



Kati Comes Home: East European Jewry Confronts Its Holocaust Secrets

ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE: MY FAMILY'S JOURNEY TO AMERICA

Kati Marton. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2009.

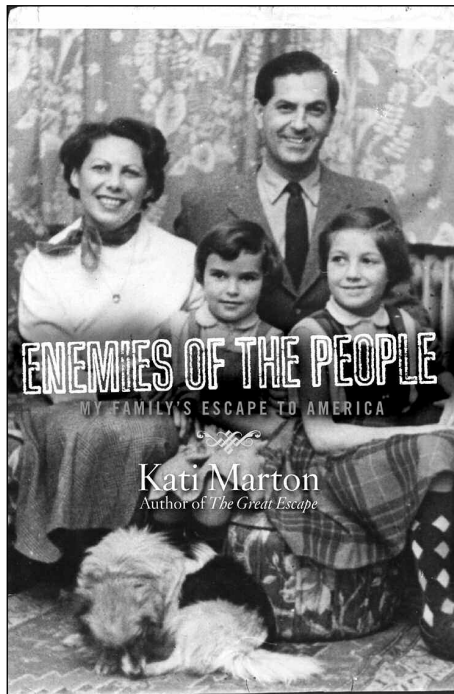
By Thomas Orszag-Land

Kati Marton, an award-winning American foreign correspondent, was researching a book on the Holocaust when a chance remark by a survivor changed her life. The book was about Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who rescued thousands of Hungarian Jewish lives during the Second World War. "What a pity, my dear," the old woman told the visiting journalist, "that this man arrived too late to save your own grandparents from the gas chambers..."

But the reporter thought she had been born and bred a Catholic, faithfully attending mass every week! Her book *Enemies of the People* results from her subsequent inquiries into the story of her abused parents, now both deceased. They were democrats and also eminent foreign correspondents who barely survived the German Nazi and the Soviet Communist occupiers of Hungary, and who tragically kept their Jewish culture secret from their children for fear of history repeating itself.

Their daughter tells a marvelous, triumphant tale of love and betrayal, courage and cunning, grinding slog and high adventure. The work is set against the background of Eastern Europe's murderous and deceitful recent past that the peoples of this region are

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just beginning to comprehend.

Almost seven decades after the end of the war, many deliberately misinformed descendants of Holocaust survivors—mostly Jews but also Roma, gays and political dissidents—are belatedly confronting the truth of their origins. There may well be many more such long-suppressed family secrets still awaiting discovery in the elaborate personal archives assembled by the defunct internal spying agencies of formerly Soviet-administered Europe, which are now available for public inspection.

The author's parents—Endre Marton, an economist, and his wife Ilona, an historian—were young, elegant, charming, sophisticated, brazen and ambitious. They fought the Nazi invaders of their country during the war by escaping from captivity, staying on the move, hiding with gentile friends and participating in the fledgling national resistance movement. They challenged and pro-

voked the Communist administration that followed by practising as the only permanently accredited, independent Western journalists engaged behind the Iron Curtain in the 1950s, foreign correspondents in their own country. Their employers were the two major news agencies of the United States, which was regarded then as Hungary's arch-enemy.

The Martons also attempted to defy history by denying their Jewish origins after the war and bringing up their daughters in the Catholic faith. They kept up the pretence even after their emigration to the United States following the collapse of the 1956 Hungarian revolution against Soviet rule. Many East European Holocaust survivors did this in their assumption of their children's best interest. They thereby bestowed upon them a formidable emotional and moral entanglement for the future. The implications of this widespread action are enormous, indicating that Eastern Europe's surviving Jewish population is significantly more numerous than previously assumed. The issue is attracting great global interest now that the fourth generation of Holocaust survivors has come of age. One common approach adopted by this self-confident generation of young adults is to reject the caution of their forbears by publicly embracing their heritage.

This raises a complex of issues explored by a landmark interdisciplinary conference held in Budapest late last year, attracting participants from universities in some 10 countries, including Israel and the United States, as well as Eastern Europe. The event coincided with the current rise of Holocaust-denial and aggressive neo-Nazi agitation in Eastern Europe exploiting the economic uncertainties in the wake of the most severe world recession since the war.

