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# INTRODUCTION



A photograph of me at age two or three, which I found in the secret police files.

“IT WOULD BE better if you came alone this time,” Dr. Katalin Kutrucz, the head of the Hungarian Secret Police Archives, suggested on the phone. The last time we met I had been accompanied by a friend, a lawyer who knew his way around the Archives. Then, Dr. Kutrucz had been all business: crisp, impersonal, bureaucratic. An old-style apparatchik, I had assumed, simply allowing me to see—as was my right under the laws of post-Communist Hungary—the secret police files on my parents. Now her voice sounded different—more human, more compassionate. Her new tone made me anxious.

Just a short while earlier, one of Hungary's most respected writers had been given his father's files—and discovered a history of breath-taking intrigue and betrayal even of his family. The foremost historian of the AVO, the Hungarian secret police, had warned me that I was “opening a Pandora's box,” when I first applied for access to the files. But I wanted to know the truth about my parents, about what had really happened in Budapest, in those distant Cold War days, when my sister and I were children. My parents had glossed over large portions of our history—even though my father was a celebrated journalist of his era, who won awards and recognition for his coverage of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. “You are an American,” Papa would say, “you cannot ever understand what it was like under the Fascists and the Communists.”

That night I slept fitfully. What did I fear most? I suppose evidence of some act of compromise or betrayal that would shatter forever my image of my parents. The risk was real. From Günter Grass to Milan Kundera, secret police files from the Gestapo to the KGB continue to disgorge the debris of half a century of such betrayals. I understand why so many people do not want to learn about the past; let sleeping dogs lie, they say to me. But I want the truth, even if it is painful.

Eyes burning from a sleepless night spent wondering about the archivist's changed tone, I climb the grand staircase of an Italian Renaissance palazzo, the birthplace, in 1946, of the AVO. The building had been the scene of some of the terror state's worst crimes. By 1950, the palazzo couldn't contain the work of thousands of uniformed and nonuniformed agents and their vast network of informers whose job it was to infiltrate every corner of their fellow citizens' lives. So the AVO requisitioned other choice bits of real estate on and around the elegant Andrassy Boulevard, which had been renamed Stalin Boulevard. Today, the building flies the European Union's blue and gold banner and shares the block with two health spas.

Dr. Katalin Kutrucz, a short, high-strung, bustling woman in a synthetic pants suit and wearing sort of open-toed Dr. Scholl's shoes with

socks, ushers me into an oval-shaped room with high ceiling and intricate molding—a room that seems suitable for an intimate musical evening. She plunks down next to me at a faux wood table. Blinking fast, she says, “It turns out that yours is one of our bigger files.” Should I feel proud? I am terrified and eager to plunge into a growing mountain of manila files that clerks in white coats are wheeling in on shopping carts and unloading. Dr. Kutrucz does not smile, but the fact that she calls me Katika, the Hungarian diminutive of my name, only increases my agitation.

All my life, my parents' defiance of the Communists, their stubborn courage as the last independent journalists behind the Iron Curtain until their arrest, trial, and conviction as CIA spies, has been at the core of our family identity. On February 25, 1955, at two in the morning, following a game of bridge at the home of the United States military attaché, my father was abducted by six agents of the secret police. His arrest was front-page news in *The New York Times*. Four months later, they came for my mother. The following January, almost a year later, *The New York Times*, in another front-page story, reported that “Endre Marton, a correspondent for the Associated Press in communist ruled Hungary, has been sentenced to six years in prison on a charge of espionage. His wife, Ilona, who worked for United Press was sentenced to three years . . . The Martons have two young daughters, Kati and Juli.” Accompanying the article was a photograph of a handsome, elegant couple and their smiling little girls, a happy family, self-contained and seemingly indestructible, on our last Christmas together in Hungary, before everything changed. Thus did I make my debut in the press, although I did not see the story until decades later.

My parents were forward-looking people. They looked back only selectively. When, toward the end of his life, my father was given Hungary's highest civilian award from the foreign minister of a free and democratic Hungary, he did not come to New York to receive it in person, leaving it to me to accept for him. That evening, the foreign minister surprised me with a large manila envelope containing AVO



material on Papa. My father never opened that file; he was done with all that. To him, history—at least his history—was a burden. For me, it was the beginning of my search.

