

[http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2011/evamuntean\\_curtaintobeast\\_oct2011.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2011/evamuntean_curtaintobeast_oct2011.asp)

**Editor's Note:** This talk was presented on September 17, 2011, at the [Indiana Catholic Women's Conference](#).

---

The title of my talk today is "From Behind the Iron Curtain to the Belly of the Beast." The title refers to my family's journey from Communist Hungary, where I was born, to San Francisco, where I now live.

Coming from a country where faith was persecuted, and a simple public prayer was dangerous, I'd like to take a few minutes to publicly thank Our Blessed Mother for allowing us to live in this great country. Please join me: "Hail Mary..."

As I said, my journey begins behind the Iron Curtain. I was born in a country that was ruled by a system of government called Communism. I am sure all of you are familiar with this system of government since America waged a cold war against the menace of Communism for a great deal of our lifetime. But not many of you know what it was like to be born in a Communist country and why people risked their lives and the lives of their children to escape.

So let me start at the beginning of my life. My parents were both educated by the state to be engineers. For my father that was the perfect career choice. Working with diesel engines was his passion. My mother hated engineering. She was forced into the career because the state needed engineers. They worked six days a week from sunrise to sunset, sometimes longer. Their combined income barely put food on the table.

I was their first child. The State gave my mother a twelve weeks maternity leave, and then she was forced to hand me over to a state-run daycare.

A year later my sister was born. My mother had all kinds of medical complications with her birth and nearly died. My parents were too poor to bribe the nurses and doctors to go beyond the mandatory care so my mother burned with fever, near delirium, yet no one offered her even a glass of water. My father, of course, was at work. My grandmother came to the hospital, found her daughter near death, and raised a loud protest, which finally forced the doctors to treat her. So much for socialized medicine. After twelve weeks my sister joined me in the daycare.

Sometimes we were allowed to go spend a few days with my father's parents, who had a little house with a small patch of land where my grandmother grew grapes and raised rabbits. She would go without food so she could buy such luxury items as a piece of cloth to sew my sister and me a skirt, or a little cocoa to make us chocolate milk on Sunday mornings.

Before Hungary became Communist, my grandfather had invested all his resources into buying his own barges and a beautiful tugboat. He risked his life to protect his ships and livelihood during the war, including time he spent as a POW. When the fighting was over and he was finally able to bring his boat home, the Communists confiscated all the merchant boats working the Danube in the name of the people. For a while the Communists used his tug boat as a luxury vessel to entertain high ranking officials, but eventually his boat and all the others in the harbor sank to the bottom of the river due to lack of maintenance. My grandfather was left a broken and depressed man.

My grandmother became the sole provider for them eking out a living by selling her grapes and rabbits. They rented a plot of land nearby and the kids were enlisted to help with growing gardens and selling the products. Her life was hard work and sacrifice revolving around her faith and family. Her rosary was always by her side, and she prayed it daily for us. After living through two world wars that raged all around them and countless political upheavals, they were terrified of the State and lived in a constant, broken fear.

My mother's parents were city folk. They lived and thrived in Budapest, the capital of Hungary. My grandfather was a composer, choir director, conductor, amateur mathematician, and linguist. They had thirteen children in a three-room apartment. It is a true miracle that my mother's family lived through the war. During the Second World War, Budapest was pounded for days and weeks at a time by bombs. Entire buildings collapsed and thousands of innocent people died in the rubble. Buildings were falling all around them and half their own building was torn away by a bomb. The family was in the basement of their building from December 24, 1944 to February 11, 1945 without being able to leave. They were there with all the rest of the tenants of their building. There were wall-to-wall people with hardly any room to move around. My mother's youngest sister was one and a half years old when they went to the basement, and because they could never put her down during the two months, she "forgot" how to walk and had to learn all over again after the war.

They almost starved to death. They survived by eating anything they could get: tape, toothpaste, apple peels, etc. Some neighbors braved the fighting and went up to the street and brought back pieces of dead horses that were killed during the fighting. They also scraped paint from the walls to eat since it had lime (calcium) in it. Because they tried to survive by eating anything available to them, they all suffered severely from dysentery.

