

# LIFE WITH COACH POP

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ÉDITIONS QUADYLLE

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In Spring 2019, while cleaning  
out the garage, my father stumbled  
upon my journal and writings  
from when we first immigrated to  
the United States. He transcribed  
all the pages he found, made his  
own remarks in the margins,  
and sent them on to me.

I took the novella I wrote in  
honor of my first school in Texas  
and used it as a backbone to  
build upon. And then, I looked  
back, as an adult, at the little girl  
I had once been.







“ITTHON VERSE”

*Arany János*

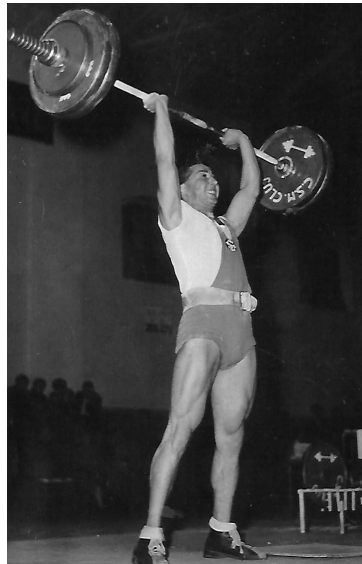
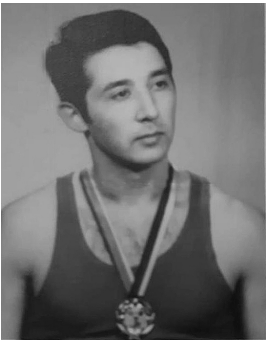
Mint a madár a fészkére,  
Szomju vándor hűvös érre,  
Mint a gyermek anyaölbe:  
Vágyom én e nyájas körbe.

Itt, enyelgő kis családom  
Közt, van az én jó világom;  
Künn borong bár a magasban:  
Itt örökké csillagos van.

