

2017

VeizerVizerWiezerWieser: A Memoir and a Search: Granite City to Kompolt

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Recommended Citation

Gatto, Katherine, "VeizerVizerWiezerWieser: A Memoir and a Search: Granite City to Kompolt" (2017). *2017 Faculty Bibliography*. 30.
https://collected.jcu.edu/fac_bib_2017/30

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Veizer, John Keith. 2015. *VeizerVizerWiezerWieser: A Memoir and a Search: Granite City to Kompolt*. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace. 279 pp.

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The story of Hungarian immigration to the United States is multi-faceted in its periods and reasons, stretching from the great immigration of the 1890s to World War I, through the interwar period, the immigration of displaced persons or DPs after World War II, and ending with the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. In most cases, these immigration waves were the result of two of the three widely-known motives for immigration, namely, economic hardship and political persecution (the third motive or reason is religious persecution but that was not a cause for the Christian-Hungarian emigration to the U.S.). Keith Veizer's memoir delineates the story of his grandfather Joseph/József Veizer and many others like them, who in the early 1900s came either on their own or with their families from farming villages in northeast Hungary, in this case Kompolt, and who settled in the ethnic neighborhood of Lincoln Place (once called Hungarian Hollow) in Granite City, Illinois. Along with Bulgarians, Armenians, Mexicans and Macedonians, these immigrants worked in the foundries and established businesses while creating a community of shared work, common values, cultural activities and often inter-marriage as well.

The present memoir pays special homage to Veizer's father John/János (Yonchy/Jancsi), who worked for the Commonwealth Steel Company, and who taught his son valuable lessons of life through scouting, sports and fishing. Veizer's respect and love for his idealistic father is exemplified through many anecdotes he shares with the readers about his father's love of reading, nature, fishing, hunting, basketball and baseball. He sees his father as a survivor of the Great Depression, all the more so since he was clever or lucky enough to avoid debts and, with time, accumulate savings. John Veizer is also characterized as a loving family man, especially toward his mother Erzsébet, Keith's grandmother, who died at fifty-three, probably from undiagnosed diabetes.

In tracing why his grandfather Joseph Veizer left the village of Kompolt, Veizer references immigration researcher Juliana Puskás's study, *Ties That Bind, Ties That Divide – One Hundred Years of Hungarian Experience in the United States* (2000), to describe the early twentieth-century labor shortage in the U.S. This shortage was caused decades earlier by the deaths of many young men in the American Civil War of 1861-1865, and it later became a major pull factor for immigrants. The push factors were the conditions in the motherland, where usually

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the eldest son inherited the land and the younger sons had to fend for themselves by joining the army, or going into the trades, or working as farm laborers for low pay. After Veizer's grandparents settled in the Granite City Hungarian Hollow, they, like many immigrants, practically started to recreate the life they had left behind in Hungary. This involved the customs of the agricultural and church year and the foods associated with each such event.

Some of the customs that Veizer recalls are pig slaughter, the joy of making *sauerkraut* or *savanyu káposzta* (soured cabbage), *palacsinta* (Hungarian thin pancakes), *kalács* (holiday yeast bread made of white flour), and *dobos torta* (drum-shaped torte). Grape harvest festivals, Easter Monday sprinkling of young girls with perfumed water, and, at the same time, to no less extent, the Fourth of July American Independence Day, were all important occasions that marked the lives of Lincoln Place. Likewise, Veizer's father greatly enriched his son's knowledge of his family's German-Hungarian background by the many stories he told him about his own childhood adventures. Weizer's father also spoke to him about their Granite City Armenian neighbors, mostly survivors of the 1915 Armenian genocide, as well as about the family's Mexican neighbors, many of whom were refugees of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, and about the local Macedonian business owners. For a while the father served in the Civil Conservation Corps, founded by Franklin Delano Roosevelt to counteract the effects of the Great Depression; in addition, as a child he was an avid boy-scout and later a boy-scout leader. Another interest of Veizer's father was music, especially *cimbalom* (a chordophone instrument) and drum pieces. All these made him an open-minded, tolerant, interesting and lively man and father. Sadly, John Veizer died of heart failure in 1974, but he left this world with a radiant smile, thus passing to his son the message that his life, despite its hardships and challenges, was worth living.

