

Michele Battiste

# UPRISING



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*For  
Erika Battiste Bedor*

*and in memory of  
Joseph and Julia Nagy*

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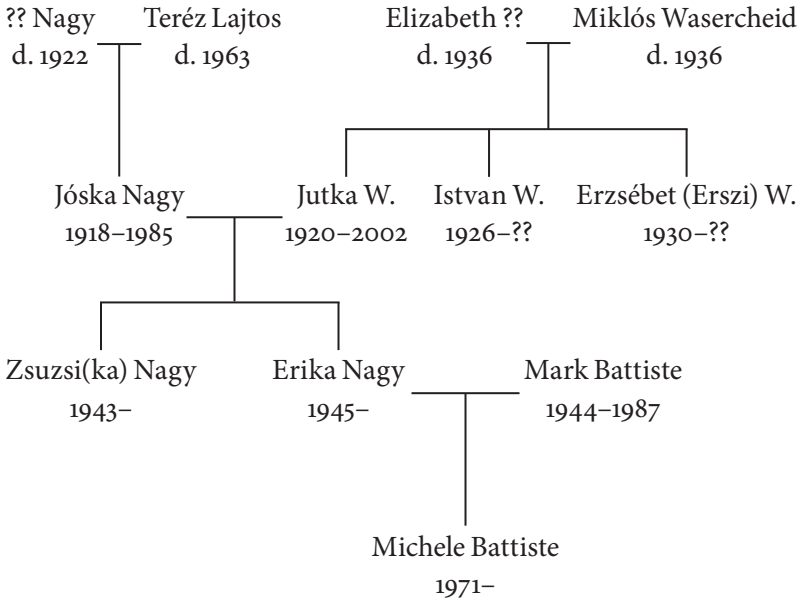
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# Family Tree



## Prologue, 2006

It should be the writer's prerogative to tell the truth. To criticize anybody and anything. To be sad. To be in love. To think of death. Not to ponder whether light and shadow are in balance in his work.

—Gyula Háý, June 1956, Budapest



## Learning the Dead Language

Forty-one letters in the alphabet—the longest *O* bending  
my tongue back under itself, uncomfortable  
as a cow in heat and just as graceful. Twenty years

since I mangled curses at the kitchen  
table—*mokúska fasz, beszartam*  
(squirrel dick, shit in my pants)—watching  
color mottle her cheeks. He said *picca*  
meant pizza and waited for the scene  
at lunch. She almost spit when I asked  
for another piece of pussy, then turned  
to smack her husband's back to keep  
him from choking. I think I understood

once. Sounds drifting through  
the house like kitchen smells, the way you know  
the taste before you eat. But my English was their song  
—a long, slow stroke across the violin's strings  
and the *magyar* slept. After

the sermon, strange men resurrected a soldier's  
song, hands on the casket, lowing in their throats.  
My father said “too bad the old man never learned  
English.” I swore, mouthed “liar.” My *nagypapa* and I

spoke. *Nagyon szép anyuka, drága kicsi nagymama,*  
*kit vagyok ma?* A foreigner tripping  
over unpronounceables and triple-placed suffixes, searching  
for the language that will take my tongue  
back, let me utter “this one” like Grandpa pointing  
to a tool in the chicken shack, crouching at the belly  
of his moonshine still. *Ez egy, this one. Ez egy,* pointing.  
I reached, grabbed, felt the weight of it in my hands.

## 1. The Way to the Party

Arise *Magyar*, your country calls!  
Now or never, our time compels!  
Shall we be slaves? Shall we be free?  
These are the questions. Answer me!  
—Sándor Petőfi, “National Song”

## Erika, November 29, 1944: The Russians are marching

and Budapest lives in sectioned-off coal cellars, black  
dust clogging the thin sieve of skin.  
Evening swells, sirens beating on six inches of window  
like autumn breaking down on barren streets.  
Jutka inhales on the decrescendo, the baby at her breast  
again, kicking her ribs—a soft metronome  
marking the rise and fall of mechanical howl,  
too slow for any melody but dirge and it is easy  
to forget that death is a mournful thing.

### II

Night leans in, thick with shallow breathing  
of the building's remnants: nineteen  
in all and all but the babies  
balancing the edge of sleep.  
Among the bodies Jóska creeps like a shade.

Jutka's lungs collapse with sigh. To cry would admit  
possibilities other than return, would tempt  
God to level this one reprieve with common  
tragedy, would wake the baby.

He whispers *wife*, a word he won't allow himself in hiding.  
He whispers *the Russians are marching*, his fingers plying  
her waist. He reaches for his daughter, a burrowing creature  
cradled in her arms.

*I won't raise a Ruszki bastard.*

### III

Jutka leads her husband to a corner, two walls at least  
and a headboard of rough brick.  
Everyone pretends to sleep.

Jóska pretends his keening is a passion.  
Jutka pretends nothing.  
She is a clenched muscle, a heartbeat around her husband going  
soft inside her, finally asleep.

#### IV

Morning comes with gray street-level light silvering the window.  
Jóska is gone, a kiss to her palm  
her skirt smoothed to her ankles.  
Left behind: a sack of apples, bread, a snapped-neck chicken  
and my conception—a pre-emptive strike.

## Jutka, January 4, 1945: Precautions

Erzsébet plump as a tree-ripened  
peach, and the animals are starved.  
I hide her in the closet, dress

her in three pairs of Jóska's trousers, smudge  
her with sludge from the street.  
She heard stories

of other girls in their hands,  
but understands them like a scary fairy tale,  
like I understand the heaped

rubble of buildings, the body  
of the locksmith in the doorway  
of his store, boots and coat removed

as if by some loved one readying him  
for much needed sleep.  
Our mother would have placed

knives in our hands. Our papa  
would have shipped us north, hidden  
us in the woods like mules. I have

two watches and salami for barter,  
Zsuzsika at my breast, my sister  
clowning in men's clothes.

## Jóska, March 3, 1945: Outlaw Dreams of Budapest

Jutka, we have failed our mothers. Five hundred thousand have left and these brittle streets are littered with strays. I can't tell friends from invaders, everyone eyeing each other, blinking a code of accusation and fear. When did our brothers start sucking at Stalin's tit? We let them feed, grow fat, fall in love with their nursemaid. I can see my ribs. Jutka, I am terrified of the prisons. Inside, they smash violins, burn our paper, freeze men naked in the basements. Jutka, I was such a bad soldier. Captured twice. You'll laugh when I tell you stories of escapes, stupid Russians. But I'm not clever. I hide. From here I see the Palace rubble, the Danube flowing south like a coward and I envy it. Every bridge is ruined. Jutka, my calendar has stopped. I wait for food, more news of you. I hear a Captain took our building, now a Bolshevik headquarters. You do their laundry, cook their dinner in the cellar. You are safe and not starving. Jutka, I remember the cellar. Jutka, I hear you are starting to show.