

## My Search for Identity in the Unknown

Through this collection of memories about my father's family, I want to explore their stories and discover the influence they had on my identity. I never met my father's parents and his sister. My parents divorced when I was 4 and I lived with my mother ever since, so I did not see my dad much either. It took me years to understand that despite this distance and the unknown, this side of my family is half of who I am. In my search for identity as a young adult, this connection becomes more and more relevant.

It was much easier for me to ask questions and research my mother's family since they were always close by and certainly play a more dominant role in my life. This one-sidedness of opinion and values led to an imbalance of my expectations, my experience of events, and my understanding of the world. I wanted to use this project to learn more about my father's family and what parts of my identity can be found in their stories. In many regards, my parents' families were opposites and there are parts of my character that just do not seem to belong to my mother's side. I do not know enough about my father's family to understand if it stems from his side.

During the project, I have researched the history of my father's family through the stories of his parents Waldtraud and Janós, his sisters Christa and Susanne, and his own. I have interviewed him and Susanne who are the only members alive today and used documents and pictures to see what life looked like for them and their parents growing up. I have digitized them to safely store them for future generations and documentation purposes since some documents are fragile and their information important to me and my research. I have created a family tree through the memory of my aunt and father and added faces to the names I had found earlier. I hope that this will be a safe space for my father's family's legacy. Their

stories helped me to understand more about my identity and provided answers to some of my questions.

Over time, the structure of the project has shifted numerously. It started as an exploration of my grandfather's role in the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. I thought about it as a historical research project more than anything. But I had underestimated the emotional connection that would start to build and the effect the project would have on me. It started with the inclusion of my grandmother and aunt and later also involved my other aunt and father. Not only was this more suitable for the exploration of my identity and its relation to their lives, but it also included female stories which turned out to bring some of the most important revelations of the project.

What follows, are the stories of my father's family. A family I never had. They are stories about resistance and revolution, pain and grief, independence and isolation. They helped me to understand the connection between my identity and theirs despite us never meeting.

Through my father and my aunt, they are part of who I am.

I am grateful that this project has helped me to find out more about the people that shaped me. I am grateful that it broke some of the silence that has prevailed within my family for so long. I am grateful for the opportunity to discover so much about myself. I am grateful that writing has enabled me to organize my thoughts and bring clarity to some of my most pressing questions. I am grateful that I was able to reconstruct some of my family's history through this project. I hope that I was able to conserve some of my family's legacy and pave the way for my own.



