

Portrait

Lajos Gothárd

Those who follow the Portrait column know that I collect my information by paying an in-person visit to my interview subjects. I believe that one's home tells volumes about the person. Two years ago one of our local Hungarians, Lajos Gothard, published his memoirs, and ever since then I have been thinking that I should feature him in a Portrait article. So according to my established custom, I paid a visit to Lajos in his home.... in Transylvania.

He is a local Hungarian, but his home is in Transylvania? Yes. At this point in his life, Lajos has homes in two places. Twenty-some years ago, after careful planning, Lajos escaped from Romania through Yugoslavia, leaving his wife, four daughters and his Tirgu Mures (Marosvásárhely) house behind. At that time many new Hungarian refugees were arriving in Seattle, and Lajos was among them. For a while he even served our association as a Social Committee member.

A few years after Lajos came, his second daughter, Ilka, joined him, followed by his wife and other three daughters. The family home in Tirgu Mures was confiscated by the Romanian authorities and rented out. Members of our association received Lajos' large family warmly and tried to assist them in various ways.

Lajos worked at Malmo Nursery in Woodinville for many years. Instead of investing in the stock market, he invested in livestock, in cattle. His wife became seriously ill, and caring for her and supporting their four daughters was not an easy task, especially since Lajos struggled with the English language. He speaks with a distinct Szekely accent, even in Romanian. Despite this, he must have a curiosity about languages. He joined the Esperanto movement in Romania and still attends the local Esperanto club meetings here in Seattle. Perhaps that is why he tries to pronounce English words phonetically! He knows some Russian, too (much more than I do after eight years of mandatory Russian lessons). After his divorce Lajos formed a lasting relationship with a Siberian chemical engineer. Shortly after I visited with him, his lady friend, Galina, was to arrive from Novosibirsk for a stay of several months, her third visit to Transylvania. Lajos also has been to Siberia on five occasions.

His life's most defining injury happened when he was 11 years old. The Romanian communists declared his family „kulaks,” and according to prevailing regulation „little Laji” was not allowed to enter fifth grade. True, the next year he was accepted back into school, and later as a grown, married man he finished high school as an evening student. But the branding and discrimination seemed to follow him for a lifetime. At the time of my recent visit with him in Transylvania, he was appealing to the courts for a formal apology and compensation for damages due to the title of „kulakfióka” or kulak brat. He will not tolerate real or assumed injuries without some kind of response. Whether fighting the Romanian communist authorities or the Ameri-

can capitalistic system, in his 69-year-long life he has turned to the courts numerous times for countless injuries.

On one occasion when his keen sense of justice told him that a judge had been unfair to him, he wrote to the judge. Due to his language difficulties, the judge took his letter as a personal threat and had Lajos arrested, dragged about by the FBI and held in Federal prison. Only months later was he freed after trial. But he also had run-ins with the police, employers and business associates.

Since he is familiar with legal matters, with the help of the International Court he successfully sued for the return of his Tirgu Mures house from the Romanian authorities.

After many years of battle, his home, built into the hillside and surrounded with fruit orchard and vegetable gardens, was given back to him in pitiful condition. He has spent much of the last three years in Transylvania trying to restore his house and orchard. He hopes that his children

and grandchildren will use the family home during their visits to Transylvania, and he himself plans to divide his remaining years between Seattle and Tirgu Mures. This past summer his oldest daughter and one of his 10 grandchildren took advantage of a Transylvanian vacation.

But Lajos enjoys his homeland, too. When I was with him in Tirgu Mures, he introduced me to the area's sights. He drove me through the hilly landscape to quaint villages with carved Szekely

gates and grape arbors, to Hungarian historical places and to the Bicas Canyon of the Carpathian Mountains. A profusion of wildflowers dotted the landscape everywhere. Despite our many disputes and differing viewpoints, I enjoyed his company and his unique Szekely way of thinking. I boarded the train to return to Budapest after several days rich with memories and interesting anecdotes.

Before I left I purchased a copy of his book for my sister as a present, and she enjoyed reading Lajos' memoir from beginning to end. He is a talented writer, weaving dialog into his stories and making keen observations of people and events. Often it seems that he provokes the authorities, but he is unable to compromise and he is a very upright man. Those who will read his memoir, *You Stood Too Erect, Ödön*, will be convinced of the same.

Lajos Gotthard's memoir (in Hungarian) can be purchased from his daughter, Anna Gotthard-Williams, at (206) 286-8092.

