

Palisade Historical Society  
Oral and Video History Project

Interview

Oral History # 023

Place: Home of Brant & Carol Harrison, Palisade, CO

Interviewee: Barbara Bikki

Videographer: Priscilla Walker

Date: 01/13/2020

Length: 01:47:22

Phone: Private

Phone:

This is a summarized transcript of a video recording of an interview with Barbara Bikki. It took place in the home of Brant & Carol Harrison for a family gathering. Barbara spoke to the group and then answered questions. Text in *italics* was added for purposes of clarification and were not a part of the original transcript.

### **Introduction**

Prior to her presentation, Barbara set up a display of photographs, handiwork, currency, and other memorabilia from Hungary. As she set up items, she explained their significance.

Barbara introduced herself as “the lady that escaped from Communist Hungary.” She was born in Hungary and went to school there until the time she left the country. She lived during the Hungarian uprising, which surprised the Russian people, because they thought they had gotten Hungary for good.

Some of Barbara’s relatives did not make it out of Hungary because they were imprisoned and killed. Her brother made it home from Siberia, where he had been a prisoner of war for 3 ½ years.

Barbara’s family consisted of her parents, four daughters, and three sons. Two boys, James and Joseph, died two weeks apart at a young age from diphtheria. She and her brother and his family were able to escape when the revolution broke out.

### **Hungary - Background and History**

Hungary was founded in 884 A.D. and is now 1,132 years old. The first people came from Finnish background and were Caucasian-based. The Huns and Turks occupied Hungary for 150 years. By 895 A.D., the land was completely occupied. Immediately after this, the people established a State and made their first Constitution. It was based on the principles that all men are created equal and freedom for all.

The Pope appointed St. Stephen as the first King of Hungary. He helped the country grow from a heathen nation to a Catholic Christian nation. Then Hungary became a member of the Western European Alliance. They had some problems with the Mongolians and Turkish. Its population was 11 million people at the time communism took over. Its capital is Budapest. The Hungarian flag is red, white, and green. The red stands for the blood its people shed for freedom, white signifies spirituality, and green denotes hope. The National Anthem is “God Bless the Hungarians.” The primary language is Hungarian, but Finish, Greek, German, and English are also spoken. Hungary is famous for its red paprika. Barbara explained the value of the Hungarian currency and what could be bought for each denomination of the currency.

Before World War II, Hungary was a large country and once described as the breadbasket of eastern Europe, as it provided crops and other commodities to the region. Its two great rivers were the Danube and the Tisa. Large portions of the country – 35,998 square miles or 93,000 meters were taken away, including the Rumania and Austria which took the rivers– so now Hungary is much smaller.

### **World War II and Russian Occupation of Hungary**

Hungary was taken by Russia in 1945 and was occupied until 1989. During this time, many goods and services disappeared. The Russians controlled the media, and people were forbidden to mention the name of God in public. If you spoke of God at school, your parents were called up, reprimanded, and made to pay a fine. Barbara recalled she liked to sing “A Might Fortress Is Our God,” and other songs, so she got into trouble for doing this. The authorities told her father he must control her and threatened to put him in jail if he failed to do so. People were allowed to attend church on Sunday, but you could not speak freely because of the communist presence.

In 1944, Barbara was only eight years old when the bombs and rockets began to fall. Her father and brother were gone, but they had dug a trench in the side of the hill beside the house -- a bunker. They were told never to speak of it. It housed 8-12 girls, along with Barbara’s three sisters, and they didn’t see the sunlight for six months. Barbara carried food down to the girls at night. Her mother was bedfast. One time, Russian soldiers came in and asked about the girls, but her mother denied knowing anything. They took Barbara’s mother out of bed and beat her, leaving her severely injured, with blood coming from her eyes and ears and compromising her ability to remember to breathe. After this happened, Barbara ran to a neighbor, where she found an elderly man to help. All other men from 16 – 60 years of age had been taken away. Her mother was put back to bed, and they hoped the Russian soldiers would not come back.

Another time, Barbara forgot to take food down to the girls for two days, so they dug their way out of the bunker looking for her, not knowing what might have happened. Two Russian Cossacks drove up to the gate, and Barbara told everyone to get out. The Russian soldiers walked in and didn’t allow anyone in or out. Her mother told Barbara’s sister, Sarah, to get back to the bedroom, break a window, get out, and run. The soldiers searched the entire area for her sister, who hid in the forest all night. The soldiers kept coming back to the house every few hours to see if she returned. Barbara’s sister then hid in an attic above the horse stalls. The horses sensed she was up there and made noise, but the soldiers did not find her. Barbara’s mother had a lot to contend with, as ill as she was.

