

## Against Building Walls: A Visit to the Family Cemetery

*Shamu Fenyvesi*

**O**n the full moon of September 2003, five of our family slept in our ancestral cemetery at the edge of the village of Derzs in northeastern Hungary. The night was clear and surprisingly cold, the first night of fall. Our tents and sleeping bags seemed as insubstantial as paper. On the expansive plain, broken only by a few trees, the moonlight was penetrating; strong enough for us to see the faint outlines of weeping willow trees carved into the tops of the tombstones. I was reminded that the willow is a Jewish symbol of both loss and regeneration.

Except for my great-uncle Shumi, no one had been buried in the family cemetery for 75 years. The Schwarczes — my widowed great grandmother and her seven children — left the village in 1927. A few Jews, unrelated to us, returned to Derzs from forced labor battalions in 1945, tore the tin roof off the abandoned synagogue, sold it, and used the money to pay for passage to Israel. Today there are no Jews left in Derzs or in the neighboring villages.

During the two weeks we spent in Hungary, a sense of loss was palpable. In an abandoned synagogue in the city of Debrecen, we saw collapsing cabinets overflowing with dusty, torn Jewish prayer books which had not been opened in sixty years. In the Jewish cemetery in Budapest where my grandmother and grandfather are buried, maple trees and elderberry bushes have shrouded many of the tombstones. Few Jews visit the graves and pay the expected upkeep fee to the silent, kind giant of a man who serves as the caretaker, gravedigger, and coffin bearer.

From the Jewish section of the Budapest cemetery you can look across the fence to the gentile graves. The many visitors are clearly visible, walking the swept pathways bordered by clipped shrubs. But in the Jewish cemetery even a large family of mourners would be hidden by the foliage.

Picking our way through the thickets to find my grandmother's grave, I was struck by the phrase engraved in Hungarian on several of the tombstones: "We will not forget you." Who will keep this promise? The weeping willow, with its melancholy curtain of pendulous branches and dense foliage, is more enduring than the well-intentioned words. Though the feeling of neglect is inescapable, the untamed verdant growth is comforting and renewing, especially in this city of dirtied stone and cement.

The day we arrived in the village — eleven Schwarcz descendants from Budapest and America, half of whom had never set foot in this part of the country — we were received with the affection reserved for old friends and the honor befitting dignitaries. Derzs' Greek Catholic priest, Gyorgy Krisko, known to his congregants as Father Gyuri, hurried to meet us when he heard our three cars pull up in front of his house. He kissed and embraced each of us, looking into our eyes and exclaiming, "How handsome," or "You have come home." For some of us, he quickly put his hands on our heads, and repeated our names in a reverent whisper, adding pieces of Hebrew blessings he had taught himself.

But in the back of our minds was the message Father Gyuri had sent us the day before our arrival in Derzs: "You must come and see me before you visit the cemetery." As we walked down the deep sand of the main street, he explained, "Someone has built a fence around your cemetery."

"But who would do such a thing?" my dad wondered. "And why?" I added. "First," Father Gyuri interrupted our speculations, "they are waiting for us for lunch."

The villagers had prepared a homegrown feast for us, taking great care to avoid pork, the main staple of Hungarian cooking. In a large room with recently whitewashed walls we were seated at long tables. We were offered heaping platters of breaded and fried vegetables, pickled tomatoes and peppers, and bottles of sweet Hungarian wine. As soon as one of us took a few morsels from a platter, one of our white-aproned hosts instantly removed the platter and replaced it with a new platter piled even higher with zucchini, eggplant, and stuffed peppers fresh from the kitchen. Our hosts politely but firmly refused to sit down until the meal was over. A half dozen of them circled the tables, pouring wine, offering more pickles, and asking us if the food was pleasing. I felt as if I was in a fable: we ate heartily and yet the food was not diminished. Even after two weeks of excellent Hungarian

food in cousins' homes and restaurants, we all agreed this was the best food we had tasted.

