

I'm Still Smiling!

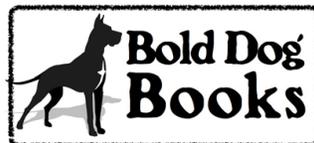
The Positive and Powerful Life of Andrew Merrey

by Peter Weisz

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DEDICATION

To all those who may be suffering and who Andrew
hoped this book would benefit.

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INTRODUCTION

“We shall never know all the good that a simple smile can do.”

—*Mother Teresa*

The mere existence of this book is a major improbability. It represents the final outcome in a series of extraordinary — if not miraculous — events. Had a man named Kasztner not intervened in the Nazis’ grand plan of turning all of Hungary’s Jews into ashes back in 1944, this book would never have come to be — since Andrew’s father would have perished in Auschwitz when he was only four years old. Had Andrew not managed to somehow beat all the odds and survive a death sentence diagnosis for more than a quarter century, his extraordinary experience would not have occurred. . Had Andrew not found the personal wherewithal to work with me and thereby record his story as he was enduring the incredibly painful final stages of his illness, his story would remain unknown. And finally, had Andrew’s parents not been able to summon the courage, through all their own pain, and found the fortitude to pick up the gauntlet and finish the project after his death, this book would never have seen the light of day. For all of the above, I am truly grateful.

I had heard snatches of Andrew’s story before I met him. His parents, like my own, endured one of mankind’s

darkest hours, the destruction of Hungarian Jewry at the hands of the Nazis. I knew Andrew as very charming man, who, despite his confinement to a motorized wheelchair, always appeared chipper, dapper and genuinely gregarious.

While John and Daisy, Andrew's "Magyar" parents were and remain frequent attendees at our West Palm Beach synagogue, Andrew would attend less often. His parents were rather stoic most of the time and did not dwell on their son's infirmity. But, occasionally, both of his parents would confide in me about Andrew's troubling, and apparently worsening, medical condition. Their tales of the torment he was enduring always struck me as incongruous. How could this cheerful chap with the Cheshire Cat smile possibly be suffering such horrors? Surely, I thought to myself, his parents must be exaggerating. They were not.

In 2013, I learned from his parents that Andrew had moved to Las Vegas for health reasons. This seemed like a positive step and, to be honest, I didn't think much about Andrew until I received a call from him in November 2014. I knew that John, as well as Andrew's wife Brigitte, had been shuttling cross-country between Las Vegas and South Florida for the better part of a year, so I wasn't too sure where Andrew was calling from at that point.

"I'm back in West Palm Beach," he informed me, "and I want to write a book." This pronouncement did not surprise me. I hear it frequently. Since 2001, I have been in the "recherché racket," helping people author and publish their memoirs. My typical client is a retired high achiever who now finds himself with the time and the desire to

record an account of his life and has the means to hire someone like me to help him pull it off. Andrew, at age 44, clearly did not fit this profile. (NOTE: I use the male pronoun since 11 of the 12 biographies I have written to date have focused on the lives of men.)

Yet, in the urgency of his voice I detected the same impulses I often encounter in clients who feel they are on their personal home stretch and are focused on the legacy that will outlive them. We agreed to meet at his home and talk it over.

I came prepared with my standard patter, explaining how I worked and listed the various stages of the process. Naturally, I brought up my fees. Andrew didn't seem to be interested in these petty details. He was clearly a man in a hurry. So we jumped right in and I booted up my audio-capture software as he began to unfold his unbelievable story.

One of the standard questions I ask every prospective client right off the bat, as I try to gain an understanding of the person's expectations and desires, is this: "Why do you want to write this book and who do you expect will read it?" Such innocuous questions typically elicit one or more of the following responses:

"I want my kids and grandkids to know my life story."

"I think my life would make a great movie."

"People have said and written a lot of stupid stuff about me over the years. I want to set the record straight in my own words."

"My cousin wrote his autobiography and my life is a hundred times more interesting than his."

“Every time I tell my kids a story, they always say: ‘Pops, you should write a book.’ ”

Andrew did not offer any of these common motives. His reasons were loftier and far less self-serving. They left me duly impressed. “When I was 19 years old, the doctors told me I had six months to live. I’m 44 now and I’m still moving and I’m still smiling. I know there are lots of other people out there who face a lot of tough shit that they have to go through. I want them to read about how I did it and find hope. I want them to read my story and say ‘If he can do it, I can do it, too.’ ” That summed it up nicely, I thought. And there might be a book title in there as well.

We met every few days after that as Andrew would lay out his life’s journey. I got it all down on paper and digital audio. Our sessions were intense. He would frequently have to deal with his pain and would wheel out to the balcony to puff on a marijuana joint. I presumed that Brigitte objected to the smoke in the house. But these sojourns did not cause any interruption. He kept right on talking as he puffed away. By January our sessions became more sporadic as his deteriorating health, often aggravated by rainy weather, would force him to cancel.

I recall appearing at his door one January afternoon and being met by John who informed me that his son would not be able to meet with me that day. John took me aside and said softly: “Peter, whatever you’re doing on this book, do it quickly.” Sadly, John was right.

After Andrew’s funeral, and after an appropriate amount of time had elapsed, I contacted John and Daisy to check on them and to gently bring up the subject of the book project.

“We have a few choices,” I explained. “We can go with what we have,” which essentially was Andrew’s life story up to around 2004. “Or we can drop the whole thing.” Finally, I broached the possibility that we work together to finish the book. I would piece together the balance of Andrew’s life by interviewing his family and friends and, in this way, publish the book just as Andrew had envisioned it.

John and Daisy considered the options and in very short order, and to their enduring credit, decided to complete the story. “This is what he would have wanted,” John said simply. And that was that.

Wherever Andrew is now, I feel that his spirit is certainly still smiling. It is my hope that with the publication of this book, and its distribution to those who he believed would benefit from it, he is smiling just a bit more broadly.

Peter Weisz

March 15, 2017

CHAPTER ONE

MEET THE DEVIL

“The aim of the wise is not to secure pleasure, but to avoid pain.”

—*Aristotle*

Andrew first met the devil while lying naked and sweaty on the floor of a Palm Beach condo back in the mid-1980s. This was not surprising since among his horny and hormonal high school crowd, making love was about as commonplace an activity as making a bed. Sometimes even more so, depending on how strict one's parents were about such things. Fortunately, Andrew's were rather lax. They didn't ask, they didn't tell, and by the time he was sixteen, they didn't interfere and pretty much allowed him to set his own course. And that course, as often as not, led straight to the bedroom. And not to make the bed.

Both of Andrew's parents are physicians — his father, John, a respected ophthalmologist and his mother, Daisy, an equally esteemed family physician specializing in weight loss and cosmetic treatments. Both his father's and

mother's families were Hungarian Holocaust survivors — both marked by amazing stories of survival. But, more about that later. Back then Andrew's parents were leading busy lives, building their practices amidst the sun-soaked super-rich (and not-so-rich) populace of Palm Beach, Florida. Their hectic schedules coupled with Andrew's "Sleepless in South Beach" sensibilities resulted in their seeing very little of each other. Andrew had always believed that sleep is mostly an enormous waste of time. Till the end, he got no more than three to four hours of it per night. His parents and he would cross paths perhaps no more than once or twice per month. Their hands-off attitude about raising children was summed up in the words of Andrew's great-uncle Nick: "When it comes to bringing up the kids, John and Daisy have a *laissez-faire* and a *laissez-passer* (let it happen and let it pass) policy."

While he eventually grew very close to both his mother and his father, at that rebellious and rambunctious stage of his life, Andrew's rare encounters with them were little more than exercises in perfunctory parenthood.

"How's school?" "Good." "Good?" "Good." "Good."

His daily routine was well established. After school, it was swim team practice, for example, and home by 5 pm for a few hours of homework and then out the door before his parents arrived home. Tiptoeing back in during

the wee hours after an evening of social intercourse, Andrew was careful not to wake them. Some nights he would engage in what his parents dubbed “rampaging.” This involved bringing some of his buddies and their dates back to the house for some late-night, low-volume carousing. Sometimes, Andrew and a friend would simply play a round of chess while the girls watched in silence. Afterward, they would pair off and play more intimate games till three or four in the morning. Andrew would get up a few hours later, after his parents had left for work, and the daily grind would begin again.

The evening that Andrew met the devil was marked by an exceptionally luxurious tropical ambiance. It had been preceded by a spectacular September sunset and had featured a sky ablaze with the deep pinks and azures that may only be properly viewed by the fortunate few who, like Andrew and his honey, found themselves young, naked, and very much alive along the sandy shores of old Palm Beach.

By age sixteen, Andrew was already covering familiar ground, although it had been a bit of a struggle getting there. Sex had never been a forbidden garden for him. He could frolic in it at will, but he was forced to feel his own way. His parents were much too proper to ever actually provide him with any specific “nuts and bolts” sexual enlightenment. This resulted in great opportunity, but lim-

ited ability. It was like owning a brand new Lamborghini, but not knowing where to stick in the key. Andrew was offered a chance to lose his virginity shortly before his Bar Mitzvah at the tender age of 12, but he had to decline because he simply did not know how to go about it. No one had provided assembly instructions and he had no idea how to insert Tab A into Slot B. But after a few years of fumbling in the dark and more than a few frustrating faux pas, Andrew had become known as something of a “coxman,” — a slang term that is pretty much self-explanatory — among his high school’s hotties.