Life was turned upside down with the Russian occupation of Hungary. School books and people’s belongings were burned on the street. They had to get used to the new Red Communist folders, and every morning they had to recite the Russian Anthem. Barbara sang the anthem for the group and said they were forced to march under the Anthem. In school, students were required to learn Russian. You could speak Romanian, Hungarian and German but were forbidden to speak English or mention England or America. They were taught that America was much different than it really is – that it was a terrible place. They did not really learn what America and its people were like until they arrived here.

When the communists took over, they sent out notices to everyone, telling them they were required to register their firearms. Then six months later, all weapons were taken from the people. Their freedoms rapidly disappeared. Everyone had to keep their identification papers with them at all times.

Failure to do so would result in going to jail. People's movements were closely tracked, and travel was severely restricted. There was no freedom of speech, and although you could go to church, you prayed silently. Preachers and ministers had to guard what they said, in order to avoid being arrested.

Under communist rule, Barbara's father was offered land on condition that he become a communist and deny God. Because he refused to do so, they were marked as Christians and the authorities took whatever they wanted from them. Stores of wheat, corn, and other commodities were seized, and people's houses were often emptied of their belongings. Those who resisted were imprisoned. People were scrutinized relentlessly, and the authorities knew of everything you owned. The Government took a percentage of what you produced, gradually increasing that percentage to the point people could no longer make a living. At that point, they were forced to give up any land they had and work on the collective farm. The situation was described as, "If they can't make you, they will break you."

Barbara recalled one time when they were cold and hungry, her father went out to gather some firewood. He saw a rabbit and hit it with a piece of wood, killing it. He hid the rabbit under his coat, but when he returned to the edge of town, the Gestapo stopped him. They questioned him about what he had, and her father denied having anything. They ripped open the coat and the rabbit fell out. The rabbit's blood had been dripping on her father's boots, which led to its discovery by the Gestapo. Barbara's father was told he would go to prison for killing the rabbit, but a higher-ranking officer made a case for her father because he had a hungry family. Had it not been for this man, her father would have gone to jail. As it was, he was released but not allowed to keep the rabbit.

Barbara's brother, Frank, did not return from the war. Two years had passed, when they finally got a postcard from Russia, saying he was alive in Siberia. The Russians captured him, and he was there for 2 ½ years. He was six feet tall, but when he returned, he weighed only 98 pounds and had to be hospitalized. While he was a prisoner, he was told not to eat a good meal because it would be his last. When they washed the dishes for the Russian officers, they were forced to drink the dishwater with a few grains of barley or corn for a meal. Frank said he would do anything he could, never to be imprisoned by the Russians again.

### **Escape from Hungary**

The family broke up after the revolution and Barbara was going to leave. Her mother and father cautioned everyone not to leave at the same time. Her parents feared if they were caught together, they would all be killed, and they would lose everyone. Barbara and her brother made it to Austria – 89 miles and many nights on foot, by wagon, horse and buggy, and freight train. One time on a train, they were told the train would slow down when they got to the edge of town, where they would have to jump off the train so they would not be discovered. The men jumped first and then caught the women and children as they jumped.

It was difficult to keep the children quiet. The children were taught to call Barbara "Little Mommy." Every time the soldiers came into the train station, the little girl and boy stayed close to Barbara. By clinging to Barbara, they convinced the soldiers she was their mother, rather than the young, single woman she was. On one occasion, her brother and his wife went over to a nearby bar, ordered drinks, and acted like they were drunk so the soldiers would not bother them.

They caught another freight train on January 7, 1957. It was bitterly cold as they hid in the caboose. When the authorities came by to check, the caboose man interceded, telling them the area had already been cleared, so there was no need to look for anyone. This was the last haul before they reached the

Austrian border on January 14<sup>th</sup>. It took time, because they had to hide from the soldiers and travel only when it was relatively safe.

An Austrian man helped them cross the border, but he had to disappear right away so he would not be caught and killed. At the border, they had to dig a big hole and crawl under a 6- or 7-foot tall barbed wire fence, since it was impossible to go over it without being hurt or getting caught in the wire. When they got into Austria, there were several camps, housing from 6,000 to 10,000 refugees in each one. When they finally arrived, they had not eaten in three days. They were given showers and clean clothes.

