



VeizerVizerWiezerWieser: A Memoir and a Search: Granite City to Kompolt

Keith Veizer

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In the early 1900s Joseph Veizer's family and many others from farming villages in northeast Hungary immigrated to a unique ethnic neighborhood in Granite City, Illinois, a new city and a suburb of St. Louis that was known at the time as "The Little Pittsburgh of the Midwest." Hungarians, Bulgarians, Armenians, Mexicans, Macedonians and others lived together in Lincoln Place (originally known as "Hungary Hollow") and worked together for several generations in factories that were within walking distance of their homes. This book is a memoir of my own Veizer family, my search into their past in Granite City and in Kompolt, Hungary, and eight short fictions inspired by my father, my family, and the Lincoln Place community. Also included are two documents translated from Hungarian that connect Lincoln Place and Kompolt. This book is also about the neighborhood itself, how it evolved and how each ethnic group contributed to it. I have integrated vibrant voices from this past, voices which I discovered in interviews of Lincoln Place residents conducted by students in an oral history at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville about fifteen years ago. These interviews, articles from the Granite City Press-Record and elsewhere, and my own memories of stories my father told me helped me to present some of the history of this community through its triumphs and tragedies and everyday experiences. One of the community's triumphs will be depicted in "The Boys of Lincoln Place," a Hollywood movie that has been in the making for several years and will be produced in the next year or so. The movie, based on a book by Dan Manoyan entitled "Men of Granite," is a dramatization of the events surrounding Granite City's surprising victory in the 1940 Illinois State Basketball Championship. Seven boys from Lincoln Place who had grown up during the Great Depression learned to play basketball in the neighborhood community house, which was presided over for twelve hours a day by a stern but loving woman named Sophie Prather, often called "The Little Mother of Lincoln Place." The team, led by a Hungarian boy whose parents came from the same village my grandparents came from, won out over 750 other teams. Andy Philip (Andig Fulop in Hungarian) went on to star at the University of Illinois and in the NBA, ultimately earning a place in the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts. Since my father was the leader of the Boy Scout troop most of the players belonged to and also the city alderman representing Lincoln Place at the time, I grew up listening to their many victories on the court and in Boy Scout competitions. Nowadays the term "melting pot" is viewed as quaint and is sometimes disparaged. Perhaps "gumbo" is a better term. The numerous ingredients of Lincoln Place did keep their distinct flavors as in a gumbo, but they also melted into proud Americans who knew when to stand together for the good of their community and their new country. I hope this book captures some of their spirit.

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