This is just what the Martons feared when they decided after the Holocaust to bury their Jewish past, an act not undertaken for lack of courage. At the height of the Cold War, when most Hungarians would cross a street to avoid

being seen in the company of an American, the Martons nightly visited the U.S. diplomatic mission to play bridge with friends. They ostentatiously drove around the war-torn capital in a white Studebaker convertible, one of the only 2,000 privately owned cars tolerated by the authorities at the time in the whole of the country. (Motor vehicles, including taxis, were defined as a “means of production” and most were taken into public ownership by the Communists.)

“We might as well have ridden a rocket,” Kati recalls of her early childhood experience.

From 1947 on, Endre reported for the U.S. Associated Press news agency, Ilona for its rival United Press (now called United Press International). Every one of their hundreds of news stories transmitted for simultaneous, global syndication was monitored, translated, analyzed and filed for future reference by the dreaded Hungarian State Security Organization AVO. The couple were also spied on all the time by AVO agents, including intimate associates like the fiancée of a close friend and even the family’s baby-sitter.

Ilona had lots of journalistic virtues, but an aptitude for writing was not one of them. So Endre routinely penned his wife’s news articles as well as his own. He also wrote many of the lengthy and detailed spy reports that their trusted friends and acquaintances were obliged to file with the AVO. The Martons were well aware that their friends and acquaintances were bribed or forced to spy on them, so Endre defended himself and his wife by writing many of the reports about their own journalistic activities, and giving them to their friends, who in turn handed them to the AVO. The secret police were thus informed on the Martons by the Martons. Endre’s reporter daughter wonders today where her father found the nerve, the cheek and the stamina.

In the end, the couple were brought down by a spy operating inside the American legation. The Martons were arrested on trumped-up spying charges in



1955. Endre was sentenced to 13 years’ imprisonment after lengthy, painful and brutal interrogations that included sleep deprivation; Ilona to six. Their children were placed in the care of strangers. But they were released in the confusion preceding the doomed 1956 revolution, and once again remained the last Western correspondents in Budapest, this time to cover the eventual Soviet invasion. They then managed to emigrate to America, where they continued to work as journalists. Their brave and lucid reportage of the revolution earned them several coveted prizes, including the prestigious George Polk Award.

Kati was over 30 years of age when she learned that her maternal grandparents had perished in Auschwitz together with some half million other Hungarian Jews. Endre’s parents were safely beyond his children’s emotional scrutiny, as they had emigrated to Australia. Ilona almost never spoke of her own parents, and when she did, she pretended that they had been killed in a wartime bombing raid. The Martons always avoided the subject of the family’s Jewish origins, but, Kati states, seeing this fact plainly confirmed in an AVO document “leaves not a trace of the doubt that floated around this unspoken subject” throughout her childhood.

The loss and fortuitous recovery of Kati’s Jewish identity is told in this, her seventh book. She describes it as “the most painful

and personal book that I have ever written.” It is an intimate inquiry into her parents’ lives based on many sources, including Communist secret police files made accessible after the advent of democratic rule. The first book Kati published was *Wallenberg: Missing Hero* (Random House, 1982).

Today, Kati runs a Jewish household in New York City with her husband Richard Holbrooke, the author, journalist and top-ranking American diplomat whose secular Jewish mother fled Hamburg in 1933 to escape the Holocaust. They were married at the American Ambassador’s residence here in Budapest. Kati has received many prizes for her contributions to such publications as *The New Yorker* and *The Times of London*. She is a director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Rescue Committee, Human Rights Watch and the New America Foundation.

Similar life stories about the discovery of lost Jewish roots reaching back to Eastern Europe are cropping up in many countries. Kati’s story bears a resemblance to that of Madeleine Albright, the Czech-born journalist who discovered her Jewish

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roots after her appointment in 1996 as America's first woman Secretary of State to serve the Clinton White House. A collection of 166 case histories based on extensive interviews has been assembled by Barbara Kessel in *Suddenly Jewish* (Brandeis, 2000 & 2007).