After lunch the villagers showed us the churches, small farms, and the single café of this village of 600 souls. We strolled and chatted. We shared stories, played with the children, and admired the goats and pigs. Although the owner of the café complained of rising unemployment rates, the small houses were freshly painted and well-kept, as were their kitchen gardens and flower beds.

From the moment we arrived in Derzs, I felt a surging of emotion in my chest. I had never experienced Abrahamic kindness to strangers quite like this. The villagers — farmers, shopkeepers, a priest and teacher — had not even met most of my family. Only a few of us had visited sporadically in the last ten years. Rocked by political and economic changes, isolated in this remote and poor corner of Hungary, the villagers had been struggling to make ends meet. Yet they asked for nothing and offered everything.

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After touring the village we walked towards the family cemetery at the southern edge of Derzs. Father Gyuri had tried to prepare us for the shock. However, there was no way to prepare for the sight of a two-meter-high wall of gray concrete, intruding on the pastoral peace of our family cemetery. The wall was made of pre-fabricated concrete slabs, the kind used to surround industrial plants. Reading a Hebrew plaque put up at the entrance, we discovered that a Toronto-based Jewish organization had arranged for the construction of the wall in Derzs. No one in our family had been contacted about the wall, and the villagers knew nothing until the construction crew arrived one fall day a year earlier.

From the road, we could not see into the cemetery. Once we entered through the steel door, we could not see the village or surrounding fields. It was as if a foreign army had occupied the village, and our cemetery. My father, not given to dramatization, later told me that when he first saw the wall, he was overcome by shooting chest pains so severe he thought he would die on the spot. Well, he mused, this would be the proper place for me to be buried.

I am grateful that my ancestors buried here, the Schwarczes and Fisches, lived in peace with their gentile neighbors and enjoyed, on the whole, free and prosperous lives in this forgotten backwater of the Carpathian Basin.

Rare for Jews in Europe, from the early 19th century on, they owned the land that they farmed. They followed the teachings of the local Hasidic rebbe Isaac Taub, and like him, they were Hungarian patriots; they even fought for Hungarian independence in the revolution of 1848. They straddled the two worlds with a grace and strength that is evident in our family stories, in the memories of the local people, and in the deep soil of the fields they cultivated. Blessed in many ways, the Schwarczes did not, like so many other Jews, live walled off from the larger world. This is my inheritance.

The half-acre of land where the cemetery is located has been in the family for at least 600 years. The oldest date on a tombstone that Great-Uncle Shumi as a child could make out was from 1390. Only family members were buried there. My ancestors expected that their descendants would farm, trade, pray, and die here in the sandy soil of the Hungarian Plain.

Only in 1944, after being rounded up by the Nazis, did they experience persecution. Much of the family was killed. The descendants of the survivors live in Budapest, Israel, Canada, Argentina and the United States. We heard and repeated stories of forced labor battalions, fake identity papers, righteous gentile helpers, cellar hideouts, Siberian gulags, death camps. Even I, born in the U.S. and a generation removed from the experience, still feel at times an aching sadness, and a nagging suspicion of the gentile world.

As one of the descendants, I struggle to reconcile these two inheritances; trust and fear, open faith and guarded skepticism. I carry a lead weight of sadness in my chest and quietly hold on to shreds of faith. The visit to Derzs allowed me to weave together the fabric of trust, of bold faith in the world. The graciousness of the people of Derzs reminded me of a truth which I had forgotten, especially in the context of the recent violence in the Middle East and the rise of racism and anti-Semitism in Europe: that Jews and gentiles can form bonds of trust which can, in small ways, patch together the torn fabric of Eastern European Jewry.

