

The Life Testimony of Kati Vigh-Brisebois

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Kati Vigh-Brisebois with her husband, Michael, and son, Emerick

A Road Less Traveled: From Communist Romania to the Land of Liberty

As a child growing up in Romania under communist rule, Kati Vigh-Brisebois could never have imagined in her wildest dreams that she would someday be a citizen of the U.S. Originally from the famed area of Transylvania, Kati was born and raised in Romania, but her ancestors hailed from Hungary and her native language was Hungarian. Her parents divorced when she was only five, leaving her mother to raise her and her older brother. As a child, she clearly remembers the impact of communist policies on everyday life; empty shelves in the grocery stores, bribing butchers at the market for meat, and sitting in regimented classrooms, hands behind her back, receiving indoctrination in the ways of the party.

Her pathway to freedom was long and convoluted. While she was sixteen and still in high school, Kati began to play basketball. By this time her brother, Vigu, was already a nationally known soccer star and had many opportunities to travel to other countries, playing professionally. As basketball players go, Kati was not tall, but she was extremely quick and aggressive. Her coach noticed her abilities and told her if she persevered she could become a great player. It soon became clear to Kati that being an accomplished basketball player would open doors to traveling around Eastern Europe and she jumped at the chance to see more of the world.

After high school, Vigh enrolled in the National Academy for Physical Education and Sports in Bucharest, Romania where she pursued her undergraduate degree. The Academy is well known for graduating such talented athletes as gymnast Nadia Comaneci.

Recalling her participation on a state run basketball team, Vigh acknowledges, "In our system of government, we were elite athletes, and this resulted in some privileges. The whole country under communist rule suffered from food shortages; people's energy was spent just looking for food." Traveling abroad to France, Italy, and Germany she experienced first-hand what a developed country looked like. "I had a strong feeling that I wanted to escape from the environment of my home country; my internal unhappiness began to grow despite my privileges."

"In 1971 I was playing on the national champion team and we were invited to a basketball tournament in China which was still under [Chairman Mao](#)'s control. For three weeks we got a view of the "future" of our county. My country was poor – people struggled to make a living. But in China it seemed even worse; there were no reading materials only Mao's little Red Book existed. They were supposedly building the new utopian society, but they had even less than we did! While we were touring China I would try to smile at someone and just get a dead look in return. One evening I took a walk and everything seemed so GRAY – the buildings, the streets – even people looking out the windows of their state apartments with the poor lighting – they looked gray, too."

Kati admits, "Internally I felt this big push to find some answers for my life. What direction was humanity going? I was seeking for meaning in my life, trying to answer the big existential questions." But how could she escape, without telling anyone? Fortunately, a team mate, Kinga, had similar feelings. Another basketball tournament was coming up, this time in Italy. Kinga told Kati she had plans to defect. To Vigh's surprise out of her mouth came the words, "Me, too!" It was an epiphany. "I had two weeks to prepare to become a refugee. We took empty suitcases to Italy with the intention of filling them with what we might need; we had so little." While in Rome, Kinga pretended to be ill while Kati planned her escape from a team tour of Rome. The plan was to rendezvous with her friend at the [Roma Termini train station](#), but they had no clear meeting point or an escape plan; it was a miracle that they found each other at the bustling train station.

"I pretended to go with the team, but when we were close to the Roma Termini I slipped away. I ran all the way to the train station; I was terrified – how could I just run off like that? But I did. And I couldn't stop thinking about my family because the government usually punishes family members who are left behind. I was only 25. I left with only the clothes on my back; between the two of us we had about \$100, and we could not speak a word of Italian."

A sympathetic Italian man came to the two women's aid and found them a hotel on the outskirts of Rome. "The next day we went to the Canadian embassy; Kinga's boyfriend had escaped to Canada during the Montreal Olympics and she planned to join him. We asked for political asylum at the Embassy." While waiting for their paperwork to be processed they both stayed in a Catholic refugee center; the agency paid for their stay. Kati then went to live with an elderly couple for two years while her friend went on to Canada.

She learned Italian and considered staying in Italy. "It was the first time I had experienced freedom. I began to visit the local churches and to ask questions about God. I am naturally intuitive – people who believe in something always seemed happy. In Romania, we were prohibited from going to church – religion was the opiate of the masses. For the first time in my life I could begin to explore questions about God and spirituality."

