

My American Dream

By Sophie Miklos

When I was a child in Transylvania, Romania, I collected American stamps and fantasized about coming to the United States. My dream came true much later as a result of a succession of tragic events, among them, the Holocaust. After I survived the Holocaust and lost my parents, relatives and all our friends and possessions, my thoughts returned to my childhood dream, and I decided to emigrate to the United States.

After I got married, with great difficulty, we obtained a Hungarian passport to Costa Rica, with a 10-day transit visa to New York City. In 1949, my husband, Andy, and I embarked on a long and treacherous journey to America that lasted three weeks on a small ship. To see the Statue of Liberty was the culmination of my American dream. The minute I took a glimpse of the lady holding the torch, I knew in my heart we'd be safe and free and get a second chance in life. With luck on our side, there was an uprising in Costa Rica so we couldn't go there. Our passport was stamped: Never to return to Hungary. There was no place the United States could send us back to, so we remained in New York City. We debarked in New York City, and never left the United States.

Upon arrival, we were taken to Ellis Island. My husband's uncle secured a bond for us for \$1,000, and we were free to leave. I doubt if after surviving the Holocaust I would have had the resilience to live through another incarceration. At the time, the immigration laws of the United States were very strict, and we had no idea whether we'd be allowed to remain. Taking a chance to stay illegally in America was not easy. The immigration department often interrogated us. They also sent a man periodically from the immigration department, inquiring about our activities from our landlord and neighbors.

After going through an anxiety-filled five years, a hearing was held for us where my husband's cousin, who was a lawyer, was supposed to represent us. He never showed up, and we were left on our own to defend ourselves. The hearing lasted more than three hours. We must have given a favorable impression because it was decided that we were young, healthy and able to work and we wouldn't be a liability on the United States nor pose any security danger. Upon the completion of the hearing, we were granted eligibility to become citizens. Upon taking and passing the required test, we finally became American citizens.

I'll never forget the pride we felt to see our dream turn to reality. We both knew that being citizens of the United States was a privilege. We also were aware that the sidewalks in America were not paved with gold. We were honored to work and become productive members of our newly adopted country.

MAKING IT WORK

My husband worked so hard that he went to sleep with his clothes on and often without supper. I also worked to exhaustion in a doll factory, operating a sewing machine all day. After working for 40 hours, my take-home wage was \$20. We rented a furnished room for a month, but we had to switch to another place where we paid weekly. We didn't have enough money for a whole

month's rent. Our food intake consisted mainly of Spam and occasionally pork chops and pasta. Our only entertainment was a radio that we purchased on down payment.

In spite of it, we never complained and felt grateful to be able to live our American dream. My husband and I were convinced that our poverty was only temporary, and we had no doubt that eventually we were going to succeed. We were confident that the United States was the land of opportunity and it would be up to us to carve out our future. In America we didn't have to fear persecution from anti-Semitism nor being denied work permits because of our religion. In our beloved country, we felt the winds of freedom blowing our way, and we thanked God for every little success we encountered.

My husband was very ambitious, and after working for five years in various furniture factories to improve his skills, he became independent. He worked 12 or more hours daily, to establish his own furniture factory. He succeeded and our financial burdens were slowly lightened.

As for me, after trying for years to have a family, finally it happened. In 1954, we became the proud parents of an American-born baby girl.

Functioning for me was very difficult. The concentration camp took a toll mentally, spiritually and physically. I had to gather all my strength to be able to take care of my family. It took 40 years until I was able to erase my dark past and feel like a whole human being. No matter how down I felt, living free in America never left my thoughts, and in the worst of times it gave me hope.

GIVING BACK

After we raised our daughter and she got married and had two children of her own, I was ready to give back to my country. I got involved in various volunteer work. When I came to Hilton Head Island 13 years ago, very few school children had heard about the Holocaust. As a result of publishing my memoir, I was invited to visit various schools and answer the students' questions about the Holocaust. I received hundreds of letters from them, stating that my presentation made the Holocaust real, and they were more aware of how lucky they are to be living in this wonderful country. Now, in conjunction with their World War II curriculum, the Holocaust is being taught in almost every school on Hilton Head.

I understand that we have a war going on, terrorism, substance abuse, poverty and many other problems. It's not a perfect world and not as safe here as when we first emigrated. But, I never lost hope in America, and through good and bad times, it'll always remain my dreamland.

We have two gifted grandchildren who are making a difference in the lives of others. By fulfilling our dreams and never losing faith in America, we fulfilled their dreams too. This is the most educated generation, and they are our future. They'll carry the torch from the Statue of Liberty and light up this country so it will shine like a star forever.

Being able to provide higher education for my daughter was my most fulfilled American dream. Our grandson majored in two subjects with the highest honors from his university and is working

on his master's degree. Our granddaughter is starting college in September. They would never have a chance to accomplish this, without Andy and I realizing the American dream.

THE DREAM CONTINUES

My dream hasn't ended yet. I am dreaming of an America where everyone will be equal, regardless of race, religion or gender, and where our children won't be killed in wars or by terrorists. I know, it sounds like a big order, but I believe it'll happen because I believe in America.

I am grateful to the United States for the icing on the cake on our American dream, by enabling us to spend our twilight years on Hilton Head, where beauty abounds.

Now that I reside in this paradise, I watch from our patio the pine trees swaying like dancers and listen to the variety of birds passing by. I recall the time when I was only 8 or 9 years old, back in Transylvania, carefully removing the American stamps from old envelopes and fantasizing about coming to the United States.

Never underestimate the power of your dreams. You are the architect who has the ability to build on the foundation of your dreams and transform them to a reality. My husband and I are very grateful that our reality surpassed all our expectations of our American dream.