Foreign Thoughts

Brian Dwyer

Humans are creatures of habit. As a college student, Sunday is a day reserved for sleeping in and getting homework done. But it wasn’t always like this. Before college, before high school, before grammar school, my Sundays were ritualistically spent at my grandparents’ blue-shingled house on Willis Avenue in a suburb of New York. The memories flood my mind like a broken levy. I can only allow myself to be swept away and embrace what once was. People have passed since that Golden Age of Sunday afternoons and the tool shed now covered in cobwebs of neglect. Whenever I give a tour of a house I’ve lived in, I always seem to notice the small things that I took for granted. So don’t mind the training wheels I hammered onto a block of wood for my grandfather’s birthday or the patch of flowers I planted for my grandmother. These things are just a product of nostalgia – but coated in these images is a deep understanding of my own character and the culminated lifestyles of the Marton family that immigrated here nearly 40 years ago.

Every Sunday my two brothers and I along with our parents would drive two blocks to arrive at one o’clock for dinner since that’s how it was done in Romania. As a family, we would walk through the creaky screen door around the back of the house. My rosy-cheeked grandmother greeted us with curly hair in an old-world apron that is worn from years of handmade meals. Each grandson received two kisses on each cheek supported by the anxious clutch of hands uncomfortably pressed against their faces and a final peck on the head. The smell of stuffed peppers filled the air, and the apple strudels were already baked and relaxing on the kitchen table.

It feels strange to say I am a first generation U.S. citizen, at least on my mother’s side (if they still count that now a days). A lot of my Hispanic friends growing up would exude their culture. They had an accent, they spoke their home language, and they could never be separated from drawing personal examples to their homeland. My Irish friends would wear their t-shirts with the Irish flag on them and express confidence that U2 came from their grandmother’s hometown. I, on the other hand, could never decide whether I was more Hungarian or more Romanian. This is all thanks to the fall of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. It left my ancestors split between borders with an option of which language or new culture would give them the best opportunity. This is why I never had interesting parallels like the other kids; I really couldn’t give a reason why my undefined culture was better than theirs or really that great at all. What mattered was that it existed and was real.

My grandparents’ basement was the first target of attack so that we could see what our grandfather was entertaining himself with. After our eyes adjusted to the darkness, we got used to the odor of stale moisture. On some days, we’d hear an Elvis record singing:

“Like a river flows

surely to the sea

Darling so it goes

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Some things are meant to be
Take my hand, take my whole life too
For I can't help falling in love with you."

Our grandfather would be sprawled out on the recliner with his socks and sandals reading a Hungarian newspaper. Elvis was the worst. If I had a nickel for every groaning sound uttered from my body over his melodic tone that was too complex and emotional for a seven year old, I’d maybe have eight dollars. The whiny voices of prepubescent boys yelled, “Turn it off!”, and Elvis’s American southern comfort tone of voice was matched by Dracula’s broken English and my grandfather’s response of, “Ah shut up! Elvis is good. You should a like Elvis.” And in time, we did.

I slap myself in the face every time I remember that genuine childish hate towards the most important cultural icon in recent U.S. history. My European grandfather was far more American than we were. It’s hard to believe I barely even noticed all the culturally backward things in that scene so many years ago. My grandfather read a Hungarian newspaper on a recliner that lay on an overly intricate rug with flowers melodically interwoven (that was from a Romanian store in Queens). The walls were filled with paintings of a countryside (German origins), a tiny American flag (made in China), and a painting of a tiger drinking water from a winter land stream (no one in our family can tell you where that’s from…it looks nice anyways). These objects seemed to have a history in their constitution, but to the grandkids they were loveable objects regardless of their story. I guess that’s why that tiger painting was our favorite.

It’s easy for me to forget how I got on the earth in the first place. I’d like to think it was by alien spaceship or one of those storks carrying me by the diaper and dropping me off on the doorstep. But the real process that people speak of as lovely and God sending was painful and at times regretted. This is how I now try to see the immigration of my grandparents to the United States in 1972. Better known as the years when people wore quilted denim jackets and choirboy dresses in the United States and Nicolae Ceaușescu dictated the Communist regime in Romania. John washed dishes in a Washington, D.C. steak house while Elizabeth made the salads. John became the building “super” in New York, and Elizabeth sewed suit jackets for police officers. They took their lives wherever opportunity or the wind could take them. I wasn’t there, so I could never boast to my friends. But who would like to brag that they come from a family that did the lowest labor work on the totem pole? It’s best to keep my mouth shut and appreciate the ability to pretend to be a privileged, white male, living an upper class life-style - but that category missed out on too much.

Polka music played in the dining room (yes, we actually used that room). The Americans goofily sang what they thought they heard, assuming the words were creatively pieced together for their sheer enjoyment. I dragged my grandfather from the TV by screaming, “Yunchi! Dinner’s ready. Yunchico!” Finally, everyone was seated at the table and the food was set. My grandfather poured wine to the adults with his trembling hand (a result of shucking corn as a kid), but this flaw blended in like the wood panels of the walls. After the supper ended, conversation ensued, and my grandmother brought up a story about Antobochi (her uncle) who moved to Canada from the old country, and she updated us on how he was doing. This quickly leads to an outbreak of arguments between the foreigners who screamed in Hungarian and Romanian about whether Antobochi’s cousin was the person who killed that chicken and whether his sister had two boys and three girls or three girls and two boys. Important arguments
were advanced with fingers thrown and an occasional loud “NO!” The words the Americans in the room were like shards of shrapnel from a World War II grenade, but eventually the conversation ended after my dad said, “Hey, Moocush and Peesh cush Fenike” (Translation: “Hey, squirrel and dirty butt”). I guess this is what a foreign culture becomes when it assimilates.

These events were so intermingled with my “normal life” that I just assumed all other households were this crazy and European. My grandma and grandpa were wrapped in an American blanket, but they were only truly kept warm by the awareness of their roots and the Communistic culture they left behind. They found comfort in the free lifestyle of the United States, but they could never throw away those records and small statues of Mary they kept from the old world. As the first generation born in the United States, my brothers and I were raised as Americans. We never learned Hungarian or Romanian, and only my grandma and I had visited the homeland since the exile. I find myself thirteen years late at trying to become more in touch with my European ancestry. I’ve taken a few online Hungarian lessons and visited that house on Willis Avenue to learn that specific way to cook breaded chicken, but it still doesn’t feel like enough. In the end, I now see that mixed between the hamburgers and hotdogs sizzling on the grill and the accordion whistling in the living room were only what appeared to be three “American” boys.