

# **“The Spirit of Survival: Life Lessons of Holocaust Survivors”**

George Barany, April 20, 2012 – Delivered at Shabbat Services, Mount Zion Temple, St. Paul, MN

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*Introduction by Rabbi Spilker:*

*Three years ago, we recognized that we needed to begin shifting our efforts for Yom HaShoah, remembering and speaking of the Holocaust.*

*While we are blessed by the presence of many who lived through those dark days some who experienced the trauma directly, some who managed to escape before, many are no longer with us. While survivors are still with us, in their presence, we wanted to begin hearing from the children of survivors, the so called 2nd generation, who feel the responsibility to speak, to share their parents' stories and their own. Two years ago, Sharon Arad spoke of returning to Vienna where her father grew up before going on the kindertransport to England and eventually to Palestine. Last year, Sarah Elkin spoke of her family's journey to Germany where her father Gus grew up before he was able to leave before the war. Tonight we will be addressed by George Barany.*

*Dr Barany was born in Hungary in 1955 and emigrated with his family to the United State in 1960 as we'll hear more about in a few minutes.*

*After distinguished studies on the east coast, he reached his present rank of full Professor of Chemistry at the University of Minnesota in 1991, and a joint appointment as Professor of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology took effect in 1996. Barany was named a Distinguished McKnight University Professor in 1997.*

*George and his wife Barbara have two children who grew up at Mount Zion: Michael born in 1987, and Deborah born in 1989. Professor Barany's brother Francis is also in the sciences, a Professor of Microbiology at the Sanford Weill College of Medicine of Cornell University and brothers have published a paper together.*

*An expert crossword puzzle maker with some published in the New York Times, Dr. Barany has worked with fellow grad of the prestigious Stuyvesant High School in New York City, and past president of Mount Zion, Joe Konstan, on a special crossword for Mount Zion which you will see after the service.*

*It is an honor to welcome George Barany to speak with us.*

Shabbat shalom.

Within the past year, I lost both of my parents, Drs. Kate and Michael Bárány: Holocaust survivors, internationally renowned researchers in muscle biochemistry, biophysics, and physiology; tireless advocates for women in science and academia; distinguished educators; and generous philanthropists. After several lengthy illnesses made it difficult for them to continue living alone in Chicago, we coordinated a move to St. Paul and established them both at the Episcopal Church Homes in St. Paul just about two miles from this synagogue. It was there that, after almost 62 years of marriage, they passed

away just six weeks apart during the summer of 2011. This July, on their approximate *Jahrzeit*, the urns containing their ashes shall be put into the ground at the Mount Zion cemetery at Larpenteur and Payne. I stand here today to explain how the lives and legacies of my parents, and especially the physical and emotional challenges of their final months (not to mention navigating all of the associated legal, financial, and logistical issues), have made me a better and stronger person, and have brought what has always been a close-knit family even closer together.

But first things first – I would like to think that my life has been quite good, perhaps even charmed in some ways. I have tried to be a good son, a devoted husband, and a nurturing father. I have had a relatively successful academic career (going into the family business, if you will) as a chaired Chemistry Professor at the University of Minnesota. Over the past 30+ years, I have trained dozens of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows and continued to mentor them to successful independent careers, taught thousands more students in the classroom (some of whom are now physicians that I encounter in my own visits to the clinic), published papers that have been quite influential in my field, been granted several important patents, won a few major professional awards in my field ... why, I've even managed to get some of my crossword puzzles published in the *The New York Times* – yet without any doubt, the single most remarkable feature of my life story has to be, and always will be, *the fact that I was ever born in the first place.*

What an incredible act of optimism for my parents to even start a family, a mere decade after being liberated from the concentration camps. In this, I have a common bond with other so-called “second generation Holocaust survivors” – if you google those words you get nearly 150,000 hits – and many scholars have made careers studying us – what drives our professional and personal choices? How to explain our neuroses (and believe me, I have plenty of those)? Were we pushed, perhaps unnecessarily, to compensate for the terrible missing elements of our parents’ lives? Whenever I would face a particular stressful situation in school or at work, I knew implicitly – or else was not so subtly reminded – that it could not even remotely compare to what my parents had gone through. Yet, throughout my life, I have been able to cobble together some buffers and support mechanisms, which included consoling myself with this mantra: “Nobody, but nobody, on their deathbed, says – ‘If only I had spent less time with my family and published more papers’ ...” Well, guess what, the author of that mantra clearly did not anticipate my father’s end-of-life.

