

# Portrait

## Béla Havasréti



It would be hard to find someone among the Seattle area Hungarians who wouldn't be familiar with Béla Havasréti's enjoyable, nostalgic piano music. His unrivalled entertaining talent and his music reminds us of our youth and our home country, and the familiar songs and classic melodies from our past.



The 72-year-old Béla, one of the charter members of our association, is an intense man, full of youthful passion and dry humor. "I was a hot tempered lad" he said as he did not submit easily to the authorities in Hungary during the Communist Rákosi era nor in Austria to the military of the English zone in 1954. During our interview his hands had a life of their own, illustrating his life's story, sometimes pointing, sometimes forming a fist, sometimes his entire arms flying high.

He was born in Baja, in Southern Hungary, the youngest of four children. His musical talent became evident very early. When he was 10, seeing a piano for the first time in his life and listening to a tune, he was able to play it by ear. Unfortunately, he was not accepted into the Budapest Conservatorium because his parents owed a restaurant before the nationalization, and the communists branded them as bourgeois. Béla's anti Russian sentiments were formed early on: a split second saved his father from being shot by a Russian officer in the presence of the 9-year-old Béla.

Beside the musical carrier, his other dream of becoming an engineer also proved to be unattainable for him. One of his teachers recommended trade school to him to learn engine fitting where he could also learn drafting. The school had a good band, too, and Béla learned to play the trumpet and passed the music exams.

In 1954 he made a statement in public that he would not serve in the communist army of Hungary. After that it became obvious that he would have to defect to the West. Already demonstrating his charismatic qualities, two of his buddies set out with him through the icy December fields. They successfully crossed over to Austria. Thanks to Béla's watchfulness and vigilance they did not fall into Russian hands in Austria which was occupied by the Allied Forces in 1954. He waited 2 years in Austria for his immigration visa to the United States. In the meantime he worked, learned the German language, played music and soccer, and did some wheeling and dealing on the side. He brought Hungarian surplus merchandise from Linz's Russian zone and sold it on the western side. "I tried every which way to make a buck," he said.

Two days after he finally received his US visa, the revolution broke out in Hungary. From his circle of friends they sent a delegation to the Americans, requesting help for the revolutionaries. However, help did not arrive, and in the meantime the borders got closed once again. "Let's go to America!" he declared to his friends. The \$2,000 that he saved during his two years in Austria was stolen from him on the ship, so he arrived to the New World with \$7.00 in his pocket. A kind Hungarian couple, including mother Kató, welcomed him into their New Jersey home along with eight other members of the "New York Hungarians" soccer team.

Three days later he had found employment. His cleverness soon resulted in a business of his own, remodeling homes. He employed 8-10 men at that time. Through New Jersey's Hungarian

community he also met the love of his life, Enci. Even though she was only interested in books, when the handsome Béla, with his characteristic assertiveness asked her to go out on a double date with her sister, Enci instinctively went with Béla. Eight months later they got married and have been following each other to various locations ever since, for the last 49 years.

On the advice of his doctor, Béla had to give up the dusty construction work. From New Jersey he came to Seattle to size up the area. Soon he sent the message to Enci to sell everything in New Jersey and follow him with the children to Seattle. Enci did sell everything but the family's car, which she drove cross country with their 10-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son as navigators, while Béla had no idea that his family was on the road. Sometime later his musician buddy and close friend, the saxophonist András Szalay also followed Béla from New Jersey.

In Seattle, Béla worked for the Ederer Crane company for 21 years as a drafter/designer. He changed companies when he was 57 years old, and started to work for Robbins, a company that design and manufacture large-scale, high-tech drilling machinery, such as the one used to drill the tunnel between England and France. Béla retired from this company, but still does occasional assignments from home via a company computer. However, the Seattle area Hungarians mostly know him as a talented pianist.

A few years ago, when Enci's mother fell ill, they moved to Florida for 2 years. This time Béla followed his wife saying that "I would go with her to the ends of the world". Enci got the idea of opening a restaurant and, characteristic of the family unity, their daughter joined the parents from California. The three of them ran a very popular and successful business.

Due to an unexpected accident Enci had to get off her feet, so they decided to sell the restaurant and move back to Seattle. Enci retrained herself in a two-year-program, and spent her last active years working long hours at the Chicago Title Insurance Company. Their daughter completed her studies, and now she practices law in Florida.

Béla and Enci purchased a new home in Kent where yellow ocher flowers line the pathway leading to the front door. Behind the house a fruit tree loaded with quinces caught my attention. Later I was offered some of Enci's pastries made with homemade quince jam. The Havasréti's are "do it yourselves": homemade bread, homemade sausage, Béla's fine wine, walnuts brought from Oregon rounded out the snacks, making my interview very enjoyable. Béla sat down to his piano and he also played a few tunes on his fancy accordion. No wonder that their son, who works at Boeing, comes home for dinner twice a week.

Béla is a natural leader, resourceful, and as we say in Hungarian, he could make a living on an iceberg. He does not shy away from hard work, and nothing seems impossible to him. We hope that we can enjoy his musical talent for many more years to come.

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