Andrew was always young for his age. That is to say that his circle of friends were, for the most part, a good 12 to 18 months older than he was. So, even though Andrew was a sophomore, his partner that glorious evening was a sensuous senior named June.

Despite the fact that their sexual activities had already led them from pillar to post, June invited Andrew to join her for one more go of it on the floor. Who was he to say no? June’s parents weren’t due home for a good 40 minutes so they had all the time two randy teens required.

Andrew silently obliged by lying down upon his back. He felt the cool brown floor tiles against his flesh as June embraced him. But then he felt something else. Something new. Something odd.

A quick, but sharp pain in his lower back, just at the spot where his spine touched the tile. June did not even notice his slight grimace. Andrew shook it off and didn't give it another thought. After all, he was young, healthy, and was certain he was going to live forever.

The pain passed a few minutes after he arose and Andrew simply concluded "I guess that's why we shouldn't do it on the floor." He quickly forgot about the whole thing and made his way to the shower.

But Andrew was unable to shrug off the pain for very long. Within a few days, he started to feel a similar ache spreading to his buttocks and the backs of his legs. And now Andrew wasn't doing anything unusual. Just sitting in a chair for a while caused the pain to begin. He began slathering his backside with Ben-Gay and other drugstore ointments. Soon his friends could smell him coming a block away, but it really did no good at all. His only real relief — albeit temporary — was achieved by soaking in hot baths. Over the next few years, Andrew found himself taking at least three or four baths every day, sometimes even falling asleep in the tub. His fingers, toes, and scrotum were in a constant state of "prune-ishness."

As the pain grew more frequent and continuous, Andrew began relying upon Tylenol (acetaminophen). Lots

and lots of it. He started slowly, taking a pill whenever the pain would arise and it did the trick — for a while. For a while. Pretty soon he was taking two at a time, three and four times per day. By the time he was a sophomore in college, Andrew was consuming up to fifty Tylenols per day and it still wasn't doing the job. His mother would send him huge boxes filled with sample packets she had obtained from the pharmaceutical reps who called on her. When Andrew wasn't popping Tylenol he could usually be found in the shower stall letting the hot water soothe his back. A ritual he underwent about a dozen times each day.

Around campus, he became known as the “Tylenol Guy.” He almost never left home without it, and if he did, Andrew discovered that asking an attractive young lady in a bar for some Tylenol was a very handy pick-up line. Here's one example:

“Excuse me, miss, but do you happen to have any Tylenol in your purse?”

“Hmm. Let me see? Yes, I think I do. What's wrong?”

“Oh, nothing big. Just feeling kind of lousy because my Porsche is in the shop.”

“Come here, baby. Let mama take care of you...”

During the four years between his sophomore year in high school and his sophomore year in college, Andrew

felt as though he'd been seen by a thousand medical "experts." He was directed to most of them by his well-intentioned mother. She sent him to chiropractors who stretched him, to acupuncturists who pricked him, and to physical therapists who vibrated him. Once Andrew almost went to see a veterinarian who was reputed to perform miracles on race horses. These specialists had two things in common. All took his money and delivered absolutely nothing in return. The pain was growing progressively worse and lasting longer and longer. This situation would tend to have a significant impact on most people's lifestyles. But not Andrew's.

He just loaded up on ever larger doses of Tylenol — and ever larger doses of denial. He took more showers each day and simply went on with his life. Andrew played intramural basketball at his Ivy League school and continued his wayward ways on campus. In fact, Andrew was going out every single night of the week. Pain or no pain, he realized that these were his fleeting college years and he was at his sexual peak. He would never again experience the cloistered freedom from life's responsibilities that he was enjoying within the hallowed Halls of the Ivy. Andrew wasn't about to let some lousy lower back gremlins ruin this cherished stage of his social development.

Andrew spoke to his parents by phone about once per week and they would invariably ask about the back pain.

He minimized things and said he was dealing with it and requested more Tylenol. Although his mother was forwarding regular monthly care packages filled with huge boxes of the stuff, his parents really did not have a clear picture of the severity of his situation. He failed to mention to them, for example, that by the second semester of his sophomore year, he was no longer able to sit through an entire fifty-minute class session. He found he was forced to stand for the final ten minutes or else the pain became overpowering. But there was someone Andrew did confide in fully. Jeffrey.

Jeffrey Yager was, at that time, a plastic surgery resident at Presbyterian Hospital, part of Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons. He was also dating Andrew's sister, DeAnne, and would not long afterward marry her. Jeffrey — who would go on to become something of a celebrity surgeon, appearing on 20/20 and other TV shows frequently — understood Andrew's situation fully and, fortunately, offered him some advice that would change everything:

“Andrew, you've got a chronic condition. You've been faking it and getting by, but that's not going to work much longer. You've got to deal with this thing now. Forget all the chiropractors and the other quacks,” he told him. “You need to see a first-class neurologist.” Jeffrey gave him the name of a Dr. Eugenia T. Gamboa who practiced

at the Neurological Institute of New York. Andrew made the appointment for the following Saturday and hopped the subway to her office. Dr. Gamboa was a compact Filipino woman who had been first in her class at medical school in Manila and spoke Tagalog, as well as Spanish and English. He liked her immediately even though she told him something he was not too happy to hear.

“I really don’t know what’s wrong with you, Andrew, but I intend to find out. You need to be off your feet for a week in the hospital,” she explained after examining him. “You’ve got some nerve problems in your back and I need to run some tests on you.” Andrew agreed to check into the hospital in a few days, but, of course, he had to inform his professors that he would be missing a week of class. Some were understanding and offered strategies to make up the classwork. A few were real asses. After informing his parents that he was going to the hospital, Andrew packed a bag and took the subway over to Columbia Presbyterian. Soon after he checked into his room, his father phoned from Florida.

“I’m here in my room, Dad,” Andrew told him. “They want to run some tests on me to find out what’s wrong. Dr. Gamboa wants to do an MRI. She says I need to be off my feet here for a week.”

“Oh,” Dr. Merrey responded. “Do we really need to be there?”

“Well, Dad,” Andrew said ratcheting up the urgency in his voice, “I haven’t been in a hospital since I was born, so this is kind of a big deal for me.” His father got the message and he, along with Andrew’s mother, arrived on the very next day.

The first test Dr. Gamboa ordered for Andrew was an MRI. Unfortunately for him, this was all taking place about one year before the advent of gadolinium contrast. When injected into the body, gadolinium makes tumors clearly visible on an MRI scan. Today, gadolinium is used in about 30 percent of all MRI scans and greatly improves clarity and diagnostic accuracy. Had Andrew’s first MRI taken place a year later, after gadolinium started to be widely used, his outcome may have been entirely different.

Without the gadolinium, the MRI scan Andrew underwent showed nothing. The radiologist could see the spinal column itself, but was unable to peek inside. And inside, it turned out, was where the devil was dwelling. On top of that, in those days, the designers of those big Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines gave very little thought to the comfort of the patient who was forced to remain stock still in a cramped and claustrophobia-in-

ducing tube for hours and hours on end. Of course, everything metal had to come off and Andrew wound up leaving his expensive gold chain necklace behind after the scan (it was later recovered).

By the third day, Dr. Gamboa, having gotten nowhere with the MRI, ordered a lumbar puncture, also known as a spinal tap. Andrew had heard of spinal taps but after Dr. Gamboa went into detail about how it was to be done, he wished he never had. It sounded absolutely horrible and guess what? It was even worse than she had described it. Imagine, if you can, being strapped face down on a cold slab with your hands and feet restrained in cuffs. As you peer about, you spot a masked and gloved figure approaching you with a needle the size of a javelin. You desperately want to wake up from what is obviously a nightmare induced by too many drunken screenings of Friday the Thirteenth when you feel the tip of the needle penetrate the sorest and most sensitive spot on your body. Someone says sardonically: "Now don't move. Okay?" Right.

The idea here is to insert a needle between two lumbar vertebrae and suck out a sample of some cerebrospinal fluid. That's the fluid that surrounds your spinal cord and brain and protects them from injury. Examining the fluid can help a doctor evaluate such serious diseases as bacterial infections like meningitis, and other disorders like

Guillain-Barre and multiple sclerosis. It can also help detect tumors.

So, as Andrew gritted his teeth and strained at his straps, a medical resident put the Godzilla-needle into place between his third and fourth lumbar vertebrae. The plunger inside the huge syringe's barrel was slowly pulled back. Spinal fluid was supposed to flow into the vacuum this created. But it didn't come out. In fact, nothing came out. Everyone seemed to be very surprised by this.

