

Strangers in Budapest



Hidden Among Us:
An essay by Jessica Keener

Questions for Discussion



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In the winter of 1993, I moved to Budapest with my husband, our six-month-old son, our dog, and seventeen overstuffed suitcases. We had been living in Atlanta for several years. I don't know if there is a best time for making a change in one's life, but I was in my late thirties and felt an urgency about time passing. I was especially fearful of having regrets at the end of my life. The arrival of our son, whom we adopted at four days old, intensified these feelings.

One of my dreams after graduate school was to live overseas, someplace in Europe—maybe Italy or France. Budapest never crossed my mind back then. But Eastern Europe was in the news a lot in the nineties. Budapest and Prague were “it” cities, and

Americans were streaming over to have a look at countries long hidden behind Russia's Iron Curtain. A few years prior, a Hungarian American friend of ours urged us to meet him in Budapest so he could show us around. We visited his cousins in the countryside, ate homemade goulash, drank Hungarian beer in tiny dark bars downtown, and ordered room service at our hotel because it was ridiculously cheap.

I loved traveling to landmark cities in Europe (Paris, Rome, Vienna, Madrid), but Budapest got under my skin in a different way. I was unnerved and haunted by its convoluted history. And my response felt more personal because of my own family history. I was Jewish. My grandparents came from neighboring Ukraine and Poland. My father had fought in World War II as part of the army's 42nd Rainbow Division and had, along with the U.S. Seventh Army, liberated Dachau concentration camp in Munich on April 29, 1945. He witnessed thousands of corpses lying stacked in open train cars. As a child I had carried my father's war story inside me.

I wondered if the ghosts of my Jewish ancestors were nudging me toward Budapest in some way.

The city also reminded me of Boston, where I grew up. Budapest had the Danube running through it, while Boston had the Charles. Budapest was gorgeous and gritty, the poor cousin of grand, polished Vienna. Boston was charming and smart, but quaint compared to its behemoth neighbor: New York. And Budapest was rife with narrow back streets and stairways that cut through the city's hills like the neighborhoods I'd walked in Boston. I was intensely, almost compulsively drawn to this familiar yet strange city. My husband and I visited Budapest a second time the following year, and that was when we made the decision to relocate.

When I boarded the plane with our babe in my arms to meet my husband, who had gone ahead to secure an apartment, I had no clear plans. No job. My husband had a few business ideas. I knew I could write anywhere. We had some savings and our American optimism. Whatever unfolded would surely be okay.

Our year in Budapest was much more difficult than I expected it to be. From the first month of our arrival, I experienced a deep loneliness I was never able to shake. Calling it homesickness was an understatement. I wanted our son to know his grandparents. I craved having conversations in my own language. The things that had seemed intriguing as a visitor—the dirty streets, the lack of retail options and services, the vacant synagogues, the bullet holes defacing old buildings—were constant reminders of the country's long economic hardship, its isolation from the world, its history of violence.

Increasingly, I felt as if I were trapped inside Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Once-stunning mansions sagged behind overgrown bushes and vines. I could see outlines of Budapest's former grandeur, but so much had been worn away by wars and government takeovers.

At the same time, Budapest ignited a seed that had lain dormant inside me—about who I was as an American and as a Jew and what it meant to feel safe.

My response to Budapest also struck me as shamefully ego-centric and naïve. As tattered as the city appeared on the outside, something else was waking up and demanding attention from its deeper inner core. I was stunned by how vibrant the city was despite its soiled appearance. The place was teeming with millions—the sidewalks overflowed with young and old, couples and families.

Yet, until my first visit, I'd never given this elegant but frayed city a thought. This was a country that gave the world Liszt, produced chess and math wizards, designed distinctive porcelain and lace, and was saturated in Gypsy lore. But something had gone wrong, terribly wrong. I wanted to understand what and, most of all, why.

After a year, we returned to the States and resettled in Boston. For a long time, I didn't know how to make sense of my Budapest experience. Hungarians were both friendly and reserved, the culture complex and layered, full of contradictions. What had I learned that I could pass on to others? What greater meaning did it hold?