Michael Bárány (Bárány Mihály) was born in 1921 in Hungary. His father Jozsef Fried – my paternal grandfather – was an illiterate but deeply religious Jewish farmer who was rather wealthy by local standards. As an ambitious young student who graduated high school *summa cum laude*, my father was stymied by the insidiously anti-Semitic “Numerus Clausus” – a quota limiting access for Jews to institutions of higher learning. Instead, he became a skilled mechanic and was inducted into the Hungarian army where he was assigned to Jewish work camps. Sometime in 1944, he learned through the grapevine of “The Final Solution” and went to considerable personal risk to secure false papers that could have brought his parents to safety, but Jozsef kept saying “God will take care of us!” This image was indelibly etched on my father’s conscience for the rest of his life, and undoubtedly seeded his later adamant rejection of organized religion and most of its rituals. My paternal grandparents were taken to Auschwitz and gassed, while my father was imprisoned at Buchenwald where he contracted tuberculosis and weighed only 92 pounds when the American troops liberated the camp in April 1945. Ever since, Michael’s mindset was that of playing “catch-up” – a belief that sustained him through numerous additional upheavals and brought him to any number of pinnacles of scientific accomplishment which resulted from working longer and harder than just about anyone around him. His personality was intense, dogmatic, pessimistic, cynical, and introverted. As to his prewar and wartime experiences, he was reticent – he discussed them very rarely with me as I was growing up, but otherwise kept it all to himself (though when he did open up, it was always with a great deal of passion and emotion ... more about this later ...).

Katalin Fóti was also born in Hungary, in the year 1929 (this makes her the same age as Anne Frank), into an upper middle class intellectual and cultured Jewish family that included physicians, rabbis, and – dangling off a distant limb of the family tree – the composer-conductor Gustav Mahler. While she too encountered anti-Semitism during her schoolgirl days, her life was reasonably sheltered and comfortable until the Spring of 1944, when she and her mother were deported to Auschwitz. About a half year into their captivity, they were marched unclothed in front of the notorious Dr. Joseph Mengele, known as “The Angel of Death.” During the so-called “Selection” that followed, Kati was sent to the “weak” group slated for the gas chambers. In German, she exclaimed to Mengele: “Ich bin jung, ich bin stark, ich möchte arbeiten, ich möchte leben” (“I am young, I am strong, I want to work, I want to live”). Mengele struck her with his cane, and sent her to the “strong” group, but this was also the last time my mother ever saw her own mother, my grandmother Adél (whom my mother adored and was very close to).

Then, as difficult as it is to imagine or comprehend, things got even worse. My mother developed acute rheumatic fever and was hospitalized. In the Spring of 1945, as the Soviet army was approaching, the Germans told the prisoners to start digging what would have been their own graves ... and after escaping from that ordeal, my mother spent an additional half year or so in a Soviet camp. Only three Jewish girls from her high school class survived the war, and of those three the other two could not cope and committed suicide within another year (one of these left a note, “I want to join the rest of my family”). I’ve already mentioned that my father internalized this period of his life and how it affected his personality ... quite in contrast, my mother became very upbeat, optimistic, and free of bitterness (we would tease her that she was a “Pollyanna”), and had deep psychological insights into what was going on with family, friends, and associates. She was not afraid to describe her experiences, and she tried to draw positive lessons from them – this extended to outreach activities like speaking to an assembly of children at Michael and Deborah’s (as the Rabbi mentioned when introducing me, those are my kids) elementary school during one of her annual Thanksgiving visits to us, back in the mid-90’s. In terms of her professional career, my mother became a scientist in an era where very few women chose this path (or were even given the encouragement to do so), and of those who did, the majority formed a partnership with their spouse.