"Wow, Andrew," said the resident, "you must have very thick spinal fluid. I can't get any of it into my syringe." Andrew didn't know if he was supposed to apologize about his "cream of mushroom soup" spinal fluid, so all he did was moan and raise his eyebrows as if to ask "What now, doc?" He quickly wished he had not asked.

"Let's take it up a notch," said the guy with the big needle, trying to sound jocular. But Andrew wasn't buying it and he decidedly did not like the direction things were going. This was supposed to be one brief painful moment in time and then it's all over. He began to perspire as the resident told him what would happen next.

"We're going to go in a bit higher where I suspect your spinal fluid isn't so thick. So hang in there, buddy." Andrew was not sure which two vertebrae they penetrated

this time, but the agony was the same and so was the outcome. Another dry well.

So they did it again. And again. Until finally they decided to bring in a specialist. Dr. Jacqueline Bello was, at that time, a neuroradiology fellow at the Neurologic Institute of the Columbia University Medical Center. Immediately after completing her fellowship, she was selected to serve as the head of neuroradiology at the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. She explained that she was going to perform something called a “cisternal puncture” in an attempt to pull fluid from between the cervical vertebrae in Andrew’s upper neck.

So another smaller (thank God) needle went in. This time, they hit pay-dirt and were able to extract some fluid. Dr. Bello immediately ordered that contrast dye be injected into Andrew’s spine. This procedure, she explained, was called a myelogram and it enabled the doctors to get a clear glimpse of what was going on inside. Things were moving very quickly now and once the film was processed and analyzed, a proper diagnosis was carried out and the horrible truth began to emerge. The dye was not visible on the X-ray below the first lumbar vertebra. Something was blocking it, and it could only be one thing.

Andrew had a tumor!

They could see that no dye had reached down to his lumbosacral area (lower back). The doctors concluded that there had been a tumor growing for years inside Andrew's spinal column. The growth had caused pressure and had accounted for his years of pain in that area. But the tumor was not encapsulated. That means that the cancerous cells of the tumor were not confined to a specific location and were instead floating freely, or disseminated, throughout his spinal column. A few such "seeds" in one's spinal fluid is considered manageable, but the level of dissemination here was much greater. The reason behind the spreading is the subject of a great deal of controversy.

For the remainder of his life, Andrew firmly believed that the dissemination of the cancerous cells in his spine had been aggravated by the unsuccessful spinal probes ordered by Dr. Gamboa. The difficulty the doctors encountered in extracting spinal fluid from his lower spine was not caused by any unusual thickening. Andrew believed that the reason the needle could not suck out any fluid was because its tip had punctured and was then lodged inside of, the tumor itself. By poking holes through its surface, not once, but repeatedly, the encapsulation was breached and many more such seeds or cancerous cells were released into his system. Or so he believed.

This view was not shared by other members of Andrew's family, most notably, his father. Dr. John Merey maintained that Andrew's tumor had always been disseminated and that there was no encapsulation present at the time of his original examination.

Would Andrew's condition have been more treatable had those spinal taps not taken place? Would the tumor have shown up in the MRI film had Andrew waited another year and undergone the test after gadolinium contrast had been introduced? Suffice it to say that Andrew believed these to be the case. But he, at the same time, realized that, at this point, such questions were academic and largely irrelevant. He had a tumor in his spine, the seeds of which had spread, and this was, as he understood for the first time, an extremely serious condition.

Once Dr. Bello's diagnosis was fully communicated, the medical staff reacted in a somewhat less than professional manner; they freaked out.

No longer concealing her alarm, Dr. Gamboa — deadly serious this time — announced: "Get him into the OR immediately!" Andrew was rushed into the operating room where a team of surgeons, headed by Dr. Ben Stein, opened his spine and worked on him for more than five hours. This Ben Stein was not the actor who played Ferris Bueller's economics teacher, but a celebrated surgeon of

the same name. Dr. Stein was the head of neurosurgery at Columbia Presbyterian who was considered to be a medical god by his colleagues and patients — a deity who would occasionally deign to descend from Mt. Olympus to perform miracles upon mere mortals such as Andrew.

Rightly or wrongly, Andrew was plagued by disturbing questions. “If only. If only they had discovered the tumor before poking around trying to pull off a spinal tap, it may have remained more or less encapsulated and been easily removed surgically. I would have walked out of that hospital a healed man and my struggle would have ended right there.”

But that’s not the hand that Andrew had been dealt. Dr. Stein and Dr. Gamboa — along with a full contingent of white-frosted docs, residents, and students — all came to see him and his parents once Andrew had been rolled out of the recovery area. They explained the situation, trying to put things into layman’s terms that Andrew could easily understand.

“We’ve had a look and the tumor has wrapped itself around the nerves inside of your spinal column. It looks like burnt sugar surrounding your nerve tissue,” explained Dr. Stein.

“We opened up a bunch of your vertebrae during the operation, Andrew,” Dr. Stein continued, rather conde-

scendingly, "We took samples of the tumor and had them biopsied. What you have is called "spinal myxopapillary ependymoma." That was certainly a mouthful.

Dr. Gamboa then said: "It is a very slow-growing tumor that typically first appears in the area called the filum terminale which is the little tail that hangs down at the end of your spinal cord. This type of tumor is more or less benign, although some people term it as having a low-grade malignancy."

Andrew could see that his parents were becoming more anxious with each word coming from Dr. Gamboa's lips. He was waiting for the part where she would break into a broad smile and tell them that all had all been dealt with and he would soon go home cured. That did not happen.

Dr. Stein took over and pointed out that myxopapillary ependymomas were usually well-defined and shaped like elongated sausages with a smooth surface.

"These types of tumors, if fully encapsulated, are easily removed and dissemination and metastases are extremely rare. These patients never have a recurrence."

"I don't understand," said his dad, gesturing with his hands. "Then why didn't you remove it during the surgery?"

"This tumor was not encapsulated. The nerve roots are penetrating right through it. Removing it would be like

trying to get chewing gum out of your hair. The only way to do that would be by cutting your hair.” But, of course, in this case, it was not hair, but Andrew’s major spinal nerves that were hopelessly entangled by the tumor.

“There was no way we could have known there was a very rare tumor in there when I ordered the spinal tap,” said Dr. Gamboa, somewhat defensively. She neither specifically confirmed nor denied Andrew’s suspicion that the situation had been aggravated by poking the tumor with the spinal tap needles. Of course, if she had only had a crystal ball she could have foreseen that in another year gadolinium contrast would have enabled her to discover the tumor without the need for a spinal tap and this matter would not have been an issue. But as it stood, Andrew clung to the belief that if were it not for the repeated needle probes into his lower back, the level of dissemination would have remained at a treatable and manageable level. A belief that, according to his father, was inaccurate.

Andrew’s parents, both doctors, had a high regard for Dr. Bello’s diagnostic acumen, especially when it came to reading spinal cord MRI’s. Dr. Bello possesses a unique gift enabling her to mentally envision two-dimensional films in a three-dimensional space. Combining this ability with her nearly photographic memory, Dr. Bello became a valued resource over the coming years in helping

to interpret the progression of Andrew's illness. Once a year, Andrew's parents would embark on a pilgrimage from Florida to New York, bearing his freshest MRI films. Dr. Bello would consistently analyze and deeply review them with Daisy and John each time. This was no small feat since myxopapillary ependymoma tumors are slow-growing. Dr. Bello would interrupt work on other cases to devote hours to reviewing Andrew's films. Detecting any change, even after a year had elapsed since the previous MRI, was not at all easy. A tumor's growth of at least 15% was required to detect an increase. It was akin to watching grass grow. Very slow grass.

The annual pilgrimages continued for a quarter of a century. What began as a special professional relationship evolved into a warm friendship that has outlived Andrew and endures to this day.

Some months after receiving the diagnosis, when Andrew asked his future brother-in-law, Jeffrey, to conduct some medical research about myxopapillary ependymoma, he asked him to search for prior cases where the tumor was not encapsulated. It took some time for Jeffrey to carry out the necessary research (this was pre-Google). He reported back that the most recent case he could locate was treated 18 years before. What Andrew had was something very unique indeed.

Back in the hospital that day, Andrew was beginning to understand that he was confronting a very rare and very serious disease. The enormity and singularity of Andrew's condition made an impact on all the medical practitioners present. After receiving the diagnosis, Dr. Gamboa ruefully whispered to Andrew's father: "This has to be the saddest case that I have encountered in my entire professional life."

At this point, Andrew's mother, Daisy, placed her arm around his shoulder as she stood bravely beside his bed. They were galvanized into a family tableau during those very tense moments. Even though all three of them lived their lives more or less independently, at this moment, they were somehow welded together as they struggled to grapple with the facts as they were revealed to them. But nothing — not family ties, not medical background, not the stiff-backed combined resolve of two parents whose families had survived Hitler — could have prepared them for the words that the anointed neurosurgeon was about to say next:

"He's not going to live to see twenty," muttered Dr. Stein grimly. Andrew was nineteen at the time.

Fighting back the tears, Andrew leaned over to his father, whose eyes had already started welling up, and ges-

tured across the gaggle of white-coated medical mavens surrounding his bed.