Over the next decade, two disturbing encounters led me to synthesize my overseas experience and write *Strangers in Budapest*. The first was in 2002, when I wrote a magazine article about the tragic death of a teenage boy who was innocently caught in a street gang's crossfire. Ironically, this young man from Boston was on his way to a "teens against gun violence" meeting the afternoon the bullet struck him in the head. In writing this story, I interviewed his mother, a remarkable woman who started a foundation in her son's name, the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, to help families deal with the rage and depression that come with the loss of a loved one from a violent death. I wondered how Louis's mother could absorb something so horrific and channel her grief into something so affirming and healing for others.

In the second encounter, I learned that my neighbor's daughter had died an unexpected, untimely death. The mother suspected foul play by the daughter's boyfriend. Though the police looked into the matter, nothing came of it, and the case was closed. The mother considered delving further, but she didn't have the heart for it, ultimately knowing it couldn't bring her daughter back to life.

During both encounters, I remember asking myself: What would I do? As a mother, the question was almost too painful to imagine, but it served up the final piece of a larger puzzle my subconscious had been trying to fit together concerning so many things: my time in Budapest, violence and wrongful deaths, my father's experience at Dachau, and how far I would go to protect my child or rectify a crime.

I began to see how we are all survivors of violence in some way or another—either personally or historically—though I had never thought about myself from that perspective. I began to see that we can choose how we respond to violence's devastating impact. Will we hate or forgive? Rage or love? That was when I knew Budapest in the mid-1990s offered an ideal time and setting for my American characters, who are wrestling with grief and its lethal consequences.

When she arrives in Budapest, my protagonist, Annie Gordon, is initially seduced by a city trying to free itself from decades of secrecy and repression. She has come with her husband and their newly adopted baby to support her husband's business ventures. But she soon grows restless. The city's dark side unhinges her own repressed memory of an accident she witnessed as a child and couldn't stop.

Annie is also someone who needs to help others, especially people broken by life. So when she meets Edward Weiss, an ailing expat and World War II veteran, she quickly entangles herself in his desperate search for a man he says murdered his daughter. What she doesn't realize is how far Edward is willing to go to uncover the truth about his daughter's death. In accepting Annie's help, Edward prods her to take responsibility for her own choices, as they hurtle toward the story's final, defiant act.

Questions for Discussion

1. In *Strangers in Budapest*, the city of Budapest seems to function as another character in the story. What are some of the characteristics of this Eastern European city that helped shape Annie's experience there? Do you think the story would have unfolded differently if it had been set in Philadelphia? What does the idea of a place functioning as a character mean to you?
2. When Annie meets Edward, something about the old man takes hold of her and her relationship with him quickly grows intense—with Edward provoking Annie to let down her guard. Annie's husband, Will, tells her not to get involved. Why do you think Annie ignores Will's warnings to stay out of Edward's problems?
3. The Holocaust and the plight of the Jews in Europe during World War II is woven into the novel. Annie is not Jewish, but her husband is, and so is Edward, who fought in the war and helped liberate Dachau. In what ways do you think Judaism influences the story?
4. What are your thoughts about Annie's attraction (or is it the opposite?) to Will's former boss, Bernardo? Do you think she wishes Will would share Bernardo's boldness in approaching life?

5. From the outside, Annie appears “normal,” yet something about her feels off center, as though she is yearning to break free. Why do you think Annie disdains offers to help her integrate into the American expat community? Do you see a pattern in her behavior, in the idea of actively staying away from people and places that are like herself?

6. In the novel, the Gypsies are almost like phantoms floating around the fringes of the city, appearing in the middle of things but never really being a part of anything. Why do you think Annie becomes obsessed with them? Do you think they represent some part of Annie? If so, what?

7. How did you feel about Annie’s relationship with Stephen? Do you think she was attracted to him or repulsed by him? Or was it both?

8. Can you see yourself moving to another country as Annie and Will do with their young son? Annie seemed to be trying to escape from something, while Will was looking to embrace something new. Of the two, which do you think had the stronger motivation, and, in the end, the stronger will?

9. There seemed to be a kind of inevitability to the way Edward’s and Stephen’s stories played out, but without Annie’s role in their lives it’s likely that none of it would have happened. Do you feel that Annie made the right decisions? If so, why? If not, why not?

10. What do you think Annie and Will’s relationship will be once they are away from Budapest and back home in America? Do you think the marriage will survive? Why, or why not?