But soon her plans changed. Kati states, "I started to feel I was being called to the United States, not Canada. I don't know what inspired me, but I went to U.S. Embassy and was told I could have a visa in three months. I was 26, young, fit and athletic and spoke Italian almost fluently; it was no problem to get a visa. I was quite happy in Rome enjoying the sun, the romantic songs – but where was the beautiful love I was always hearing about in the music? I knew there had to be something more." Three months passed quickly. "I packed a small bag and I was off to NYC. From there I traveled to Mobile, Alabama where I was sponsored by a local family. It was 110 degrees and incredibly humid; the family was lovely, but I couldn't speak a word of English. I was crying all night."

Her sponsoring family helped her connect to a local university where despite her poor English she was able to be hired as an assistant coach for volleyball. She learned English and how to drive and soon after met a fellow Hungarian who was a tennis coach; he invited her to live with his family in NYC. This was a huge turning point for Kati. "I celebrated my first Thanksgiving on Long Island with Lazlo (the coach,) and his family. We were all thankful to God to be in United States and experiencing freedom."

She worked briefly at both a perfume lab and a nanny agency in Manhattan while living in Queens. Doubts began to plague her. "I was experiencing life in a new way, but I had to ask myself, 'What am I doing here?' My purpose was unclear, and my family was missing me." On a visit to the immigration office where she was applying for American citizenship she met Krystof "Chris" Hempowicz. He invited her to a Unification Church center in Manhattan for a meal followed by a presentation of Unification Principles. It wasn't long after that she became a member of the church.

She participated in church fundraising activities for about two years and then the opportunity to enroll at UTS arose. As Kati recalls, "My religious education was below zero. I really was like a blank page – an empty book. One professor who had a big impact on my seminary experience was Dr. Josef Hausner. I really connected with him – he was like a grandpa. He was also from Romania and as a Jew he had been in prison camps in WWII. While studying with him I remember clearly his teaching that everything is about interpretation. Hausner often spoke about famed Rabbi Hillel and his belief that God's truth is in all of us; we differ in our faiths because of interpretation. The oneness of God is so powerful; we need to find the commonality beyond Judaism, Christianity and Islam – beyond all faith traditions."

Kati also remembers [Dr. Joseph McMahon](#). "He was a great instructor both intellectually and academically. But beyond that I found him to be a very caring person. Years after I graduated whenever I would see him I found him to be a caring human being – far beyond just the classroom setting."

"While at UTS I made life-long friends; Chris Hempowicz enrolled at UTS at the same time that I did and I became close to his wife Christine as well. There were many other students that I befriended - Christine

Edwards comes to mind. I am still in touch with so many classmates and when we can, we visit each other. Although we are scattered around the country, we still follow each other's lives and keep in touch on social media."

Kati graduated UTS in 1984. Soon after, she was able to visit her home in Romania for the first time in over ten years. "I was very worried about getting in and out of the country; even though by then I had my American citizenship. I didn't know what would happen if I returned to Romania. I might risk going to jail for four years." Her visit was during the era of [Nicolae Ceausescu](#) who ruled Romania with an iron fist for 25 years driving Romania deeper into food shortages and poverty. Kati recalls traveling in Romania, "People were so desperate they were stealing light bulbs from trains – so the trains were often dark."

Fortunately, Kati was not detained and returned to her adopted country with a sense of relief – and obligation. "I came back and could not stop thinking about my past experiences. Being in Romania renewed my memory of how miserable life was under communism. I clearly understood the dangers of communism and felt strongly that I had to educate religious leaders in the USA. Of course, it is important to accept people where they are, and I found myself using much of what I had learned at UTS in my outreach. I looked for different approaches where I could utilize some of Rev. Moon's teachings to bring a unique insight to my ministry outreach. I don't feel it is necessary to convert people, but it is critical to share a new perspective. You also have to model what you are teaching; I have to start with myself, my family and extend outwards to connect with Godly people."

Back in 1982 Kati had married a French Canadian, Michael Brisebois. Her husband had immigration issues which forced the couple to move to Ontario, Canada where Kati became the chairwoman for the WFWP ([Women's Federation for World Peace](#)). At this point, Kati's focus shifted from ministerial outreach to connecting with a diverse community of women to support women's roles in healing families and (eventually) nations, around the world.