“I’m going to go to attend all of their funerals,” he muttered defiantly.

During his final days, Andrew wrote: “That was February 12, 1990. Twenty-five years ago. Many of those docs are long gone, but I’m still breathing, I’m still kicking, and I’m still smiling. I’d like this book to explain why.”

CHAPTER TWO

BACK IN THE DAY

Andrew had often heard that your life flashes before your eyes just before you die. When that didn't actually happen after being issued a death sentence by his doctors that day in the hospital, Andrew concluded that reports of his imminent demise were in fact "exaggerated." Yet, over the following days and weeks, he did begin to think back about who he was and where he had come from. It is not a common thing for a 19-year-old kid to come face-to-face with his own mortality, but that was the situation. Andrew was looking the devil right in the eye and he was terrified.

All sorts of crazy ideas go through a person's mind when he or she tries to cope with the reality of a night-

marish situation. One begins to wonder about living under a family curse. This was not the first time a member of Andrew's family had been placed under a sentence of death. His father, grandparents, and many family members had been condemned to die by no less of a personage than Adolph Hitler. Their stories of miraculous escape during the Holocaust are worthy of books of their own. In fact, Andrew's mother, Daisy, has written about her childhood experiences in a book called *FIRSTBORN IN TANGIERS* (2008, Perfect Paperback, 226 pages). The book is well worth reading in full, but meanwhile, here is an excerpt. In it, Daisy, born in Morocco after her parents fled there from Hungary before the German onslaught, describes the unfortunate fate of her extended family who were left behind:

While my mother's family was spending a nice summer in their Gyomro (suburb of Budapest) villa, they were visited one evening by the mayor of that little town, also a longtime friend, who told them to leave that same evening. He further warned them not to ask any questions and not to say anything to anybody, to just leave, adding that one day they would be grateful for this tip. This kind act, by a Gentile, saved their lives!

They complied, took a few belongings, leaving the rest of their possessions in the villa, so as not to arouse any suspicions. Taking the train to Budapest, they arrived late at night; at the same time, the Hungarian fascists, known as the Nyilas or Arrow Cross, rounded up all the Jews from Gyomro and other nearby villages surrounding Budapest and deported them to Auschwitz-Birkinau. There

Dr. Mengele decided their fates: whether they were to be sent to the gas chambers right away or to the forced labor camps where the inmates were treated abominably and left to suffer slow deaths. Only a few people survived Auschwitz-Birkinau. Out of the six million Jews murdered by the Germans, over 450,000 came from Hungary.

The Germans had a plan for the annihilation of Hungarian Jewry. They murdered the Jews from the periphery of Hungary and left Budapest for last...Irma's parents (Andrew's great-grandparents), the Bleyers, were wealthy landowners who lived in a castle in Verseg, which was considered to be in the countryside. They owned most of the land, the tavern and the grocery store in the village. While many children remained in the town, Irma was one of the few to leave for Budapest. This fact saved her life.

Even though my great-grandmother was the matriarch of the village and well-respected, there was no resistance from the inhabitants of the village when she was deported. When the Hungarian Arrow Cross group barged into the castle, nobody came to the rescue of any members of this side of my family as they were beaten unconscious until they revealed where they had hidden their valuables! After my unfortunate relatives gave away their places of hiding, they were either shot or taken to Auschwitz.

My great-grandparents, already in their nineties, were taken to Auschwitz in a cattle car. Either from the beatings or their old age, they never made it to the extermination camp. Eyewitnesses reported that they had perished en route and were thrown out like dogs on the countryside. Not one of the Hungarian peasants who seemed so grateful to them tried to help them! Finally, with the exception of my mother, Irma, none of the Bleyers survived!

Andrew's father, Dr. John Merey, was saved thanks to an extraordinary and historic event in the annals of the Holocaust. In 1944, when he was a four-year-old child in Nazi-occupied Budapest, John and his family were rescued aboard what became known as the Kasztner Transport. This train, carrying 1700 Jews to eventual safety in Switzerland, was named after a highly controversial figure, Rudolf Kasztner. Kasztner, in his role as head of the Hungarian Jewish Aid and Rescue Committee, had negotiated with Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi SS officer in charge of sending all of Hungary's Jews to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The Germans permitted the transport to leave Hungary to safety in exchange for a ransom of gold, jewelry, and cash. The controversy over whether or not Kasztner was a hero or a collaborator raged for long after the war. Surviving members of Andrew's family never questioned that it was undoubtedly the former.

Andrew's great-grandmother, Irma Munk, along with her husband, Gabor, and twelve other family members (including Andrew's father, 4-year old John) somehow succeeded in getting their names on the transport list. After liberation, the family found itself in Switzerland. There, in August 1945, Irma Munk recorded her memories of the family's unimaginable ordeal. Included below are some verbatim excerpts from her testimony, drawn from a lengthy letter written to another family member

(Gizi) who had likewise been rescued. Irma's words are translated from the Hungarian by Andrew's father, Dr. John Merrey.

Stripped of every possession, having no idea where they were being taken, the family was force-marched towards the waiting cattle cars:

June 29, 1944 — The young walked while the old and sick went in carriages, sitting on the luggage with feet dangling, as we crossed the city in a long line like a gypsy caravan. Everywhere people looked with amazement at this wretched group. They were standing on the sidewalk laughing, though a few others appeared teary-eyed. We walked for hours. It was dark night by the time we were settled into the cattle cars. My poor Gizi. Even now, I can see your worried eyes, half running between the wagons, as you waited for us.

The cattle car: overcrowded, hot, noisy, with hardly any room. Finally, we were jammed onto the train and so began the cattle car journey - without air, tortuously long, and an unknown end. The dawn didn't want to come. Though deadly tired, we looked out the door the first morning and with dread saw that we were still in Budapest. The entire night had been spent shuttling us here and there while going nowhere.

And this is how the trip went for three days until we stopped at Magyarovar, where we remained for another three days. There, Misi (the husband of John's cousin) tirelessly ran about trying to keep order among the 1700 passengers. At Magyarovar we slept outdoors in the fresh air. We were able to attend to washing and other personal matters because on the train all human necessities were totally lacking. I don't even know how we managed. Poor

Father (Andrew's great-grandfather, Gabor). How he suffered from all of this. With tranquility and sacrifice of biblical proportions, he put up with this trip — just so he could remain with his beloved children. As the train started up again, there was an awful commotion. We just didn't know where we were going. We were crossing Austria and were told that we are on our way to Auschwitz in Poland — though some thought we were supposed to be going to Auspitz in Czechoslovakia.

This mix-up was corrected and four days later we arrived in Linz (Austria). This was the scene of our most awful and unforgettable experience. When we arrived, it was announced in a harsh voice that women would go to the baths. We were all happy at the thought of bathing in that awful hot weather. We even walked gladly in the mid-day sun to some place outside the town.¹ We got undressed and immediately saw that these were no ordinary baths — but there was no going back at that point. We had to get undressed among columns of leering soldiers. There we stood totally bare. We were forced into a large room where we were examined. Some women were selected and their entire bodies shaved. God knows why. Well, such a screaming and hysteria broke out because those who were waiting naked outside thought we were brought there to be massacred.

Afterwards, naked and washed, we stood among the soldiers until our clothes that were piled in a heap were returned. For hours, everyone searched for their clothes and, after finally finding them, got dressed. Meanwhile, amidst crying, screaming, and pushes from soldiers, we

¹ At the time (June 1944), and even at the time these words were being written (Aug. 1945), the world had not yet fully learned that, at Auschwitz and elsewhere, the Germans used gas chambers disguised as bath chambers, complete with fake shower heads, to dupe their victims into remaining calm prior to murdering them by the millions.

were chased back to the train yard. God, what a memory this is!

Back on the cattle cars, we departed through Germany. Inside, we drank like animals to manage the oppressive heat. . Our grandson, Peter (Munk), along with the other young people, with pail in hand ran through the open fields. Meanwhile, young people sat in the open freight car, feet dangling, and even singing. The train never stopped at a station but always beyond the station, or at an open field, so that no one would see this unfortunate mass of humanity herded together like animals.

For food, we ate what we brought with us: canned food, bread, and fruit. In Linz we received soup, a goulash soup, I think. In another two days, in a heavy downpour, we arrived at Bergen-Belsen. It was nearly evening when we disembarked. Some went by foot while the elderly, traveled by truck, amidst shoving and obscenities. In the camp, dead tired, no one saw anything. We stood and stood outside – crying, as so often on this trip. We were registered by a soldier with a typewriter who assigned us to our barracks. Three so-called beds, were place one on top of the other in triple-decker form. We secured a preferable arrangement: women with their children were placed next to each other. Father was assigned to the men's barracks. There were no bedclothes or pillows, only straw, as if we were animals. Luckily, we brought a blanket and a pillow. We received soup and fell asleep. We were so exhausted that we didn't know where we had arrived,

Reveille was conducted at six in the morning. People from our group brought so-called coffee, which could be more accurately described as something unidentifiable and dark, from the kitchen, Every four barracks had a kitchen beyond the barbed wire from where the food which consisted, besides the so-called coffee, of 300 grams

of dark bread for breakfast and a plate of rotted vegetables for lunch. These vegetables consisted of turnips, which were occasionally combined with cabbage. We received butter and jam twice a week, to which we probably owe our lives. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to survive. We were definitely starving and losing weight.