They were starved and dressed in rags, but they survived. Once the gunfire stopped, my mother was sent out to check the situation. As she went out of their building, she had to step over dead bodies that littered the streets. She was horrified to see that some of the soldier's bodies had their arms and legs cut off. She learned later that the Communists would cut off the legs of the dead German officers because of their beautiful, well-made boots; and they would cut off the arms because when the German soldiers pillaged the locals, they would wear the jewelry on their arms.

My grandfather fought daily to maintain his deep faith and love for the Church when it was extremely dangerous even to whisper the name of Jesus.

Around a decade later, my father and his friends were involved in the Hungarian uprising of 1956. When the Hungarians lost their battle for freedom that year, my father had to return to his job, whereupon the Communists immediately started interviewing him and asking him about his participation. He denied it, claiming to be at home with his mother, but the Communists produced a document detailing his every move. They asked if he still wanted to deny it. He had to admit that there might be a kernel of truth in it.

Since my father is a brilliant engineer, and since the Communists were in a dire need of good engineers, they told my father that that they were willing to let him stay working as long as he was successful. They had an arrest warrant with no date and told him they could put date in at any time he did not cooperate or if he was not successful. He worked for years under this tremendous pressure. During these years he was given the hardest assignments and was constantly reminded that he had to be successful and productive if he wanted to stay out of jail. It was at this time that my father decided that at all costs he needed to leave Communist Hungary.

In 1965 a group from Cummins Diesel came for a conference in Budapest. My father was in charge of coordinating the event. It was his excellent performance at this event that caused the head of the Cummins

delegation to offer my father a job. He made it clear that Cummins would not help or be involved in any way with an escape attempt, but a job would be his if he was able to make it to Columbus, Indiana.

In 1966 there was another big investigation in which the Communists accused my father of all kinds of crimes. This was the last straw and the plans for escaping were started in earnest. My father heard that escaping from Yugoslavia would be relatively simple, so plans were made to take a family vacation there and try to escape. My brother had suffered from severe eczema from birth so they were able to use his medical condition as an excuse to take a family vacation to Yugoslavia where the seawater and air were said to have healing powers.

Once in Yugoslavia, the search was on. My parents would drive around looking for any opportunity to escape. Once they were driving out in the country on an old abandoned road, and it looked as though there were an opportunity to walk to freedom. It was decided that my father would stay at the car with my brother and my mother and the two girls would start walking. If we girls made it to freedom, my father was going to run after us with my brother. As soon as we girls started across the field, guards showed up out of nowhere and pointed guns at us. Thinking quickly, my mother told us to pull down on our pants and go to the bathroom. The problem was that we didn't need to go. She insisted. The guards were apparently convinced of our innocence and let us go back to the car.

Another time my parents noticed a part of the barbed wire fence out in the country was low (probably from many others taking this route). Again my father stayed with my brother by the car and again the guards showed up with their dogs and machine guns.

The final attempt that year was going to be to swim at night along the shore of the Adriatic Sea around the border to freedom. Our parents bought rafts to put us kids on. In the middle of the night as my father turned down to the road that led to the water, the guards seemed to come out of nowhere with their dogs. These guards pointed their machine guns at us and motioned for us to turn around. My parents were devastated. Dejected we returned to Hungary. My father started a whole new plan to escape. This time we were either going to make it to freedom, or they were going to lose their lives trying.

My father had a friend who knew of a rich architect who lived in Austria. The architect was bored and looking for a challenge. My father met with him to enlist his help with our escape. The plan was that this man would drive across the border with all five of us in the trunk of his car. He was going to bribe one of the guards, whom he had befriended during his many business travels across the border, not to open the trunk of the car.

The architect had certain conditions. One of them was that we had to have the equivalent of \$3,000 in a bank in Austria. He wanted to make sure that we were not destitute if the escape was successful. My parents sold everything they had (sewing machine, refrigerator, boat, etc.), but they could raise only \$1,000. So my father smuggled the \$1,000 to Poland where he sold it in the underground for Polish currency. Once back in Hungary he had a friend who worked at a bank who exchanged it back to Hungarian money. With the exchange rate as it was, he was able to triple his money. He had the \$3,000! A friend of my father took the money to Vienna and deposited it there in my father's name so the architect could verify that we had fulfilled his request.