Török  
Family Tree



Waldtraud



Janós



Christa

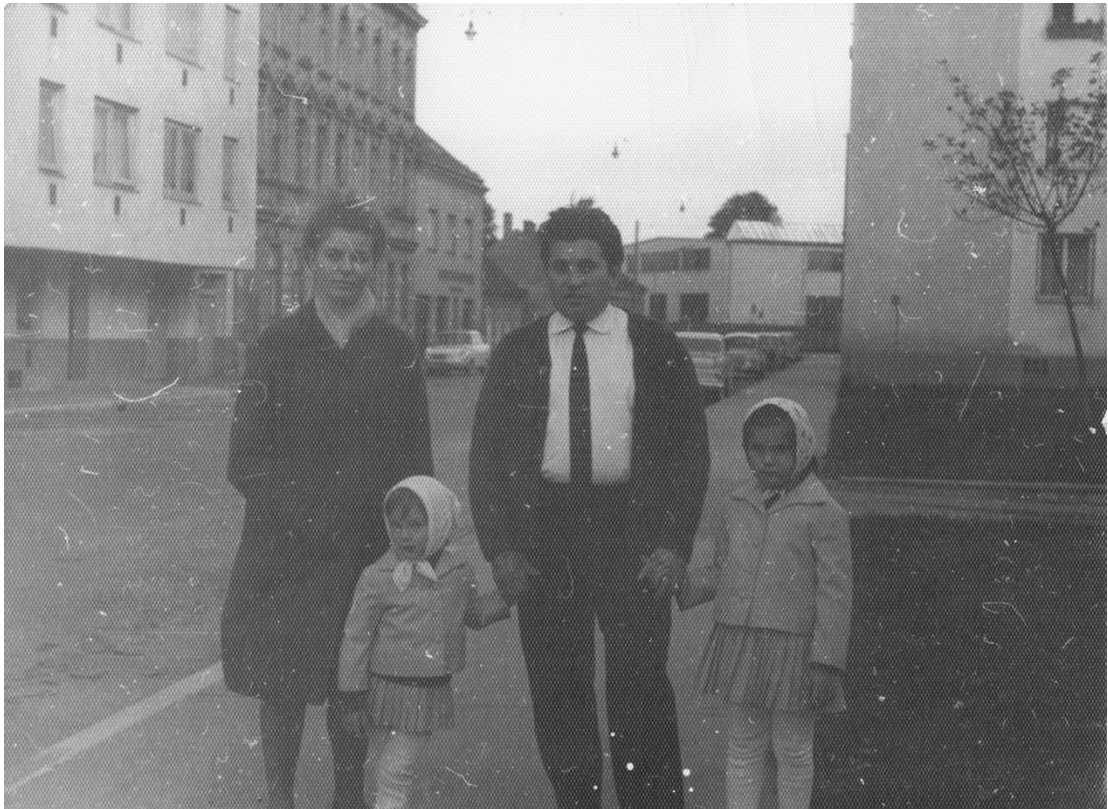


Stefan



Susanne





## Papa

The crackling campfire lights up an unusually cold night in June. I sit on my father's front porch and ask questions I wish I would already know the answer to. My dad doesn't like it. His answers are brief and the questions I ask are unorganized and diffuse because there are just too many. I throw another piece of wood into the fire. We did not talk as much as we would have liked in the past few years. My parents divorced when I was four and I lived with my mother for as long as I can remember. There are some major differences between his and her family. Her family is quite large and very present in my life. We celebrate Christmas, eat out for birthdays, and visit my grandparents on weekends. My father lost his parents and a sister in a car accident when he was 18. His side of the family consists of himself and my aunt Susanne, that's it. I call my dad on his birthday, but usually I am not even able to visit him properly. He has always been okay with that. In our family, everybody always seems to be okay with everything – conflict avoidance.

I do everything as I am supposed to. I am 21 now and my life feels like a recipe followed to closely—nothing special. By the time he was 21, my dad dropped out of school, lost most of his family, served in the special forces, set a national record for relay racing, and almost became a pilot. I think the difference in real-world experience sometimes stands between us. Our values and ways of thinking are often far apart which can lead to disagreements. Nonetheless, I am fascinated by his story.

He grew up as the youngest of three siblings. His dad was a refugee from the Hungarian Uprising and his mother escaped her home on the countryside to move into the city. He grew up in Vienna but there were still strong ties to Hungary and the Austrian countryside. He dropped out of high school because he wanted to focus on sports full time and joined the

military early on since he was in good shape from his track and field career. He started taking on leadership positions early on and was already in charge of a small group when he was 17. While he was in the military the car accident happened and he was left with very little options. It was clear to everybody that he would move in with his sister Susanne and her husband and they had to become their own family. For two years, they did not really talk much. After all this, my father got the opportunity to join the military pilot program. It is a long process and candidates get sorted out throughout the entire process. Only the last 5 people remaining get a spot and actually become military pilots. He fought through the process and after all this adversity ended up in the last group of ten but was not chosen in the end. A severe setback but nothing that could stop him. After everything I learned about him, no setback is severe enough to stop him. That is something to be proud of and I hope I can adopt some of his perseverance.

After the pilot program did not work out, my dad wanted to start working to make his own money. He was in even better shape than when he started the military because he continued his track and field career and decided it would be a good idea to become a security guard. He talked to some people and sure enough he was given a job he thought would be great and full of action. It turned out to be a porter job at a cooling truck company—not at all what he imagined. Little did he know that this job would be one of the most important things he would take on and take him further than he had ever thought.

On a Friday night in August he received a call from a truck driver on the other side of the country stuck and unable to move his vehicle. The problem was that it had tons of frozen fish stored which would go bad if the truck would not be helped. He called the number of the logistics bureau but after minutes of dialing he realized that the entire personnel had left, it

was Friday night. Independence was nothing new to my dad, so he started to make some other calls and talked to the driver of the truck. Sure enough, he made sure that the truck got support and the charge was safely brought to its destination. He did not think much of it and continued his work. Days later he got a call from the logistics bureau and was thanked for his efforts and congratulated on how well he did it. Eventually, since it did not seem too difficult to him, he was asked to join the team and work there full time. A truck load of frozen fish and a promotion later, it seemed like all the work would finally pay off.