In general, people were awful. They didn't respect private property. People, day by day, as their depression deepened, grew spiteful and jealous. When bread was distributed, individuals played the roles of meticulous engineers, who measured each piece to ensure that what one person received was neither bigger or smaller than that distributed to another. Within a few days, we had our own police as well as a nursery school where the kids learned Hebrew and foreign languages. Everyone tried to keep busy so as to distract ourselves as to our fate. I washed Father every day so that the poor man would not feel neglected. The latrines were almost a half kilometer from the barracks.

Soon the kids became sick with measles and lay with high fevers. It became an art to obtain for them one or two potatoes, which we hadn't seen for weeks. At times, we found a little piece of canned meat or a little bacon skin in the vegetables. This was a great joy. In this way we lived – totally without hope - while we saw the Dutch people on the opposite barracks.

The worst were the daily long and bitter roll-calls, referred to as the roll-call of suffering. We were forced to stand for one to two hours, often enduring rain and wind as 1704 people were counted. Children, the old, it didn't matter. They were frozen together during periods of cold during the roll-call. Misi, running around at the orders of the Germans, did superhuman work. It was he who arranged everything for everyone and saw to it that the

German orders were obeyed. He was not allowed to be with us and, in fact, not even with his own little family as he was so totally exhausted. I noticed, in general, no one in the entire family was the same as he or she had been at home. I think, subconsciously, each of us was living in the shadow of imminent death.

Finally, after six weeks, news of Krumey's (the SS lieutenant-colonel) presence arrived like a bolt of lightning hinting that some would be allowed to leave. And so it happened: 320 names of those who would be leaving tomorrow were announced. The remainder (1384 persons) would be permitted to follow this initial group in two weeks. Panic. Desperation. Screaming. Pleading. We rejoiced that we were on the list but with tears saw that our daughter, Ily (Andrew's grandmother) and her family were left off.

Our departure was very difficult as we stood in the broiling sun for hours. They examined all our belongings. Letters, photos, and all other personal materials were confiscated. Pushed aside, we, the old and sick, left in wagons while the others traveled on foot. For the trip, we received one piece of bread with a pat butter and one can of food. Waiting for us were the filthy, beat-up cattle cars. In the cattle car, we could hardly breathe through the mounds of baggage. As we departed, we were nervous as we didn't know any information about our destination.

This trip was worse than the trip to Bergen Belsen. No pen can possibly record the nature of this trip. Our normally calm Father was nervous to an extent that I had never seen before. He was bumping into everyone while he was carrying a package from one place to another. I just cried continuously. Lajos (Andrew's great-uncle) just screamed himself hoarse. He just couldn't tolerate anyone and he was the commander of our individual cattle car.

The insults were flying and I thought that any minute people would resort to killing each other. Meanwhile our little Pali (Michael Shezaf) was lying with a high fever in another car and we didn't know what was going on with him.

By the third or fourth day, we understood that we were going to Switzerland. The joy was overwhelming. Until that time, we proceeded at a snail's pace. Only the leadership had an inkling of what was going to happen to us and where we were being taken.

Finally we arrived at the border, disembarked, and were subjected to Swiss customs inspections. We then boarded a normal, clean train and headed toward Basel. My God! We were saved! People sang. Every eye was filled with expectation and hope. How they received us as the train rolled in! Ladies dressed in white, tea and soft bread; kind words and respectful glances while, on the other hand, out of exhaustion, starvation, and dirt, we were even afraid to speak. We received baths and disinfection. They gave us dinner, rice in milk, and put us up for the night, with a warm heart, in school barracks that were clean. May God bless these Swiss.

Of the fourteen family members aboard the Kasztner transport, only Andrew's grandparents, Ily and Erno, along with Andrew's father, John, had been left off the list of the 320 Jews transported out of Bergen-Belsen in August. Upon learning that she would be separated from her family, Ily had the temerity and courage to approach Lt. Col. Krumey and ask to be included on the transport "so the family could remain together." Krumey reportedly looked at her, eyes filled with amazement and asked:

“Sind Sie Wansinig?!” (Are you crazy?!). Andrew’s father and grandparents were forced to remain behind in Bergen-Belsen for another four months, and arrived in Switzerland in December.

Not long after Andrew’s great-grandmother’s words were written, Andrew’s father and grandparents set sail to the US in a Liberty ship as part of the very first post-World War II wave of Jewish immigration. They arrived in Baltimore harbor in April of 1946. There, the family was met at the pier by two of Andrew’s great-uncles, Miklos (*pron:* MIK•lowsh) and Laci (*pron.:* LUTZ•ee). The new arrivals were transported to New York where their first home was in the back of Laci’s medical office in Queens, New York.

Andrew’s paternal grandfather, Ernest (Erno), was a graduate civil engineer in Hungary. He had earned his degree prior to the onset of the “Numerus Clausus” decrees that restricted Jews from attending the universities of Hungary. His diploma, with its embroidered official seal, proudly rested on the wall of Andrew’s office. Rather than pursuing an engineering career, Ernest preferred to work at his thriving decorative marble business. Once in the United States, he planned to resume his civil engineering career.

Andrew’s grandmother, Ernestine (Ily) Munk Merey, was the daughter of Gabor Munk. Gabor had made his

fortune as a distributor for the Manner Confectionery Company (Vienna), with a sales district that covered all of pre-World War I Hungary. As a result, great-grandpa Gabor had become one of the highest tax payers (“virilista”) in Budapest. It was Gabor’s money and great-uncle Nison Kahan’s Zionist connections that made it possible for their 14 member family to join the Kasztner Transport train. Was this the largest family to survive the Holocaust in Eastern Europe intact? It is hard to say with any certainty, but it seems likely.

After the great suffering they endured during the war, Andrew’s grandparents, Ernest (Erno), Ernestine (Ily), as well as Andrew’s father, Janos (John), felt as though they had arrived in paradise as they stepped freshly onto the sidewalks of Queens, New York.

Andrew recalled his grandfather Erno telling him: “We had heard in Europe that the streets of America were paved with gold. This turned out to be true as long as you were willing to bend over and pick it up.” As was the case with many immigrants of their generation, developing a strong work ethic was not a problem for any of Andrew’s grandparents, and accounted for the substantial financial success they enjoyed in later years.

His father’s family initially lived in a one-bedroom apartment for six years as Janos (now John) Merrey grew

into the All-American boy. After graduating from Forest Hills high school, he followed his parents' advice and began pursuing a career in medicine. John graduated from Union College in Schenectady, and ultimately enrolled at Columbia Medical School. He performed his residency in ophthalmology at New York University Medical Center — which is where he met his future bride and Andrew would soon be born.

Andrew's parents met on a blind date in 1966 that had been orchestrated by a family friend. The match was arranged despite John's mother's description of him as someone who preferred "tall and blonde" women. The friend did not know anyone who fit that description, but she did know Daisy, a petite Hungarian brunette who had recently arrived from Morocco. The romance blossomed between the ophthalmology resident and the co-ed working on her masters degree, but shortly thereafter, Daisy's employer relocated to San Francisco and Daisy traveled with him. Andrew's mother continued her studies at Berkeley, but John managed to lure her back to New York with the prospect of a fellowship in pharmacology at NYU that he had helped to arrange.

Daisy turned out to be an extraordinary student, earning both an MD and a Ph.D. from NYU. Andrew's parents, John and Daisy, were wed in a Hungarian flavored Jewish ceremony while John completed his ophthalmol-

ogy residency. Both Andrew's sister, DeAnne (b. 1969) and Andrew (b. 1970) arrived not long afterwards.

Hinting at where he would spend the bulk of his life, Andrew was conceived while his parents and five-month old sister were vacationing in Palm Beach. Daisy stunned her gynecologist with a second pregnancy so soon after delivering her first child. Daisy suggested that having been conceived in Florida might have accounted for Andrew's lifelong sunny disposition.

As soon as his father finished his ophthalmology residency, his parents' first order of business was to get out of New York. After growing up in the near-Saharan climate of Morocco, Daisy simply could not tolerate the cold New York winters and implored John to set up his practice in a more hospitable and tropical climate. The closest destination that filled the bill — a mere two and a half hour plane flight from New York — was southern Florida.

Touring the region during a scouting expedition, the young couple received a sign that they should plant their roots in Palm Beach. Actually, it was a "For Rent" sign advertising available medical office space. Andrew's parents stopped to check out the location and John signed the lease on the spot. The family has resided in Palm Beach County ever since.

As mentioned, Andrew was born in 1970 at NYU Medical Center, where an event took place that evokes aston-

ishment to this day. How many people have ever enjoyed a friendship that dates back to the first day of their lives? Well, Andrew was proud to say that he actually had enjoyed just such an incredible friendship.

