



Cheryl Koenig OAM, is a motivational speaker and author. *With Just One Suitcase* is her fourth book. Her previous publications are *Paper Cranes* (2008), *The Courage to Care* (2007) and *There's always Hope: just alter the Dreams* (2006). Cheryl spends her spare time volunteering in the health care sector with a focus on government policy and services centred on people with disabilities and their carers. She currently sits on several committees in this capacity and was recognised for her contribution to the community in 2009 being named NSW Woman of the Year, and in 2014 receiving the Medal of the Order of Australia. Cheryl lives in Sydney with Rob, her husband of over thirty years and with whom she has two sons.

# WITH JUST ONE SUITCASE

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*Dedicated to my darling Rob.  
May your hand continue to hold mine  
and may we dance this dance together,  
until the stars no longer shine.*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Warmest thanks to Wild Dingo Press, in particular Catherine Lewis, for her commitment to preserving tales which form part of the multi-dimensional fabric woven to combine the rich tapestry that is modern Australia. Although new in derivation and divergent in motivation, these tales continue today and the need for them to be told is significant. Working with you, Cathi, has been a wonderful experience. You are an amazing teacher—you have brought out the best in my writing, and thereby in me.

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To my very special family: Robert, Jonathan, Chris, Danielle, Stephanie, my siblings—thank you for your love and patience with me, at times, fanatical pursuit of history.

Most importantly, however, my eternal gratitude to my patriarchs: Frici and Istvan. During the writing process—as I packed and unpacked my own small suitcase many times over in a personal battle for survival—your stories inspired me to stay strong, committed and hopeful. You each taught me that life may be tenuous and uncertain and sometimes crisis will follow crisis. And just like the *many* immigrants who have come to our shores with just one suitcase, you have demonstrated courage to rebuild from the ashes.

## WITH JUST ONE SUITCASE

Indeed we understand ourselves, our identities, our roles in life, largely because of the stories we are told. And from the contents of my two fathers' suitcases, I have learnt that being surrounded by family—by a common humanity and a special interconnectedness—is the real measure of a successful and authentic life. I have that family. I have that life.

Finally, in closing Fred and Steven's suitcases, I consider the impact upon their *real* legacy: their grandchildren. I am pleased that I was blessed with the time to finish what I set out to do. Because their grandchildren, and indeed, the grandchildren of the many thousands whom they represent, only come to know their grandparents in the evening of their lives. And in that fading light, some might only see the weathered facade they present and perhaps consider this generation as old, unsteady, fragile or even withdrawn.

Some might never know the extraordinary early lives of their grandparents. I know mine did not. How could they when I only knew a fragment? Now my children will come to know how brave and adventurous their grandfathers truly were; and appreciate the poetry of genes from Katarina and Anna that have combined to make their own. And if for no other end result than this—knowing where it is you come from—it has been more than worthwhile. My hope is that it encourages other families to sit down and have the same conversations.

I used to think it was the big events that defined history, but I've learned it's not—it's the people. History is written by survivors.

Like a persistent archaeologist who digs and dusts until she finds the antiquities for which she searches, I have found more jewels than I had ever hoped for.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

How many of us, in our Australianness, forget that we are the product of people smugglers, of war or at the very least, of economic refugees? As the descendant of the central characters in this story who lived through World War Two and its aftermath, naturally it is my belief that to do justice to our label as a 'proud multicultural society' we need to continue the conversation about our immigration history, share in the revelation of stories from those whose courageous origins were lived out quietly with nobility and humility, embrace the kaleidoscope that is our identity.

