

Becoming Hungarian: A Memoir

Erika Reich Giles

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A story of a family's resilience and individuality, Becoming Hungarian is an affecting memoir that's flush with political and historical insights.

Erika Reich Giles's memoir *Becoming Hungarian* chronicles her parents' harrowing escape from Hungary's communist regime and her own later reconnection with her heritage.

Giles did not always appreciate her Hungarian background. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, she wanted to assimilate and be seen as an American, even preferring more modern decor to her family's "doilies, colorful ceramics, and pictures of the Old World." But as she approached midlife, her detachment from her heritage began to change; like a "flickering flame," a passionate commitment developed to explore her family's past and "reclaim" her native-born culture and language. Stricken by the tragedy of September 11, 2001, and the realization that life is tenuous, she felt compelled to learn about her family's 1948 departure from Hungary, during which she was a baby in her "mother's arms." This interest initiated a lengthy series of phone conversations, letters, and interviews with her parents and older sister.

The memoir recounts Giles's parents' courtship and marriage in the Hungarian city of Szombathely, where her grandfather owned a factory. But when the prosperous factory was seized by Soviet-backed communists, her grandfather was banished from the premises. Her father—an heir to the business and a longtime employee—became a "pariah" and was soon fired. Amid an increasing climate of surveillance, domination, and confiscation, her parents made the anguished decision to leave Hungary with their two daughters by sneaking into neighboring Austria.

The book details the family's suspenseful odyssey to reach the Austrian border, from tense bus rides to bicycling and walking for miles "over hilly terrain and thick underbrush." After later immigrating to the United States, Giles's family settled in Billings, Montana, beneath the vast, "azure blue" skies. Memorable, candid portraits of Giles's family members arise, with notes about how their circumstances in Billings were "drastically diminished." As refugees, her parents experienced occasional prejudice; her spirited and tenacious mother struggled with English and cleaned other people's houses to augment the family's income. And despite her father's German mechanical engineering degree, he was forced to take odd jobs until he found a security guard position. Yet their resilience and individuality endured: her mother spent hours sewing traditional Hungarian festival costumes for her daughters, while her father pursued a fascination with Eastern religions and yoga.

These portraits mix with memories of Giles's visits to Hungary, where she witnessed the nation's ongoing evolution away from the Iron Curtain's menacing "barbed wire and minefields." Along with beautiful, evocative observations of the "gleaming silver" Danube River and marketplaces fragrant with paprika, there are emotional meetings with relatives and family friends. The sight of the Hungarian flag is captured in terms of the deep thrill of personal pride, while the sobering "House of Terror" museum is depicted in somber terms, considerate of its reflection of the tortures inflicted by communists and the valor behind the attempted 1956 revolution.

The book effects a sense of both completion and renewal, along with brief commentary on Hungary's current right-wing nationalist government. The "left-leaning" Giles expresses disapproval regarding Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "authoritarian bent" and anti-immigration stance. But here, rather than reflexive concern, Giles's distinct and acquired socioeconomic vantage point might offer more insight as to why Orbán has continued to be reelected.

A heartfelt and eloquent family memoir, *Becoming Hungarian* follows a monumental personal and historical journey homeward.

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