When the time came for each of them to seek a life companion, my parents independently concluded, whether rationally or instinctively, that they could only marry another Holocaust survivor. They “met cute” in the Spring of 1949 (my 20-year old mother cut her finger while slicing a loaf of bread, and my 27-year old father was the medical student called upon to administer first-aid). The essence of their courtship occurred August 1-4 (henceforth referred to in the family as “The High Holidays”) during a vacation retreat for Hungarian University students that was sponsored by a Jewish-American relief organization. They were officially married in October 1949, and my mother was told by her physicians that her health problems would not allow her to have children. Nevertheless, on an early Saturday morning in February 1955, her water broke, she went into the lab to put the finishing touches on a paper to be submitted for publication, and shortly thereafter, I was born. The political and military upheavals of October 1956 led a few months later to our family’s dramatic escape across the Yugoslav border (several earlier attempts had been aborted, for one reason or another). A generously bribed guide conducted us to the vicinity of a spot where a cow had stepped on a land mine and been blown up, thus creating a narrow, snow-covered zone that was temporarily safe for passage, by foot and in the middle of the night. My mother, pregnant with her second child, carried the essential belongings – including lab notebooks – in a single suitcase, while my father carried me after I had been sedated. Partway through, the load was too much, and they took the risk to awaken me. According to family lore, my comment at the end of this harrowing journey was “Jól sétáltunk (that was a nice walk).”

My brother Francis was born in Israel while my parents worked at the Weizmann Institute, and this was followed by a couple of years in Heidelberg, Germany. We emigrated to the United States in 1960, landing in New York City where my parents had their “dream” jobs at the Institute for Muscle Disease

that had been established by the organization for which Jerry Lewis does the annual Labor Day telethons. Then, when the Institute closed in 1974 due to a power struggle to which my parents were innocent bystanders, they were forced to uproot again, and relocated to the University of Illinois Chicago Medical School. There, my parents re-established themselves, and continued to make significant scientific contributions, were successful teachers, and advocated reforms related to women in academia. I won't give you the full litany – details are given on a couple of websites that I set up in my parents' memories after each of them passed away – but imagine a workplace where women do not have proper rest room facilities, where men and women receive unequal pensions for equal work, where no accommodations are made for the conflict between the tenure clock and the biological clock, and where there is no on-site daycare. For her leadership role in addressing these inequities, Kate Bárány was named the UIC Woman of the Year for 1996. And typical of my mother's style, she reached her goals not by confrontation, but by winning over the people she needed to bring to her side one home-baked cookie at a time.

One thing that I have been particularly touched by is the fact that every scrap of paper that my parents ever exchanged has been saved (and each had their own "collection") – this includes letters (including envelopes with cancelled stamps) that my mother, in pre-e-mail days would send to whatever hotel my father would be staying at while attending out-of-town conferences, to the small cards, giving only the number of years and containing the single Hungarian word "Szeretlek" (means "I love you") or "Cic" (means "kisses") that would accompany the red roses my father would give my mother on their anniversaries and her birthday. They also wrote heartfelt poems and letters to each other (usually in Hungarian – I'm sure that the translations I solicited do not do justice to the originals), and exchanged PG-rated e-mails that give me hope for my own golden years-to-come. My mother told my brother and me as we were growing up, "I only wish that your wife will love you as much as I love your father ..."

The past few years were not kind to my parents as each, in their own way, struggled with declining health. My mother's heart condition worsened to the point where she was no longer able to take her daily walks and her frequent swims; she became legally blind; and most cruel of all, she suffered from loss of her short-term memory. Meanwhile, my father, an intensely proud man, was her primary caregiver, but things reached a crisis point when he broke his hip in February 2011. The whole family had to adapt immediately: my wife Barbara took an unpaid leave-of-absence from her teaching job in the St. Paul schools, my son Michael interrupted his graduate studies at Princeton and took the next plane to Chicago, and my brother Francis cut short a family vacation in Florida to help out. I will spare you the details, but with the pressures of daily life-and-death decisions, often made on short notice while sleep-deprived, tensions flared and words not normally part of our working vocabularies were used.