Once the architect confirmed that the money was in the bank in Vienna, coded telegrams started going back and forth between him and my father. It was set up that we would meet him at a hotel in Yugoslavia.

Part of the plan was to make sure all three of us kids were asleep during our time in the trunk. For four consecutive Sundays, my parents gave all of us tranquilizers to test their efficacy.

The day came and we met the architect out in the country in a clearing that was pre-chosen for its secluded location. To get five people in the trunk of his car was, to say the least, difficult. The architect had to sit on the trunk to close it. To provide air, the back seat was pulled away from the back of the car a few inches.

As soon as we were in the trunk, the architect started driving. Problem was, the tranquilizers were not working: my sister and I were wide awake. Luckily my two-year old brother was out like a light. My parents bribed us to stay quiet by promising us certain dolls that we liked. We wanted the dolls very badly — we stayed quiet.

The toughest part was the wait at the checkpoint — moving forward one car at a time. Finally the guard asked the architect if he had anything to declare. The architect replied, "You know I don't". This was the code for the guard not to check the trunk.

We were allowed to pass through the checkpoint, but it was another fifty yards to the border. When we made it passed through the border, the architect started yelling, "We got through, we got through!" He drove us to a secluded country location and opened the trunk. I still remember the elation of my parents and all the hugging and kissing. Soon after this my sister and I finally fell asleep and slept for twenty-four hours!

At this point the architect's part in our escape was complete. But he was a very good man, and decided he would walk back over the border with the license plate from his car, put it on our car and drive our car through the border so we would have more than just the clothes on our backs. We paid the architect \$1,000 for his help. We had \$2,000 left to live on. And we were free!

My father immediately started applying for our visas to immigrate into the United States. He went daily to the embassy to make sure that our paperwork didn't go to the bottom of the pile. He contacted Cummins, which verified for the authorities that he did have a job waiting for him. Finally the day arrived; on November 30, 1967 we flew out of Vienna on Swiss Air. Our final destination was Columbus, Indiana. We arrived on a Friday and my father started his new job on Monday.

The people of Columbus were tremendous. My sister and I were put into school, and the teachers took great care to spend time each day teaching us English. Our neighbors were fantastic also, donating things like clothes, furniture, and most importantly, their time to make sure our family got off to a good start. We even had one wonderful neighbor lady who sewed us clothes.

For the first few years in America we had to maintain silence with our family and friends in Hungary. Only coded post cards were sent to let them know we arrived safely. The Communists were searching for my father and interrogating his friends and family in Hungary. It was a very dangerous time for them all.

On April 23, 1974, we became citizens of this great country. It had taken a few years, but finally, in 1979, my mother was able to get a visa to return to Hungary to visit her aged father. Even as a U.S. citizen, my mother faced grave danger in returning to Communist Hungary. After my mother's first successful trip, I went back a few years later. One memory that stands out in my mind is a sightseeing tour I took with my uncle. I remarked how ugly a particular building was. My uncle grew quite alarmed and told me that we must not say such things in public since the building was the headquarters of the Communist party. To live in such fear of voicing an opinion was new to me. Even as a young girl, I knew how blessed we were to live in the United States.

While in Hungary practicing our faith was very difficult. My parents were around fourteen years old when Communism arrived in Hungary. People were arrested and killed for their faith so parents were reluctant to

teach their children about religion. Understandably, they feared that the children might accidentally say something about God in public. But once we arrived to Columbus, we started to attend Sunday Mass. It was difficult because only my father spoke a little English. We did receive our First Holy Communion and Confirmation, but eventually we drifted away from the practice of our faith. By the time I left to attend Indiana State in 1976, I was not going to Mass at all.