It was a bitter time in the refugee camps, although the Austrian soldiers and policemen did what they could to encourage them. Once they discovered Barbara could cook, she was put to work with 10-15 others preparing meals for the refugees in the camp. Barbara talked of how her strong faith got her through these difficult times. There were people from many religions and backgrounds in the camps. Each religion took care of its own people, and there were American missionaries who helped some people immigrate to America.

Barbara met her future husband, Leslie, in the refugee camps. He had been a sergeant in the Red Army for four years and sustained shrapnel in his arm, leg, knees, and ankle during fighting. He was hospitalized for six months to recover. Had he been caught when he got away, he would have been killed.

About the time they were engaged, she and Leslie heard there were Americans sponsoring refugees to come and live there. They went to the American Embassy and were married at the courthouse in Vienna on August 1, 1957 as they were getting their papers together to come to America. They came to America as a married couple. *They were among the 250,000 who escaped from Hungary at the time. Some 50,000 came to the U.S.*

The group of refugees, including Barbara and Leslie were interrogated about relatives in other countries. The government was looking for a place to send them. Some were sponsored by Churches. Because Barbara's cousin on her mother's side, Emil Bella, had immigrated to the United States, they were separated from those who had no relatives outside Austria. The Bikkis were transferred to the English section. Their neighbors, who were also escaping had family in Canada. Others in the group went to Australia. The flight from Vienna to New York's airport – later named JFK - was diverted to Ireland because of a bad storm where it refueled to continue the journey to New York.

The big expense, of course, was the airfare, for which they got a loan from the Worldwide Religious organization. Barbara said the Bikkis repaid the loan "little by little."

After landing in New York, they were housed at the Empire State building for two days while being processed. They were again interrogated with questions similar to those they answered in Austria about their situation and their relatives in America. If someone told a different story in New York, they were transferred back to Austria.

### **Settling in America**

When Barbara and Leslie reached New York on August 16, 1957, they were told someone special would be waiting for them. They arrived in Palisade on August 22. When they got off the train in the middle of the night in Grand Junction, Barbara wondered if they had reached the end of the world. There was no one at the depot, except for a woman in the ticket office. Then, Reverend Emil Balla

and his wife, Esther, arrived at the depot. Barbara was surprised to hear someone speaking to her in Hungarian, saying “Leslie and Barbara, you are our guests.” Emil and Esther had lived near Barbara’s family in Hungary. He was from the part of Romania that used to be Hungary. He was born in Balla, which was named after his grandfather who was also a minister and had become a martyr. *Reverend Balla was pastor at the First Baptist Church from 1957 to 1960.* Many Hungarians remained in Romania and did not return to Hungary after the war. Barbara could never understand why the Hungarian president, President Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill sold out the people, leaving them under Russian rule and occupation.

After arriving in Palisade, Barbara and Leslie lived with the Reverend and his wife for five weeks before they went out to get a place of their own. Esther taught Barbara many things about day-to-day life in America, and the church gave them a gift shower to help them get started in their new life here.

Barbara and Leslie’s first home in Palisade was a small house they rented from Frosty Tilton. They made a living cleaning the First Baptist Church for \$50 per month, cleaning other people’s houses, and taking care of their yards. Barbara cleaned 24 different houses in Palisade. The going pay rate was \$1.00 per hour. Their rent was \$65 per month, plus utilities. Barbara remembers Mr. Tilton insisting they pay on time and keep the place clean, but she understood little else of what he said.

Next, they lived in another little house nearby at 322 West 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. There was no furnace or gas. They stoked the fireplace to keep warm and cooked on a woodstove that had a water reservoir, so there was some hot water for washing. They had to bring in an outdoor toilet until the bathroom could be fixed. A pipe had broken in the basement, and the water there was nearly waist deep. Some of the floorboards were rotten, so if you stepped wrong, you could end up in the basement. They were able to fix up the house, and the children could play and study in the basement.

When they first came to America, they spoke no English. It was a challenge to learn the language since in Hungarian, people speak and write in the same way, but with English this is not the case. Barbara and Leslie took evening classes at Mesa College to learn English, and they practiced on each other. They set a goal of learning ten new words per day and made a deal that if one of them failed to learn their ten words, they would go without supper that evening. Finally, Leslie protested, saying “How long are you going to torture me with this?”

Mesa College was supportive in assisting them to attain United States Citizenship. They became Citizens five years after their arrival. In those days, attaining Citizenship was a difficult process, which required extensive vetting to ensure you were upstanding, did not owe anyone money, and had not gotten into any trouble. It was important to become a Citizen, because without it, you could not own property, get credit, and have many other rights. She wore her certificate on top of her head.