My overarching philosophies – informed by years of watching my parents in action – were: (1) what would *they* have done, if they were in a position to make informed choices?, and (2) regardless of their current conditions, they deserved to be treated with respect, dignity, and love. I hope that my own kids were taking notes, for the inevitable 30 or 40 years from now. With many difficulties, we were able to relocate them both to St. Paul, where Mom died listening to Johann Strauss' "*The Blue Danube*" while Dad and I were holding her hand ... and six weeks later, after many moments of affection and grace that will be with me forever, Dad joined her. I can speak more about this afterwards in the Harris Chapel, but let me take this moment to publicly acknowledge Rabbi Adam Spilker, who respected and overlooked differences in religious philosophy in order to be there when our family needed him, and congregation member Charles Fodor, himself a refugee from Hungary, who has been a wonderful friend throughout.

This brings me to my central charge from Rabbi Spilker, to reflect upon my parents' spirit of survival, and to draw life lessons from their Holocaust experiences, and beyond. I bet my mother would be amused to know that I am now giving a "sermon," since we always referred to her homilies, like "SSS: the secret of success is sleep," as sermons.

Point 1: My parents were secular Jews, and while we were proud of our Jewish heritage, we feared to broadcast it lest our enemies use it against us. Starting as a little in-joke between my parents, but fortified through subsequent generations, is the belief that our family is like a small country unto itself (we called it “Bárányország” and even have our own Constitution, seal, and national anthem), and that we as its citizens are responsible for the support and survival of all the others. My mother told me once by way of justifying our “nuclear” family, “... we planned for your brother to be your best friend ...” As I told my brother in Rabbi Spilker’s study the day after our father’s death, after months of family stress and harsh words, that having just become an orphan, there was no way that I was willing to lose my brother too. My father always told us, “You are the continuation of my life ...,” and we have passed that on to our children, too. I want both my son Michael Jeremy and my daughter Deborah Adina to know that I am confident that Barbara and I have given them a strong foundation and will continue our unconditional support through whatever paths they choose to follow.

Point 2: My parents had a deep sense of justice which they instilled in us as well as their students, and upheld the highest standards of scholarship and integrity. My parents chose to title their scientific autobiography “Strife and Hope,” after the concluding sentence of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian drama entitled “The Tragedy of Man.” To my parents, science was a safe haven because it could not be taken away, as so much else had been. Science was logical and predictable in a world where they had experienced so much suffering based on the arbitrary prejudices and madness of human beings. For sure, family came first (as I recall how the achievements of their children and grandchildren were listed on my parents’ *curriculum vitae*, and formed the centerpieces of their personal correspondence and the annual review meetings they had with their Department heads), but they strongly believed that the power of knowledge and understanding could improve the human condition.

Point 3: Once my parents had passed away, a minor miracle happened. The strife and afflictions of the recent past fell away, and suddenly, my parents reverted in my mind to the ways they were at the tops of their games, and I was able to take stock of all they had accomplished in their lives, the barriers they had overcome, their lasting influence on myself, my brother, their four grandchildren, and the many colleagues they had mentored and the students they had taught. This has been a time-consuming task that is still not complete, but it has also brought me back in touch with extended family that I had hardly known, and made new friends for me. I have also formed a special bond with others of my generation who have similarly faced the challenges of caring for ailing parents. In this latter regard, I would like to single out my colleague Steve Kass, who is with us tonight – he tragically lost his mother recently, and his 90+ old father, still alive, was with the American army that liberated my father more than 65 years ago.

I am grateful that in 1995, my parents acceded to the request of the Shoah Foundation, formed by Stephen Spielberg with the proceeds from his film “Schindler’s List” (which, by the way, my parents refused to watch, for self-evident reasons), and each sat for a separate 2-hour oral history that is “must see” viewing for me, my children, and some day, my grandchildren.

Our own small “family country” of Bárányország came into existence, as most countries do, out of the horrors of war and suffering; but also like many, through the hope, optimism, and determination of people who believed that the world could be better and that they could play a part in that. My parents lived that philosophy, not only in their devotion to each other but by passing that determination on to their descendants and students. Their lives demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity, as well as high degrees of altruism and service. Also like others, our small country honors its history and celebrates our profound respect for the legacy of its founders – my parents – Michael and Kate Bárány. I love you forever!

Thank you very much, and again, Shabbat shalom.