MY MOTHER



## MY FATHER



## AND ME

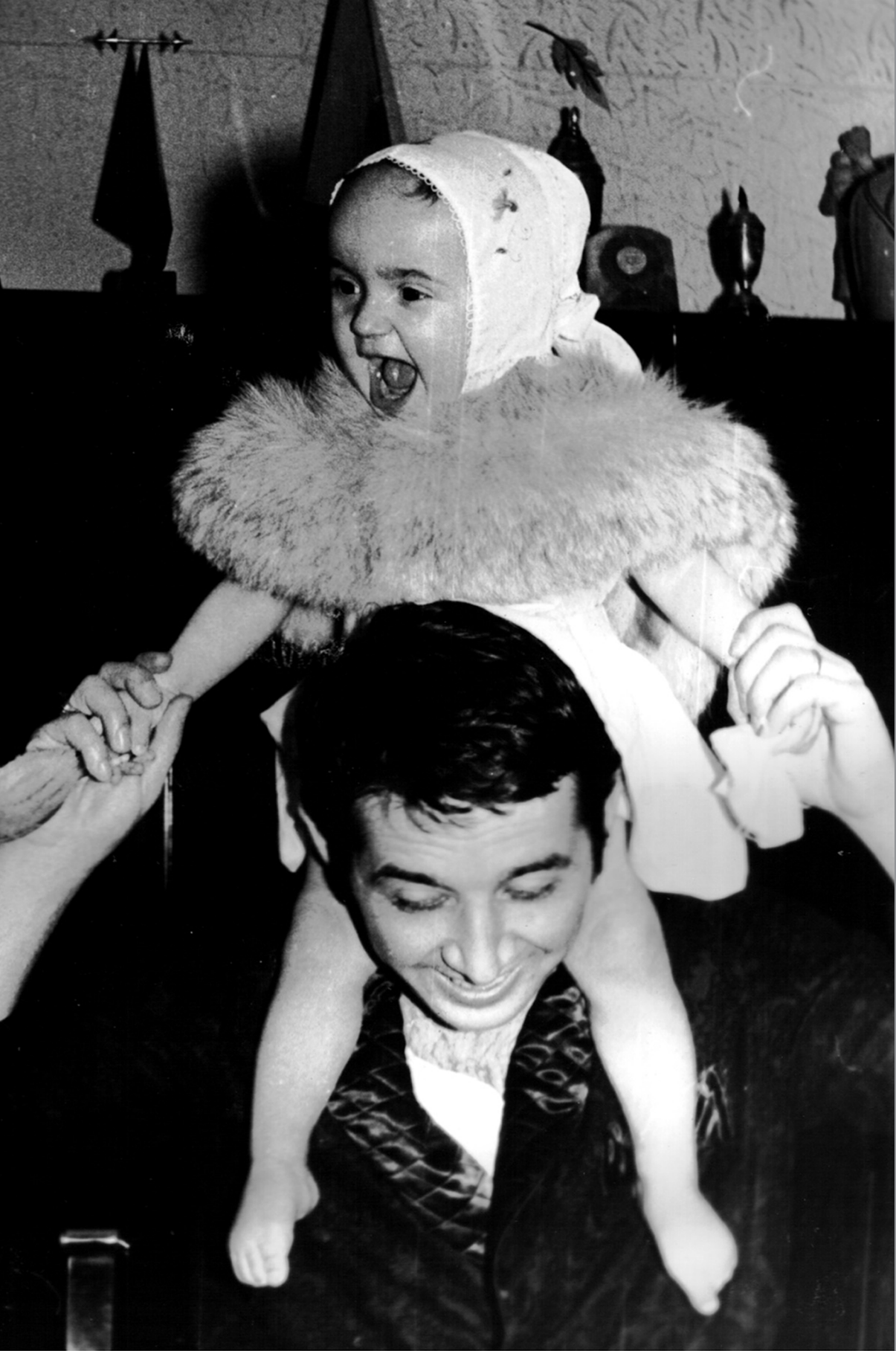


The persons and events  
depicted in this book  
are based on my personal  
memories and dreams.

This is history,  
as I remember it.







**M**y father has always been my hero.  
As a little girl, I knew I had the best dad in the world.  
He could heal any ailment – whether physical or psychological. He could make anything fun. He was always there. And, he had superhuman powers.

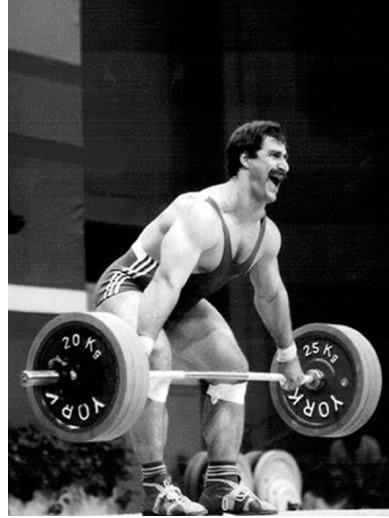
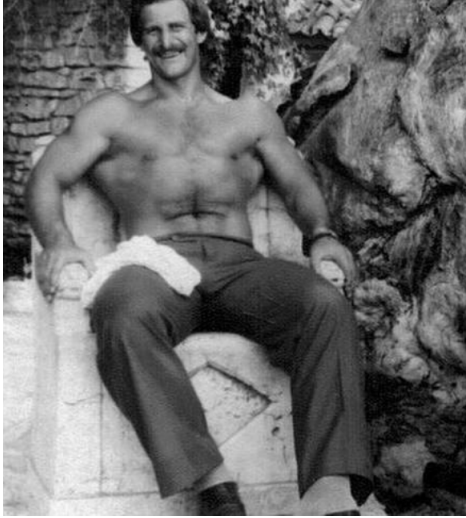
But, as little girls grow up, heroes become human. And when I was ten, my father fled from the country I had grown up in, leaving my mother and me behind. He had his reasons. He was not invincible, after all.

My father defected, and with that, he uprooted our family tree, severing all ties. He took with him only the three seeds of our nuclear family, which he hoped would sprout and flourish. The wind carried us to Texas and then Kansas, where my parents settled down. But I flew on, never sure where the soil would best suit me, or where the rain and sunshine would let me grow.

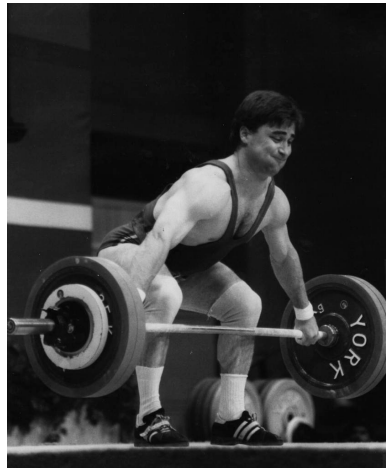
With my own set of seeds in hand, I have replanted in Germany. But I am not a sapling anymore, and I yearn for deep roots that allow me to stand tall. I yearn to reconnect with my ancestors. I yearn to finally feel at home.

So, I have decided to dream – of a majestic tree that could grow tall into the sky, with a set of roots in Transylvania, another in the US, and two more in France and Germany. Thus anchored at four points, the tree could withstand the winds that try to sway it, and, shifting its center of gravity at will, it could always remember, and still grow.

This book is my innocence revisited in a dialogue with the man and the hero who is my father.



*István Tasnádi — “Tasi” — weightlifting silver medalist at the 1984 Olympics*



*Dragomir Cioroslan — weightlifting bronze medalist at the 1984 Olympics*



## COMMENTARY

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My father is István “Steve” Javorek, known to his athletes as Coach Pop. He was born in a small town called Székelyhíd. He comes from a long line of proud Hungarians, even though the name Javorek would point more towards Czech descent. In fact, my father’s ancestors in the early 1800s were born in what is today the Czech Republic. But, if you ask my father, he will tell you that his last name comes from the Hungarian, “jávorfá,” which is maple tree in English. Growing up, my father was a skinny kid, who played the violin, was afraid of the doctor, and couldn’t be left alone in the dark. He ended up becoming a weightlifter and a coach.