At the time Andrew was born, mothers were required to stay in the hospital for at least a week after delivery — even if both mother and child were in good health. It was a different era. The following episode that took place shortly after Andrew was born illustrates this point. After emerging from the womb, Andrew was placed immediately into the nursery without his mother having had even a glimpse of her new baby. Shortly after Daisy was wheeled back to her room, a nurse entered wearing a broad smile.

“Well, Dr. Merey,” she asked, “are you ready to meet your brand new son?”

“Wait,” exclaimed his mother sitting up, “I’m not ready! Let me put on my lipstick first.” One thing Daisy always taught her son was: Try to make a good first impression.

Andrew clearly made a great first impression with the hospital nursing staff. When the time came for a newborn nurse to hold a baby-bathing instruction class for all the new mothers on the ward, it was smiling little Andrew, the cutest baby on the floor, who was selected to serve as the demonstration model infant.

Daisy was sharing a semi-private room on the maternity floor with a Mrs. Pariser who delivered a baby boy about six hours after Daisy did. Since Andrew was born before midnight and Alan was born after, their birthdays are one day apart (October 9th and 10th). Daisy and Mrs. Pariser got to know one another rather well after being confined in that small room together for a week. Not surprisingly, their two families remained friends during the year the Mereys remained in New York. But after the Mereys moved to Florida, the two families drifted apart. But the fates intervened.

Fast forward five years into the future. By some quirk of karma, both the Merey family and the Parisers, independent of one another other, wound up living on the tony little island known as Palm Beach, Florida — less than one mile from each other! And like all good Palm Beach Jewish boys, both Andrew and little Alan Pariser were sent to Camp Shalom, the summer day camp operated by the local Jewish Federation. Alan and Andrew became buddies, having no idea that they had already met one another on the first day of their respective lives. Naturally, they soon felt the need to arrange for a sleepover play date. This, of course, required that their mothers meet one another during pick-up time in order to size one another up. The meeting took place and, of course, no adult names were mentioned. “This is Alan’s mommy” and “Hi,

I'm Andrew's mother." After a bit of squinting at each other and then some jaw-dropping shocked incredulity, the two stunned moms embraced as the realization of this major coincidence began to sink in.

Alan and Andrew remained good friends throughout elementary and high school. Although Alan's family was considerably more religiously observant than Andrew's, this fact did not present any obstacle to their friendship (other than the fact that Andrew was forced to party without him on Friday nights throughout high school). Alan got into Brandeis University where, after one semester, he became a father and made the decision to devote to providing for his family full-time. Alan and Andrew remained friends despite the distances separating them — even after Alan moved to LA to be with his children while his ex-wife pursued an acting career.

Alan and his second wife, Sondra, landed in Las Vegas where he continues to operate a successful marketing franchise. In fact, it was Alan that Andrew and his wife, Brigitte, were visiting in 2012, when Andrew discovered that the dry climate in Las Vegas was beneficial to his medical condition (See Chapter Six). Based on that visit, Brigitte and Andrew decided to relocate to Nevada. Alan and Sondra at their side, helping them adjust to life out west...and to life in general.

So the story came full circle. Two babies who first came face to face in the maternity ward of NYU hospital when they were but a few hours old wound up helping each other cope with life's many challenges. "That's definitely one for the books, folks," Andrew would comment a few years later.

Growing up in the shadow of the world-famous Breakers Hotel, in a high-rise dubbed none too cleverly as "Sun and Surf," unquestionably had its pluses for the young family. Although surrounded by natural beauty, their unit was not on the ocean-view side of the building. Rather, it was on the less expensive "nothing-view" side. Nevertheless, it was a short hop over to the lush sandy beach.

As kids, Andrew and his sister, DeAnne, would visit the shore and swim in the warm tide every day. Until 1975, that is. That's the year that the "Jaws" movie came out and the family immediately stopped venturing into the water. In 1976, Andrew's parents became close friends with a leading area dermatologist, Lewis Kaminister, who enlightened them about the hazards of too much sunlight. They stopped going to the beach altogether at that point.

Although their personalities were quite distinct, the two children, Andrew and his slightly older sister, DeAnne, were close and chummy playmates. DeAnne (whom Andrew called "Fuffy" since he couldn't pronounce

the nickname that their father had bestowed upon her: “Fluffy”) was the consummate instigator — leading Andrew on frequent rummaging expeditions through all the closets and cabinets. At times such adventures took them to the brink of disaster. In those halcyon days before child-proof caps and kid-proof latches, children’s curiosity could easily lead them to explore the contents of the family medicine cabinet. One might easily imagine John and Daisy’s horror, coming upon their two toddlers playing on the floor amidst an array of multi-colored pills and capsules.

“We found candy, mommy,” said DeAnne, “and Andrew ate some.”

Andrew was instantly snatched up and trundled off to the Emergency Room to have his stomach pumped. Fortunately it was discovered he only consumed a single harmless pill.

Andrew was soon enrolled at the Wee Wisdom Montessori School. His mother recalls how, on the first day of school, Andrew was apprehensive and clung to a tree instead of entering the building. Miss Rita, the enlightened Montessori instructor, employed an advanced holistic teaching technique to overcome Andrew’s psychological reluctance. She picked him up like a sack of potatoes and carried him into the building slung over her shoulder.

Once inside, Andrew soon discovered the world of books. His favorites, not surprisingly, were those by Dr. Suess, including the ever-popular “Cat In The Hat.” Andrew brought along a copy on a family cruise to Italy and read it aloud non-stop. Things went a bit too far when Andrew decided to impersonate the mischievous cat by inverting a steaming plate of consommé and plopping it on his head, thereby ruining his best dress outfit. “You put the soup. On top of your head. No dinner for you. Now go straight to bed!” ordered his mother.

Andrew’s sister, DeAnne, recalls her brother as an irrepressibly happy child — hardly ever prone to the various stresses and anxieties that plague most children. Case in point: Old Mrs. Feinberg lived down the street from the Mereys and like everyone else on the block, she had a few orange trees in her backyard. One summer afternoon, Andrew, age seven, and DeAnne, eight, along with a few other neighborhood children, were running through Mrs. Feinberg’s yard, when she confronted them and angrily accused them of stealing an orange from her tree.

“Well, this was ridiculous,” DeAnne pointed out years later, “since we all had all the oranges we wanted from our own orange trees and didn’t need to steal any of hers.” Outraged, Andrew and DeAnne decided to extract revenge for the false accusation. After dinner, they grabbed a bottle of dandruff shampoo from their parents’ show-

er and made their way over to Mrs. Feinberg's asphalt driveway. There, in a liling cursive script, they squirted insulting graffiti messages onto the tarmac using the soap container as their shampoo Sharpie. It didn't take a hand-writing analyst to figure out who had done the deed and soon John and Daisy were informed about their children's late-night act of vandalism.

"I was up all night worrying about what sort of punishment we would receive," reported DeAnne, "but Andrew was cool and calm as could be. He wasn't the least bit perturbed. He simply didn't worry about such things. Nothing could ever cause him to become anxious or upset." As things turned out, no punishment was ever meted out.

Although his folks were more or less risk-averse, Andrew was anything but. He loved taking chances and seeing how far he could push life's limitations. His parents still tell the story of when Andrew was nine years old and their family of four decided to embark on a Caribbean cruise. One night, his mother awoke around 2 am and peeked into his cabin to look in on Andrew. Only he wasn't there. She had personally tucked him in around 9 pm and had naturally grown alarmed. After awakening his father and his sister, Andrew's mom alerted the crew, who immediately initiated a deck-to-deck search. Fearing the worst, his parents began listening for voices outside of stateroom doors and then knocking if they felt

someone inside was awake. As they made their way along the rows of cabin doors, Daisy noted tobacco smoke emerging from around one of them. She knocked and found young Andrew, merrily playing stud poker with a bunch of cigar-puffing adults in one of their private state-rooms. The young midnight gambler learned his lesson (more or less) after that. Daisy insisted that John have a serious talk with the boy. Although Andrew does not recall his father ever becoming angry or raising his voice with him, John sat Andrew down and calmly explained what he had done wrong. Finally, John said: "It's okay to have fun on a cruise ship, just don't go overboard. OK?" And then gave the lad a little wink.

The simple fact was that Andrew could not sleep for very long. Whether on land or sea, he was a confirmed insomniac for most of his life. Andrew recalled as far back as kindergarten being ordered to lie down in his sleeping bag during nap time only to lie there for the full 45 minutes watching other kids sleep. Doing the math, he discovered that he had always slept about half as much as the average person. That translated to about an extra four hours of awake time per day. This meant that by 2015, Andrew had spent as many years awake as an average 60-year-old man, although he was only 44. "By the time I'm 60 (and he did have every intention of turning sixty), I will have experienced the same amount of 'living' time as an average 80-year-old."