I spent six good years in Terre Haute obtaining my bachelor degree in Aviation Administration and a Master's degree in Business Administration. After graduation, I ended up in Midland, Texas, working for Midland International Airport first as an operations agent and then as a supervisor. I was in charge of the daily operations of the airport. While the job itself was fulfilling, I didn't care for the Texas heat, so in 1984 I moved to San Jose, California. Coming from Texas, I was shocked at the high real estate prices, so I decided to try real estate sales. I worked successfully in commercial real estate for four years.

It was during this time that one of the most profound experiences of my life happened. It was 1988 and my sister and I were visiting my folks in Columbus over a holiday. It was a tradition of ours to try to visit our parents at the same time so that we could also visit each other. One evening during this visit we were watching television in the living room when my father came walking in mumbling under his breath. When we asked him what was wrong, he said, "Your mom is watching some damn religious show". Since he was about to commandeer the television anyway, my sister and I decided to go and give my mom a hard time about the show she was watching in their bedroom. A documentary on the apparitions in Medjugorje was just beginning.

I remember being transfixed for a solid hour. My life turned upside down. I kept hearing the Blessed Mother's response to the children when they asked her why was she appearing – "Because there is a God". I couldn't sleep at all that night. My mind was racing with the implications of everything I had seen and heard. If there is a God, then everything we do matters. Everything we say matters. Everything we think matters. Everything matters.

When I got back to San Jose, I immediately went to my local church and asked for a priest to hear my confession. I had no idea what I was doing, but I knew enough to know that it was imperative that I go to confession. I sat with that priest for a half an hour pouring my heart and soul out to him. Many tears were shed that day. When I left, I felt clean. Really clean. I was on Cloud Nine. I started attending daily Mass immediately. I went to our local Catholic bookstore and bought tons of books. I devoured everything I could get my hands on. I had a hunger for knowledge as never before.

The beautiful part of this conversion experience is that it didn't happen only to me. My sister back in Houston and my mom here in Columbus both went to confession and started attending Mass and praying the Rosary. Funny thing about the Rosary: my sister calls me one day all excited saying, "Did you know there are things called 'mysteries' of the Rosary? That you're supposed to meditate on events in the lives of Jesus and Mary?" I did not know that. But I immediately went and got a book on it.

The three of us had the great privilege of going to Medjugorje in 1989. My sister was pregnant with her fourth child. We were determined to go to thank the Blessed Mother for all the many graces we had received. We also wanted to thank her for our dear Aunt who the year before our conversion had gone to Medjugorje, and on the mountain prayed in a very special way for our conversion. If there is one thing I'm convinced of, all three of our conversions were brought about by my grandmother's daily Rosary for us and by the prayers of my holy aunt on that special mountain.

During the next few years I grew in my love of God and His Church. I became a Third Order Carmelite. I attended a weekly youth prayer group. I took pilgrimages. I lived and breathed my faith.

It became quite obvious that I needed to leave my job as a real estate agent. The work was very cut throat and I was aching to do something more meaningful with my life. I finally quit my job and took a year off to discern and to travel.

When it was necessary for me to return to work, I took a job at a Fortune 500 company and started working in their contracts department. Apparently they liked me because almost right away I was promoted. While I enjoyed success at my job, I still felt empty – I knew that for me this job was meaningless in the grand scheme of things.

At my weekly prayer group meeting I met a guy who became a dear friend. This friend invited me to go to "Camp-lots-of-fun" one year. Camp-lots-of-fun is a camp that he and my future boss, Tony Ryan, started for families to come together and enjoy a long weekend of fun in the beautiful California coastal mountains. (Tony was, and still is, the Marketing Director at Ignatius Press.)

I met Tony a few more times over the next year at different events, so when I heard that his assistant was getting ready to quit to go to graduate school, I immediately called him and asked for the job. Tony's response was "Eva, you have the job. But are you sure? You might be bored". I told him I would take the risk -- and the huge pay cut that came with the job -- and gave my two week's notice. As it turned out, two girls were leaving to go back to school, so I took over both their jobs in September of 1993. Needless to say, I've been anything but bored! Ignatius Press has been one of the greatest blessings of my life.