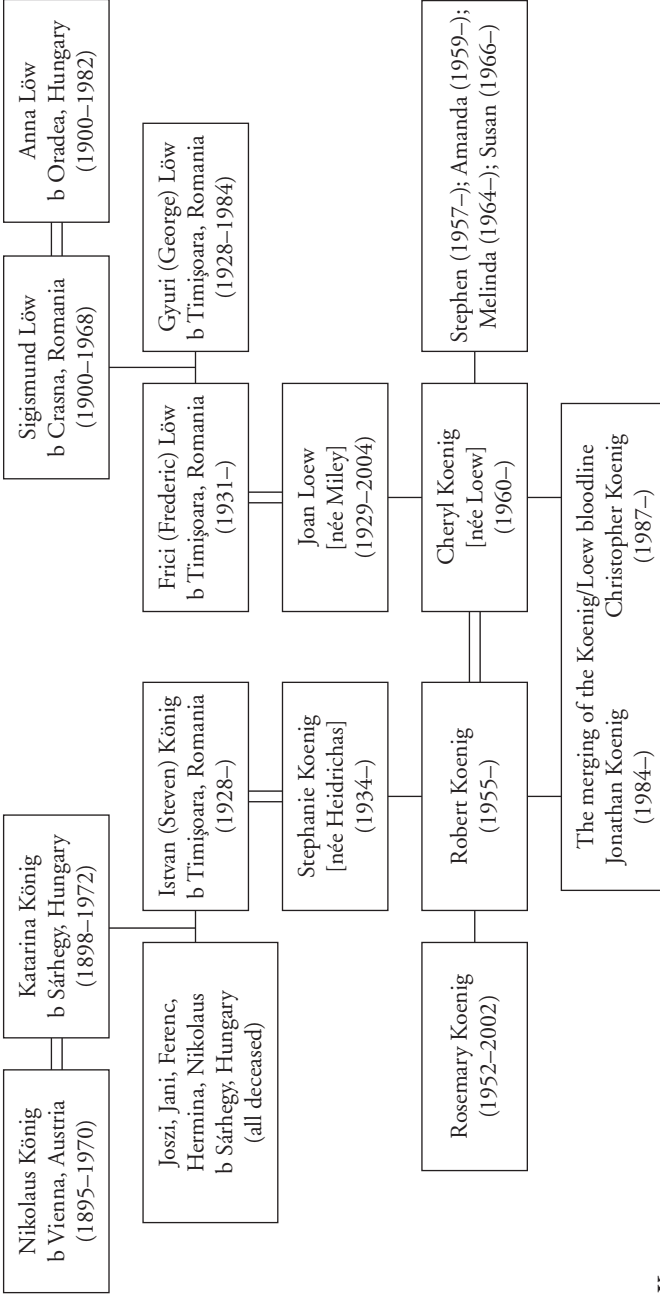
The early lives of my father and father-in-law were narrated to me by them respectively (as was my grandmother's legend which she recounted many times over in the countless hours I spent with her before she passed away). It is based on the facts of their lives; however, creative licence was necessary in some parts of their stories in order to give depth to the narrative—especially in the days prior to their births and during their early childhoods. As I visited that era, it wasn't difficult to find the vision to give birth to the tale, from the lullabies their loved ones left behind, as the actual writing process spawned its own language, as facts emerged on the page. Language, however, does not give birth to a tale—rather the story must have the ability to bring forth the language. And always at the forefront of my mind during the creation of this story was that if I altered their history, I would alter, too, their achievements.

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The strength of character portrayed by the many thousands of post-World War Two immigrants to grace our shores—their valour in the face of oppression, fearlessness in travelling halfway around the globe and their determination, with a work ethic to match—are just a few of the qualities that generations since will never truly possess. The naive may think that these settlers were disadvantaged—arriving in a new country young, alone and without financial assistance. But it is we, subsequent generations, who are the disadvantaged ones, as we will never know the feeling of triumph and sense of pride that comes from building a new life in a new country, *with just one suitcase*.



# FAMILY TREE



## Key:

Double line connection = married to

Single line connection — related to

## Central Characters

- Anna Löw (pronounced Lerv). Her children and grandchildren called her Anyu (pronounced Un-you), meaning ‘mother’ in Hungarian. When the family members came to Australia, they anglicised the spelling of their family name to Loew.
- Sigismund Löw. Also known as Apu (pronounced Ar-poo), meaning ‘father’ in Hungarian.
- Frici Löw (pronounced Fritzi Lerv). He anglicised his name to Frederic Loew when he came to Australia.
- Gyuri Löw (pronounced Jury Lerv). He anglicised his name to George Loew when he came to Australia.
- Istvan König (pronounced Ist-varn Ker-nig). He anglicised his name to Steven Koenig when he came to Australia.
- Istvan König’s family: mother Katarina, father and one brother both called Nikolaus, sister Hermina, brothers Jani, Joszi (the letter ‘J’ is pronounced as a ‘Y’) and Ferenc (pronounced Ferenk).
- Stephanie’s (Steven’s wife) family name is Heidrichas (pronounced Hydrickas).

## Central locations

- Timișoara (pronounced Timishara) is situated in south-west Romania, close to the Hungarian border.
- Chișoda (pronounced Kishoda) is a suburb of Timișoara.