In the summer of 2003, almost three decades after the death of his father in Granite City, Illinois, Keith Veizer traveled to Hungary, visiting the usual tourist attractions in Budapest, and then he rode to Eger, some thirty kilometers north of Kompolt. In Kompolt Veizer meets with his distant cousin Elemér Vizer and his family. He also learns about the fate of thousands of Hungarians of German descent whom the Soviets deported, near or after the end of World War II, to Ukraine and elsewhere in the Soviet Union, where they became forced laborers in menial jobs and many of them perished; a plaque on the side of the Kompolt Catholic Church lists the names of seventy-one Kompolt men deported and killed in the Soviet Union, including eight men of the extended Vizer family, and four Vizers are also memorialized on a monument in front of the church. Many others with German roots in Hungary were deprived of their houses and property and were forced to resettle in East Germany. Some of these people managed to return to Hungary, sickly and - in figurative Hungarian - *csupa csont és bőr* ['all bone and skin'], and many never recovered their health and died not long after returning home; others survived and remained in Hungary but suffered from physical and/or mental problems for the rest of their lives.

Veizer recounts in his memoir how another relative, Daniel Vizer, told him all about their family in Kompolt throughout the ages. Apparently the land around Kompolt was devastated by the Turks, and eighty families of Catholic peasants, three of them named Wieser, of Alsace, in southern Germany, were invited by the land owner Lord Antal Grasslkovich to resettle the place. Within the context of this story about his ancestors' immigration to Hungary, Veizer reflects on the evolution of the spelling of his family name, as shown in the very title of his memoir. The name's original German spelling was Wieser, but later it was changed into Vizer and other

variations, some of which presently appear on the gravestones of the family's late members, including Veizer and Wiezer.

In late 2013 Veizer once again returned to Kompolt, and this time he also visited other places, like Heves and Kapolna. In August 2014 Veizer returned to Hungary for the third time, this time to study Hungarian at the Budapest Balassi Institute. Visiting Eger he made friends with Péter Várkonyi, a Károly Esterházy College researcher of the history of Kompolt, who had just found in Eger some documents relating to Granite City, and thus Veizer learned some more about how the Kompolt and the Granite City Vizers are related. Finally, Veizer ends his book with an appendix of short stories inspired by his father or by the Lincoln Place neighborhood of Granite City. Most of these narratives were initially published in magazines and journals, and of them, "*Jijos*" is especially entertaining in how it recreates a popular game as well as the unique language used by the town's people.

In summary, Veizer's memoir captures the everyday-life of Hungarian families from Kompolt, Hungary, who populated Granite City, Illinois, since the early twentieth century and still live there nowadays. It is a remarkable and complicated journey with many surprises. In his book, Veizer brings to life the stories of his family members, about their arrival in America, their jobs, their workplace accidents and illnesses, their social life, their pastimes, their food, their decency and morals, their tolerance of other races and nationalities, their oral history, and the continuing relationship that many of them still retain with people of their old-country village of origin, Kompolt. As the title of the memoir with its many names suggests, it is sometimes a challenge to digest the names and roles of all the characters in this immigrant saga, for this is in fact a personalized history, a slice of life of the great immigration. Yet, of all of them, the figure of the author's father looms as the most impressive and memorable. Finally, I would like to suggest a solution to one of the linguistic conundrums that Keith Veizer poses in his book, saying that he cannot find in his dictionary the Hungarian word (*kis*)*begrő* (lit. 'little jug' and here referring to his grandfather Joseph's nickname). May I respectfully suggest that he look up, instead, the word *bögre* in his dictionary and thus solve at least one of the many riddles and open questions of his life and memoir.