I know that our family cemetery was much safer without the wall. The cemetery plot has been cared for by the local gentiles since my great-uncle Shumi renewed our friendship with the villagers in the 1970s. Shumi

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returned 50 years after he had left the village with his widowed mother and his six brothers and sisters. He made the all-day trip from Budapest to visit the places he remembered and to share his stories of family, land, and faith with the local villagers. He befriended the Greek Catholic priest and the school principal. He talked with their church youth group who preferred our family stories to their Bible lessons.

Speaking from the pulpit of his 900 year-old church, Father Gyuri began to mention the Schwarczes in his sermons as an example of a righteous village family. Cultivating a deep respect for Jews and Judaism, he taught the church youth group to read the Hebrew characters on the tombstone inscriptions. Under the leadership of a bright and affectionate young girl named Kati Domokos, the youth group took responsibility for the care of the cemetery. They cleared the tall brush from around the graves and planted flowers.

One year the children from the youth group wrote Great-Uncle Shumi to ask him if it was acceptable to put flowers on the Jewish graves on All Souls Day, a Catholic holy day. Shumi wrote back promptly: "I am grateful. My ancestors were never so honored." This is what our ancestors, this is what Great-Uncle Shumi wanted: To be part of the land and community, even in death. This, to me, is the renewal of the weeping willow.

Now, because of the wall and narrow gate, the neighbor cannot bring his tractor to cut hay. At the request of the wall builders, the gate remains locked, with one key kept by the next-door neighbor and the other with Father Gyuri. One of them is expected to open the gate when Jewish visitors from Budapest, America, or Argentina come to say Kaddish. Sheep cannot be pastured in the meadow below the cemetery, and children can no longer go in and out to play. From a place of memory and peace for the whole community, we have an officially sanctioned, exclusively Jewish memorial.

I am not ignorant of the rise in anti-Semitic acts in Europe. I appreciate the commitment of those who work to protect the memory of Jewish life from desecration. But the case of my family cemetery and the righteous gentiles of Derzs begs many questions: Are all Jewish sites in danger? Are gentiles everywhere to be mistrusted? Before building the wall in Derzs, neither the villagers nor anyone in my family was contacted about the construction of the wall. What does this say about how the Jewish community wants to be represented? What kind of relationships do we want to cultivate with the larger gentile world?

Larger questions come to mind: Can we protect our cemeteries and synagogues with higher walls and surveillance cameras and armed guards? I realize that during especially tense times, the security of walls may be a necessary recourse. But we imprison ourselves. I do not want to pray, study, or be buried behind a "security" wall. Ultimately we must commit to building trust with our many neighbors. Instead of the costly and brutal concrete wall in Derzs, could the funds be better used to arrange meetings between Jewish youth and gentile youth of Eastern Europe? Or to fund educational programs built around tolerance and cooperation? Wouldn't this be *v'ahavta l'ray'akha ka-mokha* — loving the stranger as yourself — the hospitality of Abraham, the villagers, and the Schwarczes?

For the second half of his life, my great-uncle Shumi struggled with two irreversible facts: he did not believe in God, and his wife and their only child were killed in Auschwitz. His last wish was a proper Jewish burial. But there was one radical departure from Jewish tradition. Shumi wanted children from the church youth group, Kati Domokos leading them, to read the Kaddish, the Hebrew prayer for the dead. Amazingly, the rabbi agreed. In 1988, Great-Uncle Shumi was buried in the family cemetery in Derzs. An Orthodox rabbi officiated and six Greek Catholic children read the Kaddish.

Last September, before we lay down to sleep in the cemetery in Derzs, we gathered around a small fire in the meadow. No more than 50 yards from Shumi's grave, we roasted potatoes, drank the sweet local wine, and traded songs in Hungarian, English, and Hebrew with Kati Domokos and Marika Pap — two of the six villagers who said Kaddish for my great-uncle — and their children.

I would like to make an open offer to the gentiles of Eastern Europe: Place flowers at Jewish graves on All Souls' Day and I will say Kaddish at your funeral. I will do the same for Muslims. And when the Jewish community asks me why, I will answer: this is what my ancestors taught me.

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