‘Sing in me, muse, and through me tell the story.’  
Homer’s *Odyssey*

# 1

## Katarina

Timișoara, Romania  
1938

The day has become ripe and the smoky aroma of fresh salami, salted pork and other cured meats wafts in the breeze to the hum of bartering voices and shuffling feet. The market is open for business this Saturday, just as it is every Saturday and Sunday. It is a carnival of stalls located in the suburb of Chișoda, south of the old baroque palace at the centre of Timișoara. You might sell all sorts of things here, but principally what can be eaten. That's the aroma that spices the air—what you might eat: not only cured meats of a dozen sorts, but also fresh meat, including the local favourite, *pacal*, known in the English-speaking world as 'tripe'.



This is not the English-speaking world, of course; this is western Romania, whose second largest city, Timișoara, sits squarely on the broad Oltenian plain that stretches farther west almost as far as Hungary and present-day Serbia. A long way to the east, across the Transylvanian Alps, lies the capital Bucharest and eventually the Black Sea. In the south, Romania shares a border with Bulgaria, and to the north beyond the Carpathians, with

Ukraine. For centuries, the country has been likely to argue with its neighbours, to be invaded by them, sometimes to exact revenge by marching an army in one direction or another with bloody intent. It's a fraught location for a country in a notoriously unruly region of Europe, large parts of which were once dominated by the acquisitive Ottomans. The culture of Romania at this time is a living festival of influences, including those of the Orient, Russia, western and eastern Europe, stretching all the way back to classical Greece.



On this day in 1938, Katarina König is busily selling the fare of her particular stall, which is to say living chickens, living geese and fresh vegetables from her kitchen garden. 'Busily' is perhaps going too far. Katarina is standing with her arms folded, the cuffs of her brown-grey smock rolled back from her wrists, silently urging customers to pay her some attention. Although eager for sales, she still nods and greets the gaze of those who pass by, through hazel eyes that hold the wisdom of a woman with four decades behind her. Short of stature, Katarina is a picture of heartiness, her weathered face punctuated with a round button nose under a high forehead, in keeping with her robust Slavic lineage. Dressed for function rather than form, she keeps her attire uncomplicated. Today being warm, she has donned a loose-fitting gypsy-style blouse over a buttoned-down ankle-length skirt which is purposely dark so as not to show the dirt that catches around her hem.

She is in the company of her youngest child, a boy of ten with unruly thick waves of brown hair and an alert expression. He is named Istvan. It is Istvan's task to get a good grip on the necks of the chickens and geese when a sale comes along, bind the legs and pass the birds over to the customer.

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There is a lack of pretension in Katarina's manner as she picks up her broom and sweeps briskly at the feathers scattered by the lively protestations of her caged poultry. She pauses, tucking the broom under her substantial upper arm to regather strands of mousy brown hair that have worked their way loose from her rolled chignon and secure them out of toil's way. As she does this, she looks to her son who is watching inquisitively.

'Vanity is for people with no mission and too much time on their hands, my boy. I think this hair of mine would serve me better chopped short.'

'No, Mama. Don't. I like your hair the way it is. Papa does, too.'

Katarina's husband, Nikolaus, is a mechanical engineer of Austrian extraction who runs a flour mill in a rural outpost of Timișoara. Katarina's chickens supplement a household income that could, even without her contribution, keep her family in passable comfort, or in something like luxury compared with the vast majority of Romanians, for this is a country which, in broad regions, has yet to fully emerge from the feudalism of the Middle Ages.

Katarina's customers are drawn from every level of Timișoara's society: people of her own class, those a little less comfortable, the nervous middle class (Stalin and his collectivist political philosophy is just over there, beyond the Carpathians), the well-to-do, and even the occasional aristocrat—or at least the aristocrat's servants. And it will be one of Timișoara's well-to-do who will become her next customer this morning, for a brougham-landaulet<sup>1</sup> carriage drawn by a handsome Oldenburg horse<sup>2</sup> with

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1 Invented in the 19th century, this ornately designed closed carriage is pulled by a single horse. A driver sits behind the horse on an uncovered elevated bench.

2 The tallest and heaviest of German horses originally used to pull coaches.

a groomed mane has just arrived and taken a place in the row of carriages outside the market. The fact that such carriages are still in use at a time when motor vehicles are crowding the streets of more sophisticated metropolises testifies to the tardy pace of development in Romania, but also captures its charm.

The woman who opens the door of the brougham and steps down reveals a charm of her own. She is dressed stylishly in a charcoal grey skirt and matching short-waisted jacket with black velvet lapels, white gloves, her jet-black hair attractively arranged beneath a cloche hat. She extends her gloved hand to help her son, aged around seven, down from the carriage. Dressed as impressively as his mother, he sports a spotless white shirt, royal-blue bow tie, navy braces, short grey trousers and highly polished black shoes. The boy doesn't appear quite as comfortable as his mother—a little as if he has been dressed for display. But the impression on anyone watching—Katarina, for example—is of quality.