Eventually, he left the company and started to work in marketing for a cosmetics brand and later for a pharma company where a common friend introduced him to my mother. A time of stability started in which he got an MBA through an international program and he was supported by his new environment. My brother and I were born during the process of his degree and we lived in a house just outside of Vienna. Due to a job opening in a different province, my dad had to move and although it was initially planned for us to join him it did not work out and my parents divorced, and my mother moved back to Vienna with both children. A divorce is not easy for any party and it really hurt our relationship to only meet every other weekend for 36 hours. The thing I remember most, and most positive, were our drives in his car. He picked us up and we listened to music for an hour and a half in the car. Very different music then what I was used to, and much louder too. That hasn't changed until today. I still remember screaming my lungs out with my brother singing along to what he played and him laughing at us through the rearview mirror. Nonetheless, it was a difficult time and the meetings of my parents exchanging us like a package on a parking lot in the middle of nowhere are not the fondest memory I have. I know they are sorry about it and I cannot blame them for making a decision, but it was an elephant in the room throughout my relationship to my father. During my questions this summer my parents opened up more about the time and I understood more about their situation. My father was all by himself and



struggled to structure his own life, children would be another burden. He wanted to take that burden, but my mother wanted it as well and a legal decision was made that was held up later as well establishing the “every other weekend” rule. My parents’ families are polar opposites. That’s just what it is. The big difference is that my dad’s family could not be around to help out as much. I love my parents. They were thrown into situation nobody wanted and the reactions and solutions were only logical consequences of the situation.

Despite our difficult relationship we have always made the most of it. Our differences should be something to learn from. He celebrates the moment and I wish I could do that more often. My life too theoretical. For me, the future is so full of opportunity that the presence can seem like a place of standstill. My dad doesn’t like talking about theoretical scenarios. When there aren’t many moments, which is always the case for divorced parents and children, the future just isn’t as interesting as the present. It is difficult for me not to talk about the future. I do it very frequently and always felt like it was something I was commended for by the other side of the family. But you can only talk about the future when you have time. I think I saw my father three- or four-times last year. We did not have the time. Celebrating the presence is part of my father’s identity. I want to make it part of mine.





## Susanne

My aunt Susanne was born in Vienna and stayed in and around the city throughout her life. Since she was young, she enjoyed riding the bike and reading crime stories. Whenever she could, she would watch “The streets of San Francisco” despite being the only person in her family to enjoy the show. She remembers very clearly that she moved into a room with her sister when my father was born since the “little King” should have a room for himself. The family traveled throughout Austria on the weekends but rarely left the country since it would have been quite expensive and the iron curtain was still shaping Europe's borders. Her longest journey came in 1995 when she spent 4 weeks in south-east Asia but that was with her husband Christian and after all the hardship she had endured to that point.

Susanne always dreamt of becoming a midwife. The one that helped her mother at Susanne’s birth must have been a little concerned when she was too tall and too light.

The *Semmelweislinik* where she was born was the centerpiece of the revolution in birth medicine in the 20th Century. In school, she enjoyed English and History but left her high school to pursue a more practical education in a different school. She finished school in the third district of Vienna but took a gap year because the midwife school did not have a cohort that year.

A friend gave her a reference to work in a research institute at the ministry of agriculture. Initially, she only took the job because she wanted to earn some money before starting further education. The year went by fairly quickly and the entrance exam came around. She finished 5th overall which was a huge success and usually guaranteed a spot in the program. However, the committee decided that because she already had a job she would not get the spot she deserved. After being denied her dream job, she stayed at her initial job until today, almost 40

years. Loyalty has always been important to her and my father. I think they were disappointed a lot by people using this loyalty but a forever grateful to those that appreciate it. The unconditional positive regard my aunt has expressed towards me and my brother during the past few years has been very refreshing compared to the other, often very demanding, side of the family. She knows that we will be there if she needs us and that is all she needs—loyalty.

Family is important to her and she is the driving motor behind family meetups and trips to and from Vienna. Until today, only family members are allowed to call her Susi. She has also been my main source of information during the research for this project. She remembers events with such detail that listening to her stories felt like an audiobook.

Throughout all of our conversations, the story I loved most was her wedding. She met her husband in the largest disco in Austria at the time where she worked as a bartender. He tried to ask her out for 3 weeks until she agreed to go on a date with him. It turned out to be a good decision since after their first date things moved very quickly. After 6 months they moved in together and after a year they got married. The situation was as follows: Her husband only had family in Austria but was happy to have the party after the wedding wherever. Susanne wanted to involve her Hungarian family members in the celebration, but the iron curtain was still up, and they had a lot of people invited. So, they did the obvious. After getting married in Vienna around noon, got everybody into cars, around 20 of them, and drove as a caravan towards the Hungarian border shortly after which, the Hungarian family members waited to have their wedding party. The border police must have been very confused, but they had legitimate papers and, as Susanne remembers well, got waved through by an officer's machine gun. They stayed in Hungary for another two weeks as their honeymoon.