My mother’s family comes from Kibéd, a village in an area called Székelyföld, situated in the Carpathian Basin. My mother feels more Székely than Hungarian, but I never quite understood the difference. The Székely, or Seklers in English, have a particular accent and wear traditional garb. They are known for being earnest, hardheaded, and spirited. My mother grew up in Kolozsvár (known as Cluj in Romanian or Klausenburg in German), one of the major cities in the area called Erdély, or Transylvania.

I was born and raised in Kolozsvár. I am my parents’ only child and grew up under, what I would call, idyllic circumstances. My childhood was filled with singing and laughter, with long hikes and playing outside. I was surrounded by people who loved me. My parents had interesting friends, and our house was always full. I had nice clothes to wear and good food to

eat. I did lots of sports and always loved the theater. I spent school holidays in the mountains or at the Black Sea with the giants my father trained. I loved school and my friends and family.

When I was 8 years old, my father told me that he might need to leave the country due to political problems. He didn't leave for another two years, considering me still too young to deal with such a situation. But, noticing more political pressure on him, and seeing more of his traveling privileges restricted, he did make the big leap when I was 10. He defected to West Germany and applied for political asylum in the USA.

It wasn't until my father's defection that I became aware of politics. It's not that I was blind to it before. It's just that it didn't matter to me as a child. Sure, at times, I had to stand in line for food, but it was just something I did with my grandfather or my girlfriends. Sure, the buses were sometimes so full that we dangled from the doors, with only one foot on one of the stairs, but every ride seemed like an adventure. And yes, on New Year's Eve, my parents and their friends sang the Transylvanian Anthem in whispers and cried. And yes, geography class was confusing, since the maps they showed me in school looked different from the ones I saw at home. But, there were no real conflicts in my life. We were living in Romania, but I knew we were Hungarian. I went to a Hungarian school, and most of our public life was in Hungarian. But we had both Hungarian and Romanian friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. And everybody got along, as far as I could tell.

As a child, I didn't pick up on what freedom of speech or religion entailed, or on how these were nonexistent in Romania at the time. I didn't feel the weight of the problems the country was facing when it came to transportation, food

supply, or basic needs for clean water, gas and electricity. I did not pick up on tensions between Hungarians and Romanians. I did not know that my father could have been put in jail, or that his life might have been in danger.

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My father went to college and was friends with great athletes and coaches. One of them was Béla Károlyi, the gymnastics coach who trained the Olympic winners, Nadia Comăneci and later Mary Lou Retton and Julianne McNamara. Béla Károlyi defected in 1981. My father defected to Germany in 1982 and was granted political asylum and a green card to the US eighteen months later. While struggling to make a go of it in the US, my father first worked for his old friend, at Béla Károlyi's gym in Texas.

In Romania, my father was a big deal. He coached weightlifters. This meant that he had access to extra food rations and that he was allowed to travel abroad. He loved his athletes, and they loved him back. Everywhere we went, people knew him. He was funny, and loud, and friends with everybody. He recruited young talent as well, so kids flocked around him, in hopes of being discovered.

I grew up in the gym, among weights and stinky men. My father took me everywhere with him, and where my father went, along came the giants, my personal body guards and entertainers. I remember being used as weights, or being thrown in the water by the giants. My favorite giant was Tasi. He was huge, and strong, but very kind and gentle. His full name was István Tasnádi, and he won the silver medal at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, California. Tasi passed away in 2018, at the age of 65.

While in Romania, my father also coached Dragomir Cioroslan, who was a bronze medalist at the 1984 Olympics. After his defection, my father was the National Olympic Weightlifting coach to South Korea. Once in the US, he specialized in coaching strength and conditioning for all sports. He coached at Texas A&M University and finally, he became the head strength and conditioning coach at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas.

He designed the conditioning programs for world famous athletes like Randy Barnes (shot put – silver medal at 1988 Olympics and gold medal at 1996 Olympics), Floyd Heard (200m sprint – world fastest in 1986), Sumya Anani (world champion female boxer), and the professional basketball players, Wayne Simien and Kareem Rush.<sup>1</sup>

To me, my father was my father. He was also my hero, because he made me laugh and because he spent time with me. When he defected, all I cared about was having him back in my life.

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My mother and I were separated from my father for two and a half years. When we were finally allowed to join him in Texas, my parents really struggled to make ends meet. Only my father was working. My mother was sad and homesick. I needed to learn English.

Despite the extra financial strain that this put on them, my parents sent me to a private school, making my education their first priority. I went to St. Michael's Academy, a very small Episcopal private school. To this day, I am grateful for the start I had through St. Michael's. I am particularly thankful to Ms. Matthews, Mrs. Nordstrom, and Mrs. Hazlett for the time and energy they put into helping me my first year

in the US. It is with humility and great admiration that I remember Mr. and Mrs. Spencer, the school's Headmaster and Headmistress at the time, and I thank them for the tenderness, understanding, and humanity with which they treated me and my family.

At St. Michael's Academy, I became a Texan and an American.

Seven months after coming to the US, I wrote a novella in honor of St. Michael's Academy and the celebration of the school's 14th anniversary. My first American friend, Deborah, helped me edit my text.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have included a list of my father's best known athletes at the end of the book.

<sup>2</sup> At the back of the book you can find a few scans of the unedited original document, along with comments written in the margins by some of my teachers.