

CHAPTER 8: DISCIPLINE

My mother remembers kneeling behind the black coal stove in the basement of the house on Crawford Avenue. Each strike of the leather strap—first across her shoulders, then over her back and legs—stung more than the last one. Large red welts appeared on her body, but the physical pain was nothing compared to her fear and embarrassment. She thought he would never stop. When he finally did, she sobbed and lifted herself from the floor. In spite of the beating, she did not hate her father; she vowed not to do anything wrong again and wanted to please him.

Anna was only 12 years old when she received the beating from her father. It was the most significant event she remembers from her childhood years and has remained imprinted in her memory. Although it was the first and last time he would hit her with such severity, the beating shaped the way she viewed him from then on. She had not thought he would miss the \$12 she secretly removed from the purse in the kitchen cabinet to treat one of her junior high school friends to ice cream at Vezdel's corner store. After all, it was her turn to buy. Her friend, who always seemed to have money, usually bought candy, pop, and ice cream for both of them. Anna did not have the money, but she knew her father did. As treasurer of a local Slovak fraternal lodge, he had cash stored away in a dresser drawer. With her father's money, she too could feel like a big shot.

The year was 1937, hard times, especially hard for a laborer trying to provide for a wife and five children, with another baby on the way. After seven years of pleading with the U.S. Steel employment office in Pittsburgh for work and two years on WPA and Welfare, Anna's father had just obtained a steady job in the cindering plant at the Duquesne mill.

My mother recalls that under such meager living conditions, the missing \$12 seemed more like \$12,000 to my grandfather. He repeatedly yelled, "Who took my money?" until she confessed. Then he beat her and threatened to send her to Morganza, a home for bad children. Her mother, Verona, pleaded with him to stop, afraid that he was going to kill his daughter. Anna promised to pay back him back as soon as she was old enough to find a job, and she did, once she was in high school and found a job at the local five and dime store in the Duquesne Plaza. When Anna received her first pay she went, with tears welling in her eyes, to her father to apologize and give him the money, which János refused to take until she pleaded he do so, saying, "I know it has been awhile, but I promised to pay you back."

Anna's beating was just one example of the kind of strict discipline she and her six siblings experienced at the hands of their father, who insisted on following old European ways when rearing his children. One of the greatest problems faced by Slavic immigrants in the transition from the old country to the new was that of family life. In Slovakia, households were governed by the patriarchal system where the word of the parents and, most especially the father, was law. The home was a gathering place for the entire family and their friends. The children respected the position of their father and were trained to obey "to be good soldiers, not good citizens". If the child revolted, the entire neighborhood turned against him. The husband exerted his right to choose the home, to discipline his wife and children, to claim their services, appropriate their earnings, and manage all the affairs of the household. But in America, freedom made the conditions entirely different, and some Slovak fathers discovered that they were unable to maintain the same authority as in Europe, but not János. His favorite saying was, "I'm the

boss," and there was no arguing with him. He had a temper that was easily provoked. Once, in junior high school, Anna took a chance on a raffle and won a box of Coty's face powder, but because she was forbidden to wear make-up, her father threw the container into the coal stove. János also demanded that his children show respect for their mother, and if any of them dared not, her, especially if they referred to their mother as "she" or "her," he would raise his voice to them, saying, "Who is she? You don't say she, that's your mother."

My mother recalls her father being especially strict with her. When out with her friends, she had to be in by 9:00 and even when she became a senior in high school she was not allowed to date. He did not want her to become interested in boys and get distracted from her studies. He also feared that she might become sexually involved and get pregnant. Instead, János wanted her to finish school and graduate, not to improve her chances for marriage as was the goal typically found among immigrant parents, but because he wanted her to be able to find a job to support herself if she needed to. Anna believed that her father was harder on her because she was the oldest. He and Verona also expected her to look after her younger siblings, and if they got into trouble, so did she. Anna obeyed her father, perhaps more out of fear than anything else.

Most times when János disciplined his children, Verona would just stand by defenseless, aware that even if she dared to say something, her words would not stop him. My mother does not recall Verona hitting her. Whenever her husband was at work, Verona would often correct the children verbally if they did something wrong, and if they did not stop, then would threaten to tell their father when he came home and he would be the disciplinarian.

Out of all the children, only John Jr. remembered being beaten by Verona. He recalled how one particular time he spoke disrespectfully to an elderly woman while he was out with Verona. Verona was so angry with her son that when they returned home she beat him with a stick. She would also punish him for not coming home on time, not doing his chores or sneaking out of the house. As an adult, he reflected back on those times noting that he thought she was tougher on him perhaps because he gave her more of a problem than any of the other children, and while he knew he had a place in her heart as the eldest son, he also knew she relied on him and Anna to help keep the younger children in line.

The one matter János enforced with all of his children was education. He was always around to sign their report cards; he wanted them to receive good grades, and if the marks were not up to standard, he would punish first and ask questions later. For example, one time my mother brought home a report card with a D grade that was really supposed to be an "A," and her father punished her without letting her explain why the grade was so low. He also refused to sign the report card. The next day Anna went to the teacher with her unsigned report card and the teacher discovered she had given Anna the wrong grade and corrected it. Anna showed her father the corrected grade and he was satisfied.

János pushed the issue of his children's education because he wanted them to make something of themselves. Only 20 percent of the children of early immigrants graduated from high school; they had to work at a young age because their families were so poor. For many first generation Slavs, their own education did not go beyond simple reading, writing and arithmetic and they did not see a high school diploma as necessary

for sons who would spend their lives working in a mine or a mill, or daughters who would become housewives. János thought the opposite and wanted all of his children to finish high school. He especially did not want his sons to follow in his footsteps by going to work in the mills or mines and wanted them to have more choices in life.

As my mother remembers, my grandfather's dominance over the family—in just about every matter—prevailed throughout her teenage years and her fear of him remained even after she became an adult.