

## The Rubber Mallet

by George Halasz

I was really eager to purchase my first rubber mallet. The Eagle mallet and I met on the sunny afternoon, Tuesday, 14th August. As soon as I lifted that Eagle, 32oz., perfectly balanced, I felt a rush of exhilaration, I felt unusually empowered. As the 32oz. rubber mallet and I left Bunnings, heading to my car, I felt we had the potential for a special relationships.

I realized that this was a strange, odd feeling, as if it was more than just a mallet, more than just retail therapy of an amateur handyman. More than a new chapter in my ongoing self-therapy. Behind this moment was the potential for a middle-aged man's second chance, to finish the unfinished business of adolescence.

This was not the familiar story of "coming of age." This story had a different bang.

My father, z"l, was a gentle soul. His philosophy on life was shaped during the Holocaust. He survived by hiding in a cellar during the Hungarian winter of 1944. He hid from the Germans and Hungarians, unsure when he heard the boots of soldiers above his cellar whether they would become his murderers or rescuers. As it turned out, they were the liberating Russian army.

Laci survived by hiding. That life-or-death, hide and seek phase of his life shaped further an already shy and introverted nature. Later in life, he often repeated the importance of "cooperation," and I wondered if that was his key to survival. I can not recall one instance of him being involved in an argument—not with me, nor my mother, nor



any relative or friend, or his many years in business. Strange not to see one's father raise his voice, or gesture anger or rage, or hit a pillow even, let alone bash one object against another. I did see him hammer though, maybe that was the clue to my moment of liberation.

The only strong emotion I ever witnessed my father show was on that day that he had to leave his home, the day he was admitted to hospital for assessment of his deterioration from Alzheimer's disease. That day, that was the day that my mother accepted the inevitable fact that she could no longer care for him at home, that day he sensed that he was leaving his home forever.

On that day, I did see my father cry.

My father felt deeply, inwardly, even if very little ever rose to the surface to show outwardly. It is only now, a decade after his passing in January 1997, that I am beginning to find my real inner sense of my father's sensitive life.

As a teenager, my father taught me to drive his loved, dark green 1949 Ford Prefect, his first car in his newly adopted country, Australia. He could not own a car before his arrival in his new

homeland, as the communist system in Hungary frowned on private ownership. His family business was "nationalized"—he was used to his possessions, as with his family relationships, being taken away. Protest was useless, he learned that lesson at a tender age.

Over the years, his attitudes became my life-lessons, implanted as I watched and took in his outlook, values and attitudes. Often he said "never to use force" (*nem eroszakolni*).

This refrain shaped and informed my own character: his views were not always so explicit, rarely in long speeches, and when he did speak, it was never gossip chat, less about relationships



with people than his intimate relationship, feeling at one with his car, while he taught me to drive his car.

When he taught me to drive" (those were the days of manual gear-change before the days of automatic transmissions) he often repeated that I needed to "feel at one with the engine" (*egyut erezni az autoval*), to know by feeling, by hearing when to motor begins to strain (*amikor halod hogy kezd erolkodni*). To avoid such strain, before we drove up the steep Punt Road hill, he would accelerate to gather momentum, to avoid the engine straining.

When a motor begins to strain, then you change down to second gear, to avoid further strain on the engine. Did he silently feel such strains himself when he felt the engine strain? When living through times of stress, his refrain was "It will be good to be over this one as well" (*Jo lesz ezzen is tul leni*).

He also taught me to change car tires. To not to strain the bolts, he suggested that I needed to unscrew the bolts not one after the other but a sequence of opposites. Why not sequentially? Because, he said, there is less strain on the remaining bolts if the load is balanced evenly. So, taking off the old tire, and later, putting on the new one, the bolts are to be tightened in the order 1, 3, 2, 4, 5. Balance created less strain.

Balance, not extremes. That elusive balance.

This was what I was searching for when I booked for a week at the health retreat, Golden Door. They stressed (no pun intended) the importance of "balance": balance between body, mind, and spirit, between work and living. To break the cycle of my increasing stress levels, which I figured arose from a moderate case of "work addiction" from my extreme levels of commitments. Somewhere I had lost my balance, I was straining, I was not listening to my "motor"; I needed to change gears. I had forgotten my father's lesson, I had forgotten to listen.

I booked the week at Golden Door on my birthday, three weeks before I was to depart. That

would give me time to change gears before I strained them further. My timing was off. I realized this was risky living.

The week at Golden Door alerted me to many areas in my life that were out of balance within the headlines of body, mind and spirit: diet, exercise, social life, family life, and so on. But that is a story for another day. The inspirational staff, Bridgette, Dean, Andrea, Mike, Daniel, Shirley and others no less than the many friends in that group of over 40 likeminded participants.

Now I wish to return to this episode a week after my return. It started on the Sunday I went to OfficeWorks to buy a self-assembled shelf unit for my study. The frame was a new "bolt-free" construction which was easy enough to put together. But when it came to the five shelves, that was different, they simply did not fit as they should, and did, on the showroom floor. I tried gently at first, and then with increased pressure, but not force (*nem eroszakkal*). The shelf was stubborn. It did not move. I kept my father's words in mind. Eventually, I became so frustrated that, wearing runners, I decided to stomp on the lowest shelf, figuring the rubber sole would not leave a mark. What a surprise! The shelf popped into place with the added force. But I had betrayed my father's teaching. The next shelf, I tried the same disloyal maneuver, and again, the reluctant shelf popped into place. Success at a cost, I became a successful furniture assembler but in the process, became the traitor son. Furthermore, the last three shelves on this nearly two meter frame were beyond the reach of my stomping feet. I went back to the assembly instructions. There at the bottom of the page, in small print: Hint: use rubber mallet to assist assembly.

Guilt absolved. There was written permission. Although it was written in small letters, those few small letters amounted to a pardon. True, it was



only a "hint," not "instructions," but clearly force could be used. So when I found the 32oz. Eagle rubber mallet, I felt a free man, not a criminal. I was going to assemble the remaining three shelves forcefully, but guilt free.

And so it has come to pass, that my new shelves stand in the corner of my study, a monument to that moment when I became my own man. I used force, a rubber mallet (*eroszakoltam*), and during that hammering, both my father and I were men—he having assembled the layers of his life, as I now was assembling the layers of mine, but foing it in different ways.

Despite the difference, even as I used force, yet he remains my father, and I remain his son, armed with my rubber mallet.

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