An initiative of the WFWP is the "[bridge of peace ceremony](#)" in which women from two countries with a history of conflict would meet half way across a small bridge erected on stage in an act of symbolic reconciliation. According to Kati, "The ceremony may be symbolic, but in life it is often the role of women to reach out to heal wounds and resolve negative feelings between conflict countries. The purpose of the bridge ceremony is to symbolically acknowledge failures from the past. Women in the ceremony usually make a commitment on a one-to-one basis to heal the past injuries." Kati has since moved to Vancouver, Canada where she continues a role with WFWP as local chairperson.

Kati has never forgotten her origins and the high price she has paid to be an American citizen. And she always remembers the people of Romania. One project of which she is most proud was the creation of the [Sunshine Farm](#) which began in 1998 and continues to the present day. "With support and donations from WFWP, [UNICEF in Romania](#) and UTS alumni as well as personal friends, Kati, her husband, Mike, and son, Emerick, traveled to her home village of [Simian](#) to create a model home for orphans. They purchased land including a small house (a house which had belonged to the Vigh family) which was then donated to the project. They created education programs for over a 100 orphans ages 14-18. "We were there to plant the mustard seed, to bring hope to those who had very little. It was important to me that they should know people in other countries cared about them; that they were not forgotten."

According to the vision statement of the Sunshine Farm the program's purpose is "To help alleviate the suffering of orphans who face the challenge of living without the love and guidance of their own parents, and to bridge the historical animosity between Hungarian, Romanian and Roma people." Under the Communist regime, the orphanages of Romania were notorious world-wide for the appalling neglect of their orphans; for so many children, the Sunshine Farm was quite literally a breath of fresh air.

The village where the project was founded has a population of about 2,000 people. Everyone in the community was involved in this project. "We would travel to Romania every year and stay for several months to develop relationships with local NGOs. I was visiting many churches in the year 2000 – Catholic and Lutheran churches. They knew I was a Unificationist, and yet they supported me; they could see our action establishing this program."

"All these kids were in state orphanages – they came to the farm for an educational retreat. We would run the program in the summer and the kids would stay overnight in tents – we would all be camping out." Along with fellow UTS alumni Chris and Christine, the orphans were taught life skills: animal husbandry, working on a small farm growing corn, peas, potatoes – observing plants as they grew and then harvesting. Kati was involved in giving presentations as well as organizing outdoor activities. "Many of these orphans came from cities so being in nature was a healing experience for them. We had nature walks and played a lot of sports; the kids had so much energy. I loved it!" says Kati with enthusiasm.

One orphan who was involved with the program later married, and he and his family now live in the home on the farm and help orphans integrate into rural society. Kati continues to visit every couple of years and her family in Romania monitor the farm, in her absence.

"One beautiful thing about this whole effort was that I met [Lazlo Tokes](#), the pastor of the Hungarian Reformed church. He single-handedly inspired a spiritual movement that became a counter revolution in Romania and resulted in communism being undermined. As a result of his leadership, many positive reforms occurred."

Despite all of the challenges life has thrown at her – or perhaps, because of them, Kati continues to be optimistic about the future, but not without a caveat. "Since I was a child I have been very tuned into propaganda from living in a communist country. I feel many people in the United States and Canada are naïve about many things – including the end result of divisive politics. They often don't study history very deeply, it is, "Just let me google that" – everyone is busy. Many people are saying negative things about the United States, but why does everyone want to come here? We are so free here in America. Sometimes we need to get beyond a 'dog-eat-dog' attitude."

Kati adds, "I can see the dangers of where the U.S. may be heading - and there follows the world. A saying goes that if the U.S. catches a cold everyone is sneezing. I tell people that the U.S. is a champion blessed by God to uphold freedom. Coming from where I do – the freedom to practice your religion is precious. If the United States doesn't stand for freedom, no one does."

Her advice for current UTS students is simple. "If you are currently a student at UTS, I would encourage you to go beyond your academic studies. Develop life-long friendships that nurture your divine nature and sense of belonging. We are all part of a chain – everyone is a link; I am important, you are important. We need to find our Godly value so that the next generation can have more hope. You can't just think of your own well-being – you need to pass on your hard-won wisdom. Years ago no one would have imagined the fall of Communism, but it happened. And the human spirit can rise from the ashes like a phoenix. With God's blessing we can do it faster – without it, I believe it will be more difficult. Which way will we take history? It is really up to us."

Kati Vigh-Brisebois currently lives in Vancouver, Canada with her husband, Michael. When not involved in community outreach she enjoys playing tennis and taking long walks along the riverside near an old fishing village. They have a son, Emerick, named after the first Christian king of Hungary.