Although there was never any medical evidence to support it, in hindsight Andrew's father always suspected that his son's sleep aversion may have been due to the developing tumor in his spine. It's hard to say if this situation made him old before his time or wise beyond his years, but it is clear that his insomnia was something Andrew had little control over. He claimed he never suffered any ill effects due to his little need for sleep. In fact, Andrew never actually regarded it as a condition. To him, four hours per night was simply the norm.

Andrew's schooling continued at Palm Beach Public School on Cocoanut Row. When Andrew was in fourth grade, a new boy joined the class by the name of David Roy. Dave and Andrew became fast friends. It was a friendship that would endure for the rest of Andrew's life.

The home Andrew recalled with the utmost fondness was located on a little Palm Beach street known as Bahama Lane. That was the place where he dreamed his dreams and cried his tears as he struggled through the tumultuous trials of adolescence. It was something of a golden time, partly due to his parents' desire to shield their children from the discrimination their families had endured during the Holocaust.

While Andrew never confronted antisemitism directly. As he was growing up, he held only a vague notion that it

existed. Alan and he were really the only two Jewish kids living in the north end of Palm Beach during those years. This dearth of Jewish families was not too surprising given the history of antisemitic policies practiced on this “Winter Getaway Playground for the Super-Rich,” as the island was billed in those days. In the mid-1970s, there were only 1200 Jewish families in Palm Beach County and this was a full ten years after the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act, and thirty years after Holocaust, Jews were still being denied admission to the swankier watering spots and posh little boutique hotels that dotted Worth Avenue. To this day, the private Everglades Club remains restricted to Caucasian members of the Protestant Christian faith.

Of course, such restrictions are difficult to enforce unless it is required for all Jews to wear big Yellow Stars. Andrew had a clear recollection of attending birthday parties, thrown by his gentile classmates, at restaurants and hotels that he later learned did not permit entry to Jews. “Well I just went in there and nobody asked me for my Baptism papers,” he would respond when asked how he got away with it.

As Andrew entered his teenage years, he enjoyed going on family vacations to some wonderful tourist destinations. These often involved accompanying one or the other of his parents as they attended some medical con-

ference or another. The family's knack for cheating death surfaced on just such a trip — during a contact lens consortium in New Orleans — during the mid-1980s. While John was attending his sessions, Daisy and the kids approached the concierge desk at their hotel and asked M. Bonhomme if he could recommend some kid-friendly tourist attractions.

“Oh, *mais oui*, Mme. Merrey,” he replied. “You must visit the Natchez. It is a riverboat with *une grande* paddle-wheel and splendid fun for the entire family.”

“Will we need tickets?” asked Daisy.

“But of course, Madame,” replied M. Bonhomme. “I will sell you tickets for the 11:30 am departure. In the meantime, you should stroll along the French Quarter to the Riverwalk shopping area. On the waterfront, you'll find *beaucoup de* boutiques and many quaint little cafés. The Natchez departs from the Toulouse Street Wharf behind the JAX brewery.” He produced a map and highlighted the suggested route to the departure point.

The shopping and strolling did not take long and Daisy and the kids found themselves at the wharf a good hour earlier than expected, just as passengers were boarding the Natchez for its 10:30 cruise up the river. Daisy approached a man whose name badge identified him as Doc Hawley, the captain of the Natchez, and asked if they

could use their 11:30 tickets and board the boat right away. “But, of course, Madame,” came the reply. And so that’s what they did.

Andrew, as was his habit, immediately began climbing up every structure he came upon as the whistle blew and the “big wheel” started turning. The stately Natchez IX glided past the French Quarter as the calliope trilled and Captain Hawley barked orders into an old-fashioned megaphone.

As the cruise ended, the trio returned to port and observed the tourists lined up for the 11:30 departure. As the crew meandered back to the hotel, Daisy looked up as she was startled briefly by a loud clanging boom. But she didn’t think much of it and pushed on. As they entered the lobby of the hotel at a leisurely pace, they were surprised to find an agitated M. Bonhomme rushing up to them with both hands up to his face.

“You are here?! You are okay?! *Mon dieu*. What happened on the cruise?! On the Natchez?” Soon a crowd began to form around the family, only adding to the general confusion.

Andrew was just as mystified by this strange behavior as was his mother and sister. Finally M. Bonhomme explained.

“We just heard that there was a terrible crash. A tanker collided with the Natchez on its 11:30 cruise. Many people were hurt and some killed. And I remembered that I sold the tickets for that cruise to your family. I was so worried, I could not stop shaking. Thank God that you are all okay.”

Daisy was also grateful that they had decided to take the 10:30 cruise and narrowly escaped disaster. Andrew recalled feeling as though someone on high was definitely watching out for them.

Back home at Twin Lakes High School, near West Palm Beach's City Center, Andrew was following in the footsteps of his older sister, DeAnne, who had been an exemplary and serious student. Andrew's style was, shall we say, more carefree and less intense when it came to his studies.

“It would drive me crazy!” DeAnne recalled. “Andrew never studied and yet got the highest grades and I had to study like crazy just to squeak by with a passing grade. It really wasn't fair.” DeAnne's diligent study habits took its toll on her social life. Unlike Andrew, who was extremely popular in high school, DeAnne did not consider herself as part of the “In Crowd.” Andrew's test-taking skills and ability to absorb facts quickly allowed him the pleasant freedom to devote less time to books and more time so-

cializing with friends. His mom and dad's "laissez-faire" parenting style also provided Andrew with the ability to become a serious swinging teenager.

While it no doubt helped to instill a sense of ingrained independence, sometimes this permissive parenting policy had its drawbacks. In 1987, the Merrey foursome was slated to fly to New York City to attend Andrew's grandfather's 90th birthday celebration. After the festivities, the family left for LaGuardia to catch the flight back to Palm Beach. In order to accommodate all the luggage, they split up and took two taxis with Andrew and DeAnne, ages 16 and 17, in one, and their parents in the other.

"We'll meet you at the gate," John told the kids as they drove off.

"Look at all this luggage," Andrew said to the cab driver.

"I hope you're not flying Delta," he replied.

"Why not?" asked DeAnne.

"Don't you know what Delta stands for? Don't Expect Luggage To Arrive."

John and Daisy arrived to the gate waiting area and their kids were nowhere to be found. In that pre-cell phone era, this posed a serious problem. They frantically scoured the nearby eateries and shops and came up empty. What should they do? The flight was about to take off

and if they continued to wait they would miss it.

“Let’s just get on,” John finally determined just as the door to the jetway was closing. “We can sort it out when we get to Florida.” They ran onboard visibly distraught at having left their minor children behind and unsupervised in New York City. But as soon as they boarded the aircraft their anxiety was extinguished. There, each sipping a sparkling beverage, sat Andrew and DeAnne as cool and calm as could be.

“Gee, folks,” Andrew said flatly. “What took you so long. You guys almost missed the flight.”

In all fairness, the freedom Andrew was afforded by his parents did not extend to all areas of his life. In fact, in certain respects his parents could be quite strict. While John and Daisy never imposed a curfew on their children, they did enforce a list of “Have-To’s” — tasks that were simply non-negotiable. Among these was the children’s attendance at Hebrew School. After coming face-to-face with an enemy who nearly succeeded in wiping Jews off the face of the earth, Andrew’s parents understood the value of Jewish continuity. Andrew and DeAnne could come and go as they pleased, but they were going to do so as Jews.

As part of his parents' efforts to expose their children to their Jewish heritage, Andrew accompanied them on a visit to Israel during the summer before his senior year of high school. By this time he had been experiencing symptoms for nearly a year but had not yet been properly diagnosed. When his parents observed Andrew's discomfort during the more rigorous aspects of their travels, such as hiking in the Negev and extended bumpy bus rides, they became concerned and sought advice from an Israeli family member who directed them to a well-known chiropractor. After conducting an examination, the chiropractor shared his opinion with the family.

"I cannot help him," he reported. "Andrew's problem is not muscular or skeletal. He needs to see a specialist when you get back home."

But once they returned to Florida, Andrew reported that he was feeling much better and so the Israeli chiropractor's advice was set aside. It would be two more years before Andrew was seen by a specialist and properly diagnosed.

Although maintaining their family's Jewish identity was important to Andrew's parents, they were low-key about it and, perhaps, due to their Holocaust histories, did not flaunt their Judaism as they went about their daily affairs. They did not, for example, nail *mezuzot* onto the door

frames of their home. These are small scroll containers that instantly mark a household as being Jewish. The Jewish population of Palm Beach was, at that time, relatively small and deeply assimilated into secular society.

The paucity of Jewish families in the Palm Beach area became something of a problem as Andrew started dating in high school. While it was important to his parents that he eventually marry a Jewish woman, restricting him to only dating such girls would have meant no social life at all. So he wound up dating “shiksas.” Lots of “shiksas.”

Thanks to his parents and his friend, Dave Roy, Andrew had the opportunity to bid farewell to a number of these high school honeys at a rather amazing social event in 1998.