In 1994 I met Dolores Meehan, a fourth generation San Franciscan. We were both volunteering at the Gift of Love AIDS hospice, run by the Missionaries of Charity. In 2000 we both attended the March for Life in Washington DC, and we were deeply moved by the sight of thousands of faithful walking peacefully for life. In 2004 we organized a rally and march in defense of marriage, responding to the illegal directive of our mayor, Gavin Newsom, to the county clerk to issue marriage licenses to same sex couples. The outpouring of support far exceeded our expectations, with 1,500 people attending, and this gave us the courage to organize the first [Walk for Life West Coast](#). This Walk was held on January 22, 2005.

We knew we would face intense opposition. San Francisco is ground zero for the culture of death: it has the lowest percentage of children of any major U.S. city; homosexual activists dominate city politics; and sexually transmitted disease rates are through the roof. In that expectation we were not disappointed. Ten days before the first Walk for Life the San Francisco Board of Supervisors issued Resolution # 44-05, designating January 22, 2005, as "Stand Up For Choice Day." Their press release urged people to demonstrate in opposition to our Walk: "Anti-choice demonstrators plan to descend on San Francisco to protest women's health and rights with a so-called 'walk for life'." Openly homosexual supervisor Bevan Dufty, who came to San Francisco from New York City, said "These *outsiders* who oppose women's rights are not welcome in San Francisco." As it turned out, the local politicians shot themselves in the foot. Because of their rhetoric, the conservative media (yes, we have some) covered our upcoming event extensively. News spread far and wide about a Walk for Life in San Francisco! It was such an outrageous thought that it was actually news.

We found we had awakened a sleeping giant. The first Walk for Life West Coast drew 7,500 people. Participation has increased every year, and this year 50,000 people attended with nine Catholic bishops in attendance. The Walk now draws persons of good will from all faiths: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Hare Krishna's—any and all religions united by respect for life. One year I even saw a sign that said "gays for life". Only in San Francisco!

As I look back on my journey, I realize that the Walk for Life has been for me both a fulfillment of the

promise of America, and also a chance for me to repay the gifts given to me by this great country. As America welcomed me and allowed my family to build a new life, I think of those verses on the Statue of Liberty:

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"

Roe v. Wade is not only a violation of our Catholic faith, it is a violation of the deepest American understanding of the very first right enunciated in our Declaration of Independence, the very ground upon which America rests: the right to life. If we are to be faithful to our American heritage we must welcome those children in the womb "yearning to breathe free".

---

### **Related Ignatius Insight Excerpts and Interviews:**

- [The Soul of Solzhenitsyn](#) | An Interview with Joseph Pearce
  - [On Keeping People In: The Berlin Wall and the Shortness of Political Memory](#) | Fr. James V. Schall, S.J.
  - [The Comprehensive Claim of Marxism](#) | Peter Kreeft
- 

**Eva Muntean** was born April 1, 1958 in Budapest Hungary. When she was nine, her family escaped communist Hungary in a trunk of a car through the Iron Curtain. From the age of nine she lived in Columbus, Indiana with her family. Eva obtained a BS degree in Aviation Administration in 1980 from Indiana State University. In the course of obtaining this degree, she also obtained a Private Pilot's license with Commercial and Instrument ratings. She then earned a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) degree in 1982 from Indiana State University. After graduating, she worked for Midland International Airport in Midland, Texas as an Airport Operations Supervisor for four years.

After moving to San Jose in 1986, Eva worked in commercial real estate for four years and at Booz, Allen and Hamilton in their contracts department. She then took a year off to travel and study before moving to San Francisco to [work for Ignatius Press in the Marketing Department](#) in 1993. Eva is one of the founders and Co-Chairs of Walk for Life West Coast ([www.walkforlifewc.com](http://www.walkforlifewc.com)), an annual pro-life rally and walk in San Francisco.

---

If you'd like to receive the **FREE IgnatiusInsight.com e-letter** (about every 2 to 3 weeks), which includes regular updates about IgnatiusInsight.com articles, reviews, excerpts, and author appearances, [please click here to sign-up today!](#)