

*Remarks by Vera Blinken
Friday, the 9th of December, 2005
Upon receiving
The Middle Cross of the Republic of Hungary*

Gábor, thank you for your hospitality and András, thank you for coming up from Washington.

Please allow me just a little bit of personal history in order to put “PRIMAVERA” into context.

First of all, I am lucky to be here. In fact I am lucky just to be. My Mother often told me that she had to convince my Father to have a child because my Father said that there was a war going on and it was not a good time to bring a person into the world. Fortunately for me, Mother prevailed.

And indeed—there was a war going on.

On December 24, 1944, Mother and I were getting ready to go over from Pest to the Buda side of the Danube for Christmas Eve dinner at my aunt’s house. We were to meet my Father there. I wanted to wear a certain dress for this occasion, but for some reason it wasn’t ready on time and, as a result, our crossing of the Danube was delayed. So—we were not on the bridge when it was blown up by the retreating German army.

From then on, during the siege of Budapest, we spent most of our time in a shelter. Whenever there was an air raid signal, we had to go down to the basement air raid shelter and take our assigned seats. On one such occasion, in early January 1945, as we were going down to the shelter, I told my Mother that I did not want to sit in our assigned seats. I was a little child, frightened and possibly bored as well. So a couple changed places with us. Instead of sitting along the wall as usual, Mother and I sat on one of the benches in the middle of the room. A bomb fell on the building next door—and the wall caved in, instantly killing everyone sitting along the wall. And what I didn’t know, but what every adult was keenly aware of, was that the

building behind us was a German ammunition depot. If the fire raging next to us were to spread to that building, the whole block would be blown up. Well, it was January, it started to snow and the fire was put out.

We were liberated by the Russians in February 1945. For a long time, it was politically incorrect to say “liberated” because of what followed. But then, we felt truly liberated. We were able to come out from the shelters and see daylight.

In 1946, my wise Mother saw the handwriting on the wall and said to my father, “We must leave; we must take our child out of here”. My Father said, “No, this will be temporary”. And indeed, it was temporary, 45 years temporary.

My Father died of cancer at age 44 in 1948. Mother took that as a sign that she was right, and that she had to take her child out of Soviet occupied Hungary. Why else would a young man of 44 have to die? It took her two years to smuggle us out. It is much too long and complicated a story to tell here, but an interesting one.

We escaped in April 1950 with the hope of coming to the United States. Interestingly enough, the hard part then was not coming to the U.S. but leaving Hungary. It was the height of the harsh Stalin era, and it was next to impossible to leave Hungary. Consequently, the Hungarian quota (there were quotas till 1954) was quite empty so we arrived in the United States in August 1950.

1956 – The Hungarian Uprising

I was here in New York. Comfortable, safe and living in freedom while my contemporaries were throwing Molotov cocktails at the advancing Soviet tanks with their bare hands. Ever since then, I have wondered—“why was I saved?” “Is there a REASON, is there a PURPOSE why I am here while so many others perished?”

And now—I would like to fast-forward to 1993.

Donald is named Ambassador to Hungary by President Clinton. So I thought to myself “This is it. This is the reason I was saved. To take my brilliant, investment banker husband back to Hungary to help this new

democracy in its transition from a command economy to a market economy”. Maybe.

And now to PRIMAVERA.

After we settled in to our new life in Hungary, I found that I wasn't meeting as many Hungarian women as I would have liked to. So I founded a women's group and we called ourselves PRIMAVERA because it was spring, it's about rebirth, and it also includes my name. We were about 200 really great, bright, accomplished women, all of them doers, mostly career women. We met four times a year at the Residence for what we called 'networking' and we did network. There were a lot of good contacts made and friendships formed and we were having a very good time. Then, after a while we decided to do a project together. There were a number of options but we finally realized that where we could make the most difference was in health care and, specifically, women's health. So we planned to launch an awareness campaign about breast cancer and the importance of early detection. There is no known way to prevent breast cancer; the only way to save lives is by early detection. We were all very excited about the project but the doctors in our group warned us that this might be a problem. The reason was that we were going to create a demand that couldn't be met. At this time in Hungary, the only way a woman could have a mammogram, outside of Budapest in small towns and villages, was with a doctor's prescription when there was something wrong, and by that time it was usually late. So I thought, all right, if they can't come to us, we will go to them. And this was the birth of the PRIMAVERA MOBILE MAMMOGRAPHY PROGRAM. It was the first mobile program in Hungary and in the region, of any kind. And—I'm very proud that we raised all the funds in Hungary. We raised funds from Hungarian corporations and multi-nationals, and we received a grant from the Soros Foundation to cover the first year's operating costs. We started our screening on May 1, 1999 in Szekesfehervar. And I am happy to report that as of last month, we have screened 75,400 women.

And now comes the best part. Based on the success of PRIMAVERA, the Hungarian Ministry of Health has designated 43 centers throughout Hungary in small towns and villages, in formerly underserved areas, where every woman between the ages of 45 and 65 can get a bi-annual mammogram. In other words, no prescription necessary, it is just a routine check-up for early

detection. This national program was launched on January 1, 2001 about a year and a half after PRIMAVERA got started.

So again, I wondered, “Was this the purpose for which my life was saved.....so I could help to save the lives of others”? Perhaps.

On behalf of my colleagues and associates in Hungary, thank you for this great honor. Thank you all very much for coming.