

BURING HORSES

A Hungarian Life Turned Upside Down

Agatha Hoff

Those of you who have read “Tales from the Bench” over the years may be aware that my family came to America as refugees from Hungary after World War II.

I thank the editors of *San Francisco Attorney* for allowing me to tell you about my recently published book, *Burning Horses*, in which I try to give voice to my mother’s life story, leading up to our immigration to this country.

Winston Churchill wrote that “[t]he war strode in havoc over the lives of millions.” My mother Eva’s life was one of those trampled in the process. In the

I saw flames reaching out with blue and orange claws from our bedroom windows. They leapt skyward, in a macabre dance. I could hear the thumping of hooves against the floor and the horses neighing in desperation. Then a sound—the like of which I have never heard before or since, came from one of the dying horses.

(From *Burning Horses*)

scope of history, her life is but a snowflake landing on an open palm—a moment in time. *Burning Horses* is my attempt to capture that moment before it dissolves into nothingness. We all go through life trailing lost words behind us. In *Burning Horses*, I’ve tried to retrieve as many of my mother’s words as possible, before they vanish.

Eva, Jewish by ancestry but Catholic by upbringing, had her life torn asunder by the Nazi and Soviet occupations of Hungary.

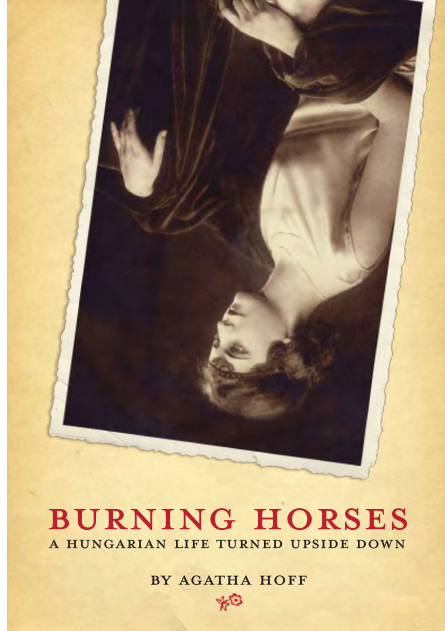


I have chosen to tell her personal story, only marginally placing it in the context of world events. The book narrates her struggles to keep body and soul together for herself and her family.

Mama was a wonderful raconteur and, until her death in 1992, a repository of our family lore. Still, some events in her life, which I witnessed as a child, went unspoken. I have chosen to include these in her story so that they won't be forgotten.

Eva led an idyllic life, growing up in a small town and later, as a young wife, participating in the social life of prewar Budapest. The winds of war sweeping over Europe fanned into flames the untended smolderings of World War I, giving rise to the Nazi takeover of Budapest and the core of *Burning Horses*.

My mother's encounter with a Nazi officer, in which she had to endure incredible humiliation in order to save her children, was a harbinger of her receiving orders to report for deportation to a concentration camp. Her



indomitable will to survive shines throughout her story. The title of the book derives from German cavalry horses having been stabled in a ground floor apartment of the building in which we lived. When an incendiary bomb ignited the house, the horses were trapped, as was our family in a cave shelter beneath the building.

It is my hope that Mama's story will once again shock us all out of our apathy in the face of the violence and wars that dominate our world.

Agatha Hoff is a former San Francisco court commissioner. She can be reached at ag2bike@earthlink.net.

From the editors:

You can purchase *Burning Horses* by Agatha Hoff at your local bookstore or order a copy from www.barnesandnoble.com or www.amazon.com.