Shortly after becoming US Citizens, Barbara and Leslie sent for her parents, who came and lived with them for 2 ½ years. They acquired a little house next door (*on Peach Avenue*), which had been a bakery (*the Robinson Bakery*). There they lived happily, where they raised a big garden and were glad to share what they grew with everyone. Barbara and Leslie helped her parents with paperwork, took them shopping and to church, and looked in on them frequently.

One of Barbara’s favorite memories was when the children – *including their sons Leslie, Jr. and Tibor*, dug a tunnel between the two houses unbeknownst to her and Leslie. They made a hole in the garage floor and placed a heavy metal plate over it. Then they tunneled quite a distance to a place where it came up in a little storage shed near her parents’ house next door. They spread the dirt from

digging out in the garden where it would not be detected. Barbara's father knew of the tunnel, but Barbara and Leslie were astonished to learn of its existence and feared what might have happened if it had caved in.

### **Building a Life in Palisade**

In 1965, Barbara and Leslie moved to a plot of land in Vineland where they began to build their Ranch of Liberty fruit orchard. There were no buildings on the land, except for a tiny house and a packing shed. They had to make the difficult decision to sell their house in town, in order to make the down payment.

During the time Leslie was working on the construction of Interstate 70, he was injured on the job and was on crutches for several months. He did what he could around the house, but Barbara had to go to work. She found a job at Ultronix in Grand Junction, where she was paid \$1.00 per hour. At Ultronix, they employed the metric system so Barbara, being familiar with it, taught other employees how to use it. She had a good relationship with her employer, who granted her time off from her job for peach harvest. One time, she joked with her supervisor about needing a raise, so he picked her up off the floor and set her back down, saying, "There! I just gave you a raise."

Barbara worked for Ultronix for 16 years and then for Coors Ceramics for 10 years. In addition to taking care of their orchard in Palisade, Leslie worked for Climax Uranium and at the City Market warehouse, before retiring after twenty years. These were good times. They were young and ambitious, and they loved the opportunities and freedom afforded them -- something they did not have before coming to America. Barbara described the difference between living in a free country versus a communist country was like the difference between heaven and earth. Barbara and Leslie were the recipients of Citizenship and other civic awards over the years, both locally and in Denver.

Things in Hungary are better now than they were during the Russian occupation. Barbara still has 57 family members living there and in Romania. The family continues to grow, and she looks forward to seeing a new baby on her next visit. For the 60 years of communism, they were unable to visit their Romanian relatives. The children in Barbara's family learn both English and Hungarian, so when they visit eastern Europe, they can easily get around with no language barriers. Still, not everyone there has a car, and they do not have many of the goods and services we enjoy in America. The trips to Hungary reinforce her belief of what freedoms we have and how blessed we are to live in America.

*Leslie passed away June 12, 2005*, and recently, Barbara sold her Palisade property to the Talbott family, who have allowed her to remain in her home for the rest of her life. She pays only the utilities and the cost of minor repairs and upkeep. She is happy and eternally grateful to everyone for her wonderful life of freedom in America.

### **Other Memories**

Barbara remembered an occasion when they were on a train close to the border, there was a little dog belonging to the caboose man. Every time the train stopped, people were allowed to get off to get a drink or a snack, but each time they got back on the train the soldiers would check them. The little dog in caboose began to bark and nip at the soldiers when they came to check on them. The dog barked and bit one of soldiers in the rear end, ripping his pants. It seemed to sense something about the soldiers and would not let them get close to Barbara.

When Barbara's parents came to America, her children and some of the neighborhood children taught them English after school. It was important for them to learn the language, since her parents cleaned the Post Office, as well as offices, houses, and the church. The children taught her father that when he saw a pretty woman, he should say, "Come on Baby. Light my fire!" Her father, not knowing what it really meant, tried it out on a woman at the Post Office. She slapped him and called him a dirty old man. Then, she found out the children had put him up to it, so she scolded them.

One morning while driving into work at Ultronix, Barbara was pulled over by a policeman for speeding. Knowing only a little English, Barbara said she did not know she was speeding because her "thermometer" might not be working right. After a little more discussion, the policeman started laughing. Barbara could not figure out why he would be laughing, but he told her he wanted her to take her car to the garage and have her "thermometer" fixed!

*Transcription and Summary by Gary Hines 01/25/2020*