It has been said that childhood is a foreign land. This is especially so if the child is uprooted early from that small universe where all is familiar, and transplanted to a country where no one knows how to pronounce her name. After my parents both died—my mother in 2004 and my father the following year—I became obsessed with learning everything I could about what precisely had happened to them and to my sister and me in the land where everything began. No subsequent chapter in my life had matched those Budapest years for intensity and the power of family love. My parents and sister and I formed a tight unit partly because the world outside was hostile. Once safe in America, each of us would pursue our own lives, and our family ties inevitably loosened. We had successfully made the crossing. Strangely, I still longed for a time that had been dangerous and painful for all of us—yet had bound us together. I missed the closeness of our lives in Budapest.

A child growing up in a State built on terror learns early that she, and even her parents, is nothing compared to the power of that State. However accomplished or witty or glamorous the parents—and mine were all of those things—they were playthings in the hands of the State. In such a place a child has no rights, not even the right to her parents. So when they were taken from me—and this is how it seemed to a child, they were *taken from me*—a separation marked me, not just them, and forever. I wanted to open the files in order to put that trauma to rest.

There was something else that puzzled me as the files disgorged secrets. Why did my parents take such risks? During the Cold War, most Hungarians would cross a street rather than risk being seen greeting an American. But my parents' best friends were American diplomats and journalists. What every grown-up I knew whispered, my parents spoke out loud. At a time when there were roughly two thousand

private cars in all of Hungary, our family drove a white Studebaker convertible! We might as well have ridden a rocket.

So, when some years later I, too, received the same award from the Hungarian government as my father, I returned to Budapest, to this stately house of horrors, and filled out all the requisite forms. For several months I waited in New York to be summoned by the head of these archives, Katalin Kutrucz.

PERIODICALLY MOISTENING her finger, Katalin, as I am now encouraged to call her, flips through the hundreds of pages of our family file. She is familiar with their contents. As the pages fly by, names from my childhood unspool. Even more names are inside quotation marks, code names for informers. Reading my thoughts, Katalin says, "Everybody in your circle, whether your parents trusted or did not trust them, was informing on them. That was just the way it was." She shrugs. Flipping through a series of reports under code name "Gaspar," I am struck by the frequency of my name and my sister, Julia's. I do not want to risk losing these pages amid the thousands, so I place a hand on hers. "Please." She pauses for a moment. "These are all yours. You can take them and do what you like with them." As if to say, "We are a different country now!" But I can't wait. Who is this energetic informer "Gaspar" and why her constant reference to two little girls? "Well," Katalin answers, pursing her lips, "I am not allowed to inform you of such things, the actual names of agents. But I will tell you this: the code usually has some connection to the real name." Gaspar. Of course. Gabrielle. Our French nanny! A zealous agent, to judge by her contribution to the file. Along with anger I feel some vindication. I never liked her, and it was mutual. I can still hear the clop, clop, of her high heels every morning as she reached for the venetian blinds directly over my head, raising them with maximum clatter, while calling out in her shrill high-pitched voice, "*Levez-vous, mes enfants!*" No wonder she was always in a hurry. She had more important business.

Out of another file falls artwork by my sister and me: a house with a smoking chimney, and birds the size of people strolling in the foreground, and another with a long row of snails climbing a hill, with the inscription, "Mamikanak," "To Mommy." Another stick figure drawing is inscribed with handwriting I recognize as my grandmother's. "Kati did this and she isn't even in school yet!" And, more chillingly, shots of my parents, clearly caught unawares on a street, by a telephoto lens. I am struck that, even though oblivious to the camera's intrusive eye, my father is ramrod straight, his face composed, his expression inscrutable. A man who, having barely survived the Nazis, was caught again on the losing side, wearing protective armor against the outside world. But no armor could protect him from a State that collected his children's artwork.

But now my guide is speeding forward. A new file with the letter "B" in bold on the cover. I know by now that "B" stands for *Beszervezes*, "agent recruitment" for the secret police. "Izorche" is the code name on this one. "That, I can tell you, was your father's code name." My mouth is too dry to speak. How dare she imply such a thing! So this was the reason for the compassion that was absent at our first meeting and her warning to come alone. The date on the last report in my father's recruitment file is 1967. This is impossible—by 1967 we were living in America. We were safe. Or so I have always assumed.

But I don't want to argue with her that this is ludicrous—two people who resisted the all-powerful AVO in its own territory? How could they imagine my parents would be *Beszervezes* material, once they were safely in the United States?

Closing the last file, she turns to me. "These are all yours," she says, with the practiced sympathy of a doctor breaking bad news. "But do not judge *them*," she warns, "judge the system." She retrieves a photograph that dropped out of the files. A curly-haired child, three or four, wearing a bib with butterflies and cherries on it, and holding a spoon. A chubby, earnest, unsmiling child whom I recognize as my younger self. I recall the historian's warning, "You are opening a Pandora's box."