

Magda Levy

Title: *My Heart's Journey*

Author: Magda Levy

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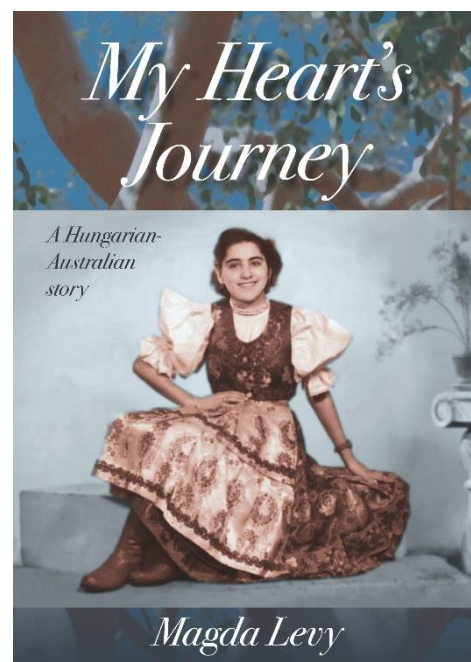
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, Sydney Jewish Museum, State Library of Victoria and National Library of Australia.

Cities/towns/camps: Hungary; Anarcs, Kisvárda; Austria: Andau, Vienna, Potzleinsdorf and Salzburg refugee camps; Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative.

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: Witness; 1956 Hungarian Uprising; Bonegilla Migrant Camp



My Heart's Journey is the 152-page memoir of Magda Levy, a Greek Catholic who witnessed the persecution and deportation of Jewish families from her hometown of Anarcs. After the war, she married Holocaust survivor Joe Hoffman, and the couple fled Hungary following the 1956 Hungarian Uprising. They subsequently emigrated to Australia, where Magda later converted to Judaism.

Pages 1–49 describe the author's family background, childhood and wartime experiences in Anarcs. Pages 50–74 describe the fate of the village's Jewish families, her marriage to Holocaust survivor Joe Hoffman and their flight from Hungary in 1956. Pages 75–106 recount the family's emigration to Australia and early life in Melbourne. Pages 107–152 reflect on Magda's conversion to Judaism, her grief following the deaths of her first and second husbands, and her enduring love of the Jewish faith.

Magda Levy (née Takacs) was born on 15 June 1932 in Anarcs, a small village in eastern Hungary near the Ukrainian border. The eldest child of Karoly and Borbala Takacs, she had a younger sister, Maika, and brother Karcsi. Her father was a Calvinist and her mother a Greek Catholic. Magda was raised in her mother's faith and attended a Greek Catholic school. The family lived on a small farm where they raised poultry and grew crops.

According to Magda, only nine Jewish families lived in Anarcs. Among them, the Takacs family were particularly close to the Diners, a wealthy landowning family who had converted to Catholicism. Magda's grandmother worked for the family for many years as a cook and housemaid and helped to raise one of their sons, Geza.

Following the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, the Jewish residents of Anarcs were rounded up and taken to the synagogue in nearby Kisvárdá, which formed part of the ghetto established around it. Magda and her family watched as their Jewish neighbours passed their home, while her grandmother wept. Despite their conversion, the Diners were among the first residents of Anarcs to be taken away. Subsequently, Geza appeared at Magda's grandmother's home seeking refuge. He was concealed beneath a stack of dried corn husks in the barn and secretly provided with food. When she became ill and died in late 1944, Magda's aunt continued to care for him. Geza remained there in hiding until liberation in 1945.

On another occasion, while Magda's grandmother was working as a cook in the home of Laszlo Diner in Kisvárdá, two Nazis arrived. Although Laszlo had converted to Catholicism, they beat him until he admitted that he was Jewish and then arrested him. He was never seen again. Nearly all members of Anarcs's Jewish community were murdered during the Holocaust.

Soviet forces entered Hungary in 1944, when Magda was twelve. As women and girls in the village faced sexual harassment and assault by Soviet soldiers, a concealed room was established in a neighbouring house where they hid day and night. Magda escaped attention because she was considered physically "underdeveloped", but after her mother twice narrowly avoided assault, she hid in the room until May 1945. During a typhus epidemic in August 1945, Magda became gravely ill, and her younger sister, Maika, died from the disease.

After the war, Joe Hoffman, a Jewish survivor from Budapest, moved to Anarcs with his mother because of food shortages in the capital. Magda and Joe fell in love after appearing in a school play together. They married in May 1950. Their daughter, Eva, was born in 1955 while they were living in Budapest.

In 1956, the family returned to Anarcs and remained there under Soviet rule until the Hungarian Uprising in October 1956. Joe and Magda's brother Karcsi then fled across the border into Austria. After reaching Andau, in late November, Karcsi returned to Anarcs to help Magda escape, while Eva temporarily remained with her grandparents. They travelled by train towards the Austrian border before smugglers guided them into Austria on foot. After reaching Andau, they received assistance from the Red Cross and slept in hay sheds with other refugees. They then travelled to Vienna, where she was reunited with Joe, who returned to Anarcs to retrieve Eva.

While waiting for their return, Magda stayed at the Potzleinsdorf refugee camp and applied to emigrate to the United States. By the time Joe arrived with Eva, however, the American refugee quota had been filled, and the family instead applied to settle in Australia. In January 1957, they left Potzleinsdorf for Salzburg, where they spent two months in another former army camp. Karcsi obtained special permission to emigrate to Australia because of a disability to his hand caused by an exploding grenade after the war, and through him the rest of the family also secured entry permits.

The family travelled to Australia by plane and arrived in Melbourne on 1 April 1957. They were taken to the Bonegilla Migrant Camp, where they were allocated a room in a weatherboard hut. After two months, the family left the camp after finding accommodation in Melbourne through a distant relative and receiving assistance from the Jewish Welfare Society.

Magda and Joe's second daughter, Mary, was born in November 1957, followed by Linda in 1970. The couple worked hard to establish themselves and eventually achieved success in the furniture business. Following Linda's birth, Magda began pursuing conversion to Judaism, converting in 1974.

Tragically, Joe died in 1984. Four years later she met and married Yitzhak Levy, with whom she had a happy marriage until he tragically died in 2001. The final part of the memoir reflects on the love and companionship she shared with both husbands, the grief of losing them, and the consolation she found in her family and Jewish faith.

My Heart's Journey is a detailed autobiography encompassing the author's childhood in Anarcs, flight from communist Hungary and resettlement in Australia. Although Magda was not herself Jewish during the Holocaust, the memoir preserves valuable recollections of the persecution and deportation of Anarcs's Jewish community. It also provides insight into post-war life in Hungary and the experiences of Hungarian refugees following the 1956 uprising. Her wartime memories are comparatively brief and are supplemented by stories passed down by her grandmother. Above all, the memoir is an intimate account of family, faith and belonging, exploring Magda's conversion to Judaism and the profound love and grief that shaped her life. The memoir was written and published as part of Makor Jewish Library's "Write Your Story" program.