Quality. Yes, that's the word. Katarina sighs, wondering how many chickens she would need to sell before she could afford a jacket and skirt from the same tailor as Mrs Löw. For, she knows the woman's name and has sold poultry to her in the past. She knows, too, that a charcoal suit with black velvet lapels made to order for her figure, would not give her the queenly appearance of Mrs Löw. Clothes might 'maketh the man', but it needs something more to 'make' the woman. Breeding, and the confidence that produces. And above all that, a certain gracefulness that no currency can procure; a knowledge that a hundred eyes are admiring you, without surrendering to conceit.

Katarina's supplementary wish is that her boys—her Istvan, especially—could go a full day as free of the blemishes of mud and soot as Mrs Löw's prince of a child. Oh, she is proud of her

boys, loves them madly, but wouldn't it be wonderful to dress Istvan for once in a white shirt that remained white for longer than ten minutes; in shoes that looked shiny black for longer than thirty seconds?

As if to demonstrate that what we wish for might well be granted us with a few undesired entailments, Mrs Löw's son suddenly baulks at being led towards the squawking chickens at Katarina's stall.

'Frici, what is it?' says Mrs Löw. 'What's wrong with you?'

The boy has an expression of mingled horror and disgust on his small face.

'Anyu! Mama!' he wails, 'Not the chickens ... No!'

'Frici, I must buy chickens. Be sensible now.'

Mrs Löw takes a firmer grip of her son's hand and urges him closer to the stall, and to the menacing chickens. She is embarrassed by her son's brief outburst and smiles at Katarina with an implicit appeal for sympathy that transcends class: *Boys! You have one, I have one. What can you say?*

Katarina's greeting conveys her ready acceptance of Anna Löw's entreaty.

'How are you today, Mrs Löw? Are you well?'

'I am very well, thank you. It's so nice of you to always remember my name.'

Her son, her Frici, is still resisting any closer approach to the chickens. Any onlooker would have thought the boy feared being eaten by the birds.

'It's not so difficult to remember,' Katarina replies. 'My family name is König, so we have something in common. You a lion, me a king.' Katarina laughs nervously and lowers her gaze, realising her careless chatter was perhaps too familiar with this high-class lady.



Was this going a little too far? Katarina comparing the king of the beasts and a human monarch? Or more to the point, placing a market-place chicken seller and an elegant woman of far higher social standing in the one frame? If she feels any unease, Anna Löw conceals it well.

‘Good, from now on I will always remember *your* name, Mrs König, you may be sure of that,’ she says, then immediately excuses herself to attend to the frankly ill-mannered behaviour of her son.

‘Frici! Please stop pulling on my arm. Now see what you’ve done—my glove has fallen on the ground.’

Frici, unrepentant, wrenches free of his mother’s grip and escapes into the crowd. The market is bustling by now; customers are crowding around the many stalls displaying the bounty of Timișoara and its rural hinterland—fruits and vegetables, cheeses in wheels and wedges, bright spring blooms ferried in from flower farms—daffodils, freesias and purple irises—and of course, the smallgoods that advertise themselves with their rich savouriness. Anna Löw, Katarina and even Istvan are able to observe Frici’s rapid progress through the throng and all the way back to the Löw brougham. They watch while he opens the door and clambers inside.

Anna Löw, some of her poise forfeited in this confrontation, turns back to Katarina König with a hasty apology.

‘Mrs König, I do apologise for my son. What must you think of him, and of me.’

‘Not at all, Mrs Löw. The chickens alarm him. Who can explain these things? He’s a fine boy.’

Anna Löw smiles in gratitude.

‘I’d better hurry,’ she says, ‘before he takes off again. I will

have one chicken and one large goose. There ... that one,' she points, 'the fattest one, please. A nice fat liver for my liverwurst.'

'Istvan, take the money from the lady while I carry the poultry to her carriage.'

Istvan does as he is told. Mrs Löw thanks him and leads Katarina with the fat goose and the moderately plump chicken through the stalls and carts towards the carriage where her driver sits waiting, either patiently or in a daze of boredom.

'Would you mind placing them in the cage and my driver will secure it for me? Janos, can you do that? Make the birds secure in the cage?'

Frici, inside the carriage, is suffering a renewed outbreak of his chicken phobia.

'Frici, for heaven's sake, stop squirming like that. Mrs König, thank you so much. I will see you next time.'



When his mother returns, Istvan who is fearless not only where chickens are concerned, but in most things, blurts out, 'What a spoilt brat! If I carried on like that sissy, Papa would thrash me, I'm certain.'