Two years after the wedding the car accident happened, and my dad moved in with her and her husband. My father and aunt had to be more resilient than I could ever imagine continuing their life afterward. Despite all trauma and setbacks, the accident, the midwife's degree, and a divorce, Susanne remains the powerhouse of our little family. She was there when I and my father drifted apart. She became present in my life at a time when I really needed it and has continued to be a source of support regardless of the aspiration. She is a source of support for me, my brother, and my dad. She has given up a lot to support other people, I think that is the midwife in her. We celebrate with her for Christmas and other events but never had a birthday party for her. I did not even remember her birthday this year. Of course, she never forgets mine. It made me feel terrible when I found out, but it should not have been a surprise. She puts herself behind so many things and remains as willing to help as ever. I am always late when I visit her, she never is. I always forget something when I show up at her place, she never does. There is a lot I can learn from her. Putting yourself behind others when they need it is a virtue she masters with ease. Next year I won't forget her birthday. Next time I will not be late for dinner. I will be there when my family needs me because I know Susi will be there.





## Waldtraud

I found my grandmother's passport in an old plastic box my dad had kept for years. It is a fragile paper document in a faded dark orange. The fresh ink applied almost 60 years ago is now a dirty blue. The box did not have a scratch, it wasn't opened often. From the photo that was only stapled onto the paper, a blond woman looks seriously into the camera. Her name was Waldtraud. She was born in the Austrian countryside, on March 15th, 1942—right into humanity's biggest tragedy.

In the same box, I found a picture of her father in a Nazi uniform—the first I know of in my family. It was uncomfortable but inevitable in an Austrian family. Two years earlier, I had learned that some members of my family on my mother's side, had died in concentration camps. I learned more about their story, but I knew there had to be more, and it was important for me to learn about both sides. Silence about the war is the norm in Austrian families. I cannot blame them, but I wish that my family would be more open about it since I can still feel the burden three generations after the war.

My grandmother lived in a fairly traditional family. Especially her father had a strict vision of what life should look like for her. He would not allow her to graduate from high school despite her teacher's recommendation. In his world, girls were supposed to stay at home. However, he underestimated the feminist revolutionaries, his wife, and her mother. They were convinced that no women should be controlled by men and that my grandmother should make her own decisions. They worked with my grandmother to plot her escape. I could not believe the stories my aunt told me about their uprising against the men in their life. When I first heard about these strong female ancestors, I knew that was a legacy to be proud of. After nothing held her in the countryside, my mother left her home to move to her aunt Anni in Vienna. She was the stronghold of feminism in the family and lived in her own house in the

12th district of Vienna and ran a fruit and vegetable store in the basement. This root of feminism was a piece of identity I could carry with me and built upon. The vision my great-great-grandmother started. Her name was Marie and she was born on the first of January 1901—right into the new century. I found her passport in the same box. I had no idea how it stayed in good condition for almost 75 years. It was issued in 1946 and had a German, English, French and Russian version because of the multinational occupation after the war. She already lived in St. Anton where my grandmother would spend her childhood. My grandmother eventually started working for different companies, married a foreigner, and became an independent woman before graduating high school. I think her father would have envisioned her life to take a very different path.

She had to take the tram into the inner city from her aunt's. This would prove to be somewhat important as this would be the place my grandparents met. My grandfather was a refugee from Hungary and took the same tram on his way from a refugee camp into the city. It is a little cheesy, but after he saw her for the first time, he took the same train every day until they started talking to each other eventually. He was 30 and she was only 17, but they ended up getting married shortly after and my grandmother got pregnant with my aunt Christa two years later. Two years after that, my aunt Susan was born, and six years later, in 1969, my father. Since she ran away from home, and my grandfather was a refugee they naturally did not have a lot of money. They lived in a small apartment in the 21st district of Vienna—Siegfriedgasse 50. Today, the yellow the house was painted in once is barely visible anymore. They had pull-out beds and not too much space, but both my aunt and my dad described it as a happy home.

Back to the passport, my grandmother was a smart woman, and early feminist, a good parent and would not let anyone tell her who to be. I hope that I can carry part of her legacy with me

and learn from what she had to go through. When her passport was issued eye-color was still an entry. She had green eyes. I have green eyes. And before I had always wondered where I got them from. Now I know it is a reminder of who I am and what I can aspire to be. I know I have my grandmother's eyes, and I will No, I will not let anyone tell me who I am.

