



Julia Arkos's story of

Julia



My mother was born Julia Veronica Szappanos in Szarvas, Hungary on June 16, 1933. Her mother, Margit (Lazar) Szappanos and father Janos Szappanos were performers with a dance act that toured Europe under the name "Rita and Ray".

Janos was also a circus performer and developed a blindfolded knife - throwing act with Margit. Shortly after my mother's birth, due to the busy traveling schedule her parents had, they moved to Szeged, Hungary to live with her grandparents, Janos Lazar and Juliana (Karolyi) Lazar. Her grandparents had a small farm with an attached bakery, and her grandfather Janos was a master baker. My mother's grandparents raised her and her parents dropped in from time to time as their touring schedule allowed (she was always thrilled to spend time with her dad, who did dote on her, but she described her mother as "distant"). My mother had a happy childhood helping with chores on the farm (loved the animals especially) and described herself as a tomboy, climbing trees and getting into fistfights with the local boys.

In 1943 her father Janos was conscripted to fight in the war and sent to the Russian front. Margit continued to dance solo, and they all waited for letters from Janos, which rarely came. After the war Janos did not return (there was severe bombing where he was stationed) and the army pronounced that he had died in combat but they could not produce a body. During this time Margit sustained an injury that prevented her from dancing and married a man named Mishka Tezsla.

In 1949 my mother was pressured by Margit to try out for the Budapest Theatre Academy's Ballet department. It was at the Budapest Theatre Academy that my mother (16) met my father Gyula (Julius) Arkos (17). My mother thought he was a pompous actor but my father's friends convinced him (as a joke) that her outward disdain for him masked her passion, so my father wooed my mother and eventually won her over. Margit would not give them permission to marry and insisted that my mother take a scholarship to the Vagonova School in (then) Leningrad, separating my parents (Margit wanted my mother to marry the wealthy Pepper farmer's son who lived down the street in Szeged). When she returned from her studies (she 18, my father 19) they married and had their first child, Julius Jr. in 1954. A few months prior to Julius' arrival, Margit and Mishka had a child, Gelert, my mother's half brother (and my brother's same - aged uncle!).

They stayed in Budapest for a while (she danced and choreographed and my father worked in film, TV and Radio) but eventually she took a position as Prima Ballerina and Artistic Director for the Szeged National Theatre. During this time word came that her father Janos had not be killed during the war; he had sustained a head injury which left him with amnesia and he was alive and well in Germany with a successful knife throwing act with his new wife under the name Circus Zero". Janos regained his memory and was reunited with my mother in 1962 when his circus act came through Hungary. During this visit Janos convinced my parents to create a dance act so that they could tour with him and escape Hungary. Janos had set up touring dates for them but they were considered a "flight risk" and not issued a visa to leave the country with my brother. In 1964, my parents seeing no future for their child under the communist regime fled the country with a few small suitcases. They obtained asylum in Vienna where they were put up in a prison for 3 days and a refugee camp for 6 months while the Austrian government decided the best place to send them to start a new life. It was between Australia and Canada. My parents only asked to be sent somewhere warm.

In May of 1966 my family arrived in Winnipeg, Manitoba in the middle of a snowstorm. Winnipeg was decided upon since it had MTC and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. My parents took jobs as dishwashers at the International Inn at the start, and then my mother worked at a bio lab for a while. In 1968 she gave birth

to a son, Gregory, after which she suffered a few miscarriages before again giving birth to a daughter in 1970, Julia Jr. (me!). She continued to teach dance where she could, and choreographed for many small dance companies. In 1978 she was hired to teach ballet and character dance in the professional division of the RWB. She also “moonlighted” for the Manitoba Opera, choreographing many of the dance numbers for the opera’s they produced throughout the 80’s. Ballet continued to be her life for the next 22 years until the need for hip-replacement surgery brought about her retirement. She had a profound effect on the careers of many young dancers including Evelyn Hart and Andre Lewis (the current Artistic Director of the RWB). Even after her retirement, much to my father’s chagrin, she would sneak in to work to help teachers with their classes or to coach a young dancer.

At the end of November in 2000, during one of my bi - weekly phone calls home, my mother told me she had the flu. The flu turned into Pneumonia and when the antibiotics weren’ t helping she went for further tests. On December 20th an oncology specialist confirmed that she had a “serious lung cancer”. She was told that she would be placed on a treatment regime and to wait for a call from Cancer Care Manitoba. The call never came. February 5th, 2001 she was admitted to emergency and started on radiation on February 7th. I caught a plane to be by her side on February 9th. The next day my father and I were called in early to meet with her attending physician because she had a rough night and we were told she had three days left. I spent day and night by her side, barely sleeping, but unlike the movies there were no epiphanies or grand statements from her. Every now and again she would squeeze my hand, do a funny little dance with her fingers (called the “fancy dance”) or stroke my face. When we were alone she asked a few things of me: make sure she felt no pain, and ensure her remains were cremated and spread “in the mountains, in the wind”. On February 12th, 2001 she passed away surrounded by her family.

I am like my mother in so many ways (particularly in my dramatic reactions to mundane situations) but I’ m no longer horrified by that realization. She was an amazingly strong, beautifully goofy, and truly kind - hearted person. I would count myself lucky to have inherited half the grace, strength and beauty she possessed.