The popularity of the Broadway smash “CABARET” had resulted in a string of Kit Kat Club-named night spots popping up all over the country. One of the swellest of these was located on Palm Beach Lakes Boulevard and featured the de rigeur bar maids decked out in skimpy “pussy cat” outfits. It was here that Andrew’s parents, at the suggestion of Dave Roy, had decided to hold a surprise graduation party for him — a neat trick given that almost all of the guests were under the legal drinking age and had never seen the interior of an adults only night club.

Andrew valiantly made attempts at dating Jewish girls, but nothing really clicked. He came to the conclusion that if he were ever to fulfill his parents' wishes about having a Jewish wife, she would have to be a convert.

While Andrew was known to "date around" in high school, he also had his share of more enduring relationships or, as they used to say, "steady" girlfriends. During his freshman year, he met a cute classmate named Kim Bell. Kim and Andrew became platonic "best pals," but by the end of the school year things became more serious. Ironically, their romance succeeded in ruining their friendship. It was a case of the great being the enemy of the good. Suddenly things like jealousy, possessiveness, and control issues begin rearing their ugly little heads and by the end of the summer the relationship was kaput.

Andrew considered himself fortunate in that he was able to attract impressionable high school girls once he had obtained his driver's license and a slick "set of wheels." His dad was one of the first true highway safety fanatics and he insisted that the only car Andrew be permitted to drive was a Mercedes-Benz. The reason? At that time, Mercedes was the only car that offered (driver-side only) airbags. I'm sure that some questioned the reasoning of a Holocaust survivor who supplied cars for both his son and daughter manufactured by a German company known to have used Jewish slave labor during

that period. Andrew knew of one such fellow — a witty Jewish survivor with a gleam in his eye and a number on his arm — who would ask the driver any time he got into a Mercedes: “Mind if I look in the ashtrays for my relatives?” While I’m sure it must have generated mixed emotions, his dad placed Andrew’s personal safety above any animosity he harbored against the Third Reich and its collaborators.

Andrew did not flaunt the fact that he was sleeping with non-Jewish women before his parents. In fact, he kept it a secret. This was because he believed, at the time, that his actions would have upset them. So he quietly kept his private life to himself. But looking back, Andrew did come to realize that they probably would have been tolerant and understanding of his situation. “Sometimes a guy just doesn’t give his folks enough credit,” was his observation.

Perhaps it was just that Jewish girls found Andrew to be too nerdy. He started getting into computers when he was only twelve years old, banging away at his first Apple Plus. He taught himself Turtle Logo and then Basic and pretty soon he was coding in Pascal and TurboPascal. Memories of spending endless hours, if not days, playing Castle Wolfenstein, Microsoft Flight Simulator, and other computer games of the day, along with his girlfriend at the time, would bring a fond smile to his lips in later life.

Those games seem quite primitive by today's standards, but they were aggressively addictive to an impressionable young geek like Andrew.

Beginning in 1982, Andrew began spending his summers at Computer Camp International located in Moodus, Connecticut. He took to the place like a proverbial duck to water from the moment he arrived. His father recalls that Andrew immediately took a seat in front of a computer screen upon arrival and he was planted in the same spot four weeks later when his parents came to collect him. The camp was all computers during the day, with talent shows and kids' circuses at night. During his first week at the camp, Andrew experienced an epiphany when he realized that his beloved computer games could be "copied" (pirated, actually). It was there that he was introduced to Pascal, his first full-fledged programming language.

In addition to computer camp, Andrew participated in several other summer programs while in high school. Oddly, he seemed to wind up at mostly girls' schools. One June, for example, found Andrew at the well-known Hockaday Prep School for Girls in Dallas (from where President George W. Bush's twin daughters, Barbara and Jenna, would graduate in 2000), enrolled in a co-ed summer program. During another summer, after his junior

year, Andrew attended a similar program at his mother's Alma Mater, Barnard College, near the Columbia campus. As she was busily cleaning up and prepping Andrew's summer lodgings in the Sulzberger Hall dormitory, another student wandered in and asked her: "Oh, are you moving in?"

"No, dear," Daisy answered wistfully. "I moved out of here 25 years ago."

With his computer camp experience and completion of all the computer classes offered by his high school, Andrew was a full-fledged "Big Bang Theory" geek by the time he graduated from Twin Lakes High School. During his last summer before graduation, Andrew was enrolled in a program at the University of Florida at Gainesville called FSF or "Future Scientists of Florida." High school students worked under the tutelage of grad students who were tasked with developing a robotic arm that would be capable of economically picking — what else? — Florida oranges. While the engineering students worked on the hardware, the hotshot high school kids were asked to code the robotic field worker's software.

Andrew recalled the never-ending whiteboard meetings where their young programming team was forced to endure the older engineering guys as they debated arcane details about the design of the robotic arm. Things would

get pretty passionate and Andrew would watch these fellows nearly come to blows over whether or not the robot should move on wheels or on tractor treads, for example. The whole thing seemed rather petty to Andrew, but to them, it was a matter of fruit-pickin' life or death.

His job came down to enabling the robot to visually distinguish between a spherical shape, such as an orange, and an oblong shape, like a leaf. Someone else's code would teach the arm how to tell if the color of the orange made it ready to pick or not. He used Kirsch non-linear edge detector algorithms to accomplish this task and they worked perfectly. Years earlier, a computer scientist named Russell Kirsch figured out that you could determine the shape of an item by placing a digital compass in the center and rotating it in 45-degree increments. Repeatedly noting the furthest point across all eight compass directions would eventually yield an outline that could then be mathematically compared to another shape.

Although it was probably responsible for rendering thousands of migrant workers jobless, Andrew's code worked perfectly and it is still being used in robotic arms in orange groves across Florida. Did Andrew make any money for his efforts? Not a chance. Everything the students developed, every last line of code, became the intellectual property of the University of Florida. Andrew

hoped that someday he would look into exactly how much money his code had earned the school to date. “It might earn me a season ticket to watch the Gators play,” he quipped.

While Andrew’s parents were pleased by his techno-savvy, they did not advise him to pursue computers as a career. That was merely a fun hobby. Everyone in Andrew’s family, as well as his teachers simply assumed that he would become a doctor. Both his parents were doctors. His great-uncle had been a doctor. His grandfather had been a doctor. It was understood by all concerned, including Andrew, that this would become his vocation. But that career path would soon hit a detour.

Once Andrew was accepted to Columbia, his father encouraged him to sign up for the school’s six-year combined program. This would enable Andrew— if he survived the rigors — with both an undergraduate and a medical degree. He did not follow his father’s advice since Andrew did not wish to have his chops busted for six years just to get a two-year career jump on his peers. After all, he was young. He had all the time in the world — or so he thought.

After Andrew had experienced nine months of living in a hospital as a patient (after having received his dismal diagnosis), he wanted nothing to do with medicine. He became completely turned off to the point that the dis-

infectant aroma of a hospital corridor made him queasy. Andrew was familiar with a number of people who, after suffering and recovering from a serious illness, decided to devote their lives to medicine, either professionally or as a volunteer. Well, he wasn't one of those people. He experienced the exact opposite reaction and never wanted to see another IV as long as he lived. But Andrew did love computers, so he opted to make that his career path. But more about that later.

It was in the freshman dorm at Columbia that Andrew became a part of a circle of lifelong friends. The circle included Tim, Mark, Stuart, Ami, and Cathy. Andrew pledged and then became a brother in the Alpha chapter of Columbia's oldest fraternity, Zeta Psi.

Andrew's mother recalls never having to pack any warm clothing for him during frigid New York City winters at Columbia. "He always wore shorts," she remembered, "even during the coldest days." It is likely that Andrew's high tolerance of low temperatures was related to his as yet undiagnosed condition.

Andrew was even more fortunate growing up in that he was capable of tracing his childhood through a progression of "close buddies" with whom he shared every aspect of his life. Allen Pariser, of course, was always there — sometimes in the background, sometimes up front

— as his lifelong amigo. But as Andrew reflected on the cherished friendships that were such an important part of his life, he viewed them as interlocking jigsaw puzzle pieces with the face of a childhood best bud on each one. Carter Smith to Steve Gordon to Alex Athineos to Eddy Cassaday and finally to David Roy, whom Andrew would label as his best friend during the final years of his life. In fact, David, along with his daughter, Asha, were living in Andrew's home at the end, since they were in need of housing after David's break-up with his girlfriend.

It was those lifelong friends Andrew found himself thinking about as he sat alone in his hospital room after the “death squad” doctors and everyone else had gone. What was he going to say to Dave and Alex and the others? How was he going to avoid their pity — which is the last thing he wanted. Andrew recognized that he was going to need to rely on the strength of his friends and his family in the days that lay ahead.

And so he made up his mind right then and there, that he was not going to let this stupid f*cking tumor destroy his life. He would not succumb to it. He would throw himself into the fight and prove those white-frosted fools to be liars. And, in order to avoid the tears of his friends and family, Andrew would do it with a smile and in good cheer. He believed that as long as he was able to just keep

smiling, he would make it through. Hence today, it is that everlasting smile that endures when those who knew and loved Andrew Merey pause to remember him.