His disgust is tempered with smugness, too, probably because he thinks that any father, given the choice, would prefer a son like him to one like this precious little Frici? If so, it's not what Istvan's mother is responding to when she admonishes him. No, she's thinking more of her son's insensitivity.

'Istvan, you should not say such a thing. Mrs Löw is one of my best customers. They are a lovely family and the other son is about your age.'

Istvan shrugs. It is not within his brief as a boy of ten to exercise charity in his mother's fashion.

'You can have him,' Istvan replies sullenly.

‘Be kind,’ persists Katarina König. ‘Listen to me. Not long ago the boy was taken to the kosher butchery—you know, in town, where all my Jewish customers go—and he saw many birds, their necks cut, hanging upside down, still wriggling, just how they do when Papa kills them at home ...’ She pauses, noticing Istvan still smiling smugly.

‘*Istvan*, are you listening? Living in town, not being brought up on a farm like you have, this was a shocking sight for him. I’m saying he saw *many*, not just the one. And he is younger than you. It scared him. The *shochet’s* knife, the blood. Try to get into his shoes.’

The Löws are Jewish. The beasts they eat are slaughtered by the *shochet*, the ritual butcher, according to a process said to be formulated by Moses millennia past, and for reasons only Moses has ever fully understood. If the beast is killed by an accredited *shochet*, the meat is kosher. If not, it isn’t.

Istvan repeats his verdict on the conduct of the Löws’ irritating little princeling.

‘He’s a sissy.’ He then punctuates his opinion with, ‘and a Jew!’

Now, Katarina is an adoring mother and a patient one, but the way her son throws off that word—‘a Jew!’—is something she won’t countenance. She turns an infuriated face to her son and slaps her palm on the pile of old newspapers stacked on her table for the purpose of wrapping vegetables.

‘I’ve taught you better than that. Are you that stupid?’

She means it. She sees in the smug anti-Semitism found everywhere in Romania not only cruelty but also a type of vulgarity. That it should surface in her son causes such a piercing disappointment that she is torn between weeping for him and slapping him. The hand she has brought down on the newspapers

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is a maternal deflection of the blow she might have landed on Istvan's cheek.

And Istvan is shocked. When does he ever see his mother react so strongly? His repentance is immediate and complete. He looks down, pretending to take a particularly close interest in counting the copper and silver *lei* from the morning's trade. He raises his head when he has mastered his emotions so that his mother can see the contrition on his face. But Katarina won't look at him. He touches her hand.

'Mama, I'm sorry. Truly.'

Katarina withholds the forgiveness her son craves for a few seconds longer. Then she looks down at his face, at his eyes.

'Good, Istvan. Good. Do you see how much I hate that sort of thing? Do you?'

'Yes, Mama.'

'Then, that's settled. Now go and see Mrs Nagy, and buy two sticks of hot *csabai*<sup>3</sup> so that I can make potato *krumpli*<sup>4</sup> tonight. Go on.'

Istvan, relieved and pleased to be back in his mother's good books, trots off a few steps to fulfil his errand. Then he stops.

'Not schnitzel?' he says.

Katarina shrugs. 'Will the veal be crumbed? Who knows if your sister listened to me.'

'Hermína said she's making a cake. *Beigli*<sup>5</sup>.'

'*Beigli*?'

'Yes, that's what she said.'

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3 Pronounced 'chah-buy': full-flavoured salami made from coarse minced pork, black peppercorns, paprika and red chilli.

4 Pronounced 'kroompily': potato bake layered with hard-boiled eggs, *csabai* and a generous amount of sour cream.

5 Pronounced 'baygly': yeast-dough cake filled with walnut stuffing and rolled into a log.

‘Can a family survive on cake? What goes on in that girl’s head?’ Katarina shrugs and sighs.



Istvan heads off in search of Mrs Nagy’s stall. Katarina, with four other sons and the not-entirely-reliable Hermina to occupy her thoughts, manages a moment of reverie alone at her stall: a short-waisted jacket with black velvet lapels hangs in her wardrobe, a servant brings her tea when she rings a small silver bell, her children line up in expensively tailored outfits to smile at her and accept, each of them, a kiss on a well-scrubbed cheek.

What Katarina doesn’t know—how could she?—is that one day her bloodline will blend with that of the stunning woman whose wardrobe and elegance she covets. None of those composite children will live in Timișoara, nor even in Romania, but each of them will carry in their genetic make-up a certain amount of the poetry of Katarina and Anna, a certain amount of the poetry of Austria, of Hungary, and of this fertile land of mountains and plains in which geese grow fat.