vegetable, and noodle-laden broth. I was motionless and speechless as if God Himself had come down from heaven and smacked me.

In this redefining moment, my whole being – raised Christian from the moment I exited my mother's womb – felt stunned and numb. Instead of blurting out my uneasiness, I held my tongue. My mind drifted to recall our close Eastern European relations.

There were Mom's four siblings who we had visited several times in Czechoslovakia. And there were Uncle Lali and Aunt Martha, Mom's brother and sister-in-law who had followed Mom and Dad to Canada in 1950, one year after my parents' arrival. I then saw the faces of the immigrant Montreal families with whom my brother and I had grown up: the Vesely, Freedman, and Meyer families. Similar to Mom and Dad, these Eastern European parents were WWII survivors who had sought a new and better life outside the Iron Curtain after the Soviets occupied and took over Eastern Europe. It suddenly struck me that all these people were Jewish.

How could I have missed this? No wonder we were so close with these families. Having shared many Sundays, holidays, and vacations with these folks, they had become like kin. Might I have had an inkling that they were Jewish? Maybe I didn't want to know or admit that I did.

I swallowed hard. I thought of my seventh-grade religious studies class. Our Catholic priest teacher had come into class one day and asked, "Does anyone know what dope is?" I raised my hand thinking, That's easy. It's a 'fool' or an 'idiot.' When he called on another student, and she answered, "It's drugs," and the Father agreed, I felt stupid. No one, not even my parents, had ever talked to me about that dope stuff before.

I had the same feeling of stupidity today. No bell had ever rung in my head about this ethnic possibility in our family, or maybe a part of me never wanted to ring it. I couldn't look at my brother who sat right next to me. I couldn't fathom why Mom had never said anything about her true faith to us before. She had let us believe she was Christian



Hannah Friedmann was born in 1920 in Kosice, Slovakia. During WWII, she hid for years in Budapest with false Christian papers as Anna Gurcik. Her son knew her as Anna Tatransky.

like Dad. I wondered why none of our relatives or family friends ever said anything about it. Was there a religious conspiracy going on?

Neither Dad nor Mom had ever spoken about the religious origins of our Eastern European family and friends. But there was something about those folks – their mannerisms, accented voices, last names, and their occasional use of Yiddish terms – that should have been a giveaway. In my innocence, or deliberate naivety, or instinct to stay away from difficult topics, I never asked questions about their religions. Boy! We have a boatload of Jewish relatives and friends! And I never considered my mother could be Jewish. Hadn't she cooked fish on meatless Fridays and come to Sunday church with us?

On the occasions when Mom joined Dad, Steve, and me for Mass in the city, I could tell she wasn't comfortable in the Catholic milieu. She never quite knew when to sit, stand, or kneel. She followed Dad's lead, as Steve and I did. Because I couldn't follow Latin, Slovak, or French services, I assumed Mom too had her translation issues. Taking in another spoonful of her meat soup, I now realized it was the religious translation rather than the language translation that had made her act awkward.

Mom never partook of the sacrament, unlike my brother, who went for those hosts almost every week – as if they held magical powers. Like my mother, I

abstained too. I felt I wasn't sin-free enough to swallow Christ's body. Maybe I was angry at Him and His Father for never curtailing my parents' fighting. I saw my mother's host abstinence as she and I sharing something in common. Dad didn't participate in the Sacrament every Sunday, perhaps not feeling absolved enough from his sins.

I continued to spoon Mom's soup into my mouth, but it turned tasteless. Does Mom's declaration mean I'm Jewish too? A lump formed in my throat and I was unable to ask my question aloud. My childhood had been dominated by Catholicism in public elementary school and then Protestantism during my private high school years. My experience of Judaic rituals was limited to one bar mitzvah – for the son of my father's accountant. That Jewish rite was very foreign to my Catholic sensibilities of first communion and confirmation. Jews wore a funny skullcap and black suits and ties as if someone had died. I didn't dislike Jewish people, but I didn't want to be like them.

Mom turned toward us from across our kitchen table. For a moment she stood motionless. Her face was tight. She held her soup ladle and tilted it in our direction. She glanced down at the table and then looked up at us. "Boys, I'm telling you this because of your Daddy having left me again." After a pause that lasted a heartbeat or two, she added, "And I want you to know the truth about your mama."

Holding back her sadness, even bitterness, about her most recent loss of Dad, Mom continued to reveal more morsels of her hidden past. "When Daddy and I came to Canada from Europe in '49, Canada was accepting only Christian couples. I had resigned my Jewish religion after the war. I wrote in my immigration application that I was Catholic, like your father, so that we could come here."

Mom stopped talking and took a short step toward the stove. She seemed pulled between her concurrent aims of cooking and confessing. She looked back at us and paused for a long second, perhaps wanting to see if we hadn't fallen into our soup bowls from her unexpected news. She then wheeled back to the stove to serve her next course.

This essay is an excerpt from the memoir "Just Lassen to Me!" by Harvey Simkovits, of Lexington.

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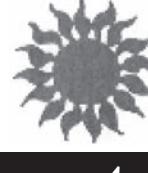
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