The number of East European Jews who are still grappling in silence with their concealed Jewish identity, or have yet to discover their Holocaust family secrets, is impossible to estimate with confidence, but there are some reliable indications. Professor Anthony Polonsky of the Institute of Polish-Jewish Relations in Oxford, England, puts at 60,000 the number of Jewish survivors in Poland alone who sought safety during the Holocaust by assuming false Christian identities outside the ghettos and labour and extermination camps. He authoritatively reckons that a third of them may well have held on to their new identities after the war.

I know several second-generation East European Holocaust survivors who have learned the truth of their origins late in life. They tend to be unhappy people burdened for much of their lives by an unidentified sense of guilt that they were brought up never to investigate.

The most poignant such story I know appears in a landmark journalistic investigation into the rescue of people from the Nazis—*Righteous Gentile: The Story of Raoul Wallenberg, Missing Hero of the Holocaust* by John Bierman (Allen Lane, 1981). The book describes how the Swedish diplomat gave up his own bed to enable a pregnant Jewish woman to give birth in peace. Baby Yvonne, as well as her young parents, survived and eventually emigrated to Toronto where she was brought up, like Kati, as a devout Roman Catholic.

When she came of age, she fell in love with a Jew. Her parents objected to the marriage on religious grounds. She defied them and, unaware of her true identity, converted to Judaism in order to marry the man she loved. ♦

Jottings by Sylvia Friedman

* I'm so pleased to be able to tell you that we here in Vancouver had a successful Annual Lasagna Supper. It was well attended, the food was good. SID SHNIAD made a fine financial appeal, our guest speaker, MARK ARNOLD, who brought us up to date on the Bil'in Litigation Case, was really great, and to top it all off, our entertainers, mezzo-soprano FABIANA KATZ, accompanied by STEPHEN SMITH, were outstanding.

And I certainly would be remiss were I not to heartily thank our entire OUTLOOK COLLECTIVE, and volunteers JOANNE NAIMAN and RIVKA STEIN, and especially our cook and servers CHEF ADAM, JOSH, SAUL, DAVID and 11-year-old NOAH BERSON, who were perfectly charming, as usual.

Nuff said for now—we will be reporting more about it in our next issue.

* Our long-time friend and supporter AL HESTRIN of Vancouver died this past month. Al was for many years the *Vochenblatt/Outlook* representative here in Vancouver, and his monthly reports to us in Toronto never failed to include many a laugh in his own inimitable fashion! He is survived by his son Maury (Barbara), daughter Diane Goldberg (Michael), and their families. Our hearts go out to you.

From Winnipeg we received word that our old friend FRED NARVEY passed away a short time ago. Readers will recall that we published some of his delightful short stories from time to time, and we plan to print one of them in our next issue. Fred is survived by his daughter Janice Afruma of California. May you be consoled by your wonderful memories of him.

And here in Vancouver we just heard that our dear friend and supporter ED SHAFFER passed away suddenly. Ed was our expert on the economic and political issues of gas and oil, and we published several articles of his on that topic, as well as a memoir of some of his experiences in the U.S. army. Ed leaves to mourn his wife Florence, daughter Martha and son Paul, and their families.

* We want to send our most sincere wishes for a speedy recovery to the following people whom we know are on the sick list: ABE ARNOLD of Winnipeg, BEN SHEK of Toronto, who is just out of hospital, and GERRY SHOLOMENKO of Vernon, who is recovering from a heart attack. Say fellows, take good care of yourselves—we need you and your invaluable counsel...

* This past weekend the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture held their first ever Matzo Ball Cook-off, and we here at *Outlook* were asked to enter the fray, which we did. We got one of the best cooks around, namely my sister-in-law ARLENE JACKSON, to "volunteer" to make the chicken soup and the Matzo balls. We even created a name for our team—*Dayenu Kneydlakh*—which unfortunately proved to be an omen. The soup and matzo balls were all prepared the evening before and set aside for someone (who shall remain nameless) to put into the fridge later that night, but it never reached its first destination. Needless to say, the unrefrigerated delicacy was rendered unsafe to consume, and so we had no entry, and we had to display our poster with a little white lie—see photo. But I hasten to add that, aside from our no-showing, the afternoon was a great success. I'd love to tell you more about it but we are, as usual, out of space.

Till next time,
Sylvia