My grandparents and my aunt Christa died in a car accident in 1988 in Tatabánya, Hungary. They were on their way back from meeting family in Budapest. My aunt Christa was driving as a tire burst mid-drive. Another car was approaching, and theirs drifted onto the other lane. My grandfather was sleeping in the back. My grandmother and aunt in the front. Initially, my grandfather wanted to take all “his girls” as he would call them to come along, but Susanne was up late the night before, and my dad was tired, probably because of practice. I would often ask questions my aunt and my father could not remember but they know exactly where they were and why they did not come on the trip. I can never imagine what emotions they feel, but I am forever grateful that I have them. They have created a form of family I desperately needed. I wish I could have met Christa, Janós, and Waldtraud. I hope that the bond we have now, my brother, my father, my aunt, and I, can be a form of consolidation for their pain.









## Janós

I don't know much about my grandfather. I know my dad has his dark hair. I know he loved bowling and watching sports on TV. He came to Austria as a refugee of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956. Before I started my research this summer, I only heard the story of him riding on a motorcycle with a machine gun in his hand fighting the regime that oppressed the Hungarian people during the cold war. This story was the reason for me to start this project. This summer I learned how he met my grandmother. I learned about his relationship with her family that had been involved in the Austrian side of World War 2.

This summer I started to research the archives of the Hungarian government and battling the difficulty of the Hungarian language. There are many Török's in the country's history and it was impossible to pinpoint anything regarding his story in the resources I found online. After struggling to find what I needed online I realized that the government also has passed a law stating that the documents the secret police of the cold war had on people would be publicly available. I emailed the archive responsible for these documents and received an answer only in Hungarian. Google translator tried its best and I filled out all necessary documents that I got from my aunt and dad. I have not received an answer since, but I am hopeful that I will be able to discover his past eventually. From everything I know so far, it is a story to be proud of.

The text on the next page "On Home" is a combination of my perception of home and my thoughts about my grandfather's forced escape from Hungary.

## On Home

Home, they say, is where the heart is. Home is where you go after you've been away. Home is where you are yourself. Home is your backbone and your safety net. Home is where the people are that make it home. Home is a space for your passion and room for error. Homes is where you break down. Home is where you heal. Home can be full of voices, movement, and livelihood. Home can be empty. Home can be taken away from you in an instance. Home can shift so quickly that you don't even know where it went. Home can shift so quickly that you can't even save what is yours, what is you. Home is a place of experience. Home is a place of happening. Home is where you grow up. Home is where you grow old. Home is where you move out and where you move in. Home can have four walls or a border or anything else. Home can be war. Home can be taken away from you by people you don't even know and who can never treat it like a home because they don't even know what home it is to you. Home can be forced, it can be given to you and when you haven't chosen it, it can never be home. Home is a choice. Home is identity. Home is where any change is a change in you. Home is a bed, a chair, or a sofa. Home is a field, it is a hill or a beach. Home is a friend and a partner. Home is family, family isn't home. Home can be stolen. Home can be taken away and not given back. Home is where intruders come into. Home is where they can take everything that is yours. Home is where they can take you. Home can be fear. Home can be hope. Home can be a shelter and a safe space. Home can be your protection against the wind and the waves. Home can be taken away from you but cannot be taken out of you. Home is what you can give away. Home is what you can throw away. Home is what you can scream at, punch, and run away from. Home can make you so angry it hurts. Home can hurt. Home can be a welcome, a new start. Home can be unfair and unjust. Home can be a retreat. Home can be exposure. Home has seen it all. Home can see it all. Home is an island. Home is what you leave behind. Home is a guarantee, no, home is only a promise.



## Christa

For years I thought that my brother and I were the only members of my father's family in our generation. Although I am not much into family tradition it felt weird that the family would "die out" if we would not have children ourselves. We carry our mother's last name and both of my father's sisters took their husband's name so the family name, Török, will vanish within our family. I think nobody is too mad about it since the Ö's did not come in very handy in other languages and when filling out forms. Still, it does feel weird. I don't know if there are responsibilities to take to keep up a family legacy but there is a void where the family used to be.

This summer I discovered a cousin of mine, the son of my father's sister Christa, lives in Austria today. His name is Roman, and I will probably never get to know him because his father distanced himself from the rest of the family after the accident, she died in. I don't know where he lives, how old he is, or if he feels the same responsibility. I don't know if the early loss of a parent would help his relationship with the family members he was foreclosed from. I am in no position to judge anything that happened in the time after the accident.

A sibling is often the person most similar to ourselves. I know my brother is for me. I know Christa was close to Susanne. There are so many pictures of them with my grandmother. They were very cute, and it looks like they had a lot of fun early on with the entire family. I think she was part of the line of strong woman in my family.

I can never understand anything that happened. I think I don't have to. I miss the family I did not have. I love the family I have.







