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Season 06. Episode 12

Podcast Title: Bruno J.'s Journey to Hell - Part 1

This is episode 12 (Part 1 of 2) of season 6.

Thus far, I have shared parts of my story of over 27 years of sobriety and a few years prior to my coming around. Let's start at the beginning and I promise you it will not be boring.

I was one of the lucky ones, and there were more than a few of us born in Germany after WW II, of refugee parents fleeing the Russian army's advance against the retreating German forces all the way to the Allied zone.

My family of four, which included my parents and younger brother, ended up in a DP camp, also known as a Displaced Personnel - DP - facility. It housed thousands of refugees from the Baltics, Poland and other Eastern European countries, driven from their homes in the northern tier of eastern Europe.

The camp my family lived in was located in the British sector, one of three Western ally zones that also included the American and French sectors. The fourth was the Russian sector which nobody in their right mind wanted to be stuck in.

My mom gave birth to me in a hospital administered by the Brits but staffed by competent German professionals.

At the age of six, after we had moved out of the DP camp and were re-united, somehow, with my maternal grandmother, we settled on a small farm, still in the British zone.

There wasn't much to do for a healthy man like my dad, then in his early 40's, unable to get a job because he couldn't speak German and had no professional skills, having been a farmer all his life.

Except for the period 1940 to 1943 when he was drafted into the German labour force as a civilian employee in the motor pool.

He survived the post-war chaos by smuggling American cigarettes and booze into the camps and buying and selling stolen equipment and parts to whomever would buy. A tugboat included. He became a small-time gangster for a while. Proud of you, dad. Never hurt anyone.

We were finally able to emigrate to Canada where my 5 uncles and 3 aunts settled close to each other in a grateful bunch, some finding work in the steel mills, rubber factories and auto plants along the shores of Lake Ontario. Two of my uncles, along with my dad, chose instead to buy tobacco farms located 60 miles south of the rest of the family.

My dad partnered with my uncle Stanley to buy the farm which my brother still owns to this day. Uncle George found a way to buy his own place a mile or two from our place.

Stanley died of wounds suffered in a car accident a few years later, so my dad inherited our 155 acres of rolling fields and forest.

Now I want you to think about what that all took. My mom, now an educated woman, marries a peasant at the age of 25, crosses the ocean with two boys ages two and six and then settles on a tobacco farm in a country where she does not even speak the language.

My dad never did learn to speak English very well at all, so Mother took over the professional duties of dealmaker, accountant and translator, whenever necessary, to conduct the complicated business of running an agricultural enterprise. Not to mention all the work that comes with running a household.

In the early years, she and a helper cooked three meals a day for a dozen laborers who came to harvest the tobacco crop for six weeks in late summer.

I learned to be one of many working the farm at harvest time. We had laborers from Quebec, North Carolina, Jamaica, Mexico, California, and even Portugal. I mixed with men of all shades, languages and beliefs. We had drunks, teachers on summer break, hitch hikers and Roma. The black guys from North Carolina taught me to box. I played cards with Les Quebecois. I learned how to drink from all of them.

I had the coolest dad in the world. He expected me to work as hard as anyone, even harder than most, since farming was not a 9 to 5 job; it was do or die.

After the work was done for the day, however, he trusted me to be on my own. When I turned sixteen, he let me have the car or the pickup and go wherever I wanted to go, so long as I got home in one piece and able to get up, sometimes at 4:00 AM to unload a kiln to get it ready for that day's loading of tobacco.

The shores of Lake Erie were only a short 7 miles away if that. I cruised, often with my buddy Roy, to Port Dover or Turkey Point, to find some beer (or pilfer it from my dad's stash) and maybe smoke a

little weed. On the beach. Chilly or warm, by the light of the moon. Perhaps chase some high school girls. Become a man at 17.

Looking back many years later, it dawned on me that, despite wonderful, loving, decent and hard-working parents of great example, I was able to escape the realities of life by living in a sort of cocoon.

My immature subconscious logic was this: so long as I get my work in, I can do whatever I damn well please.

The fact that I could breeze through school easily didn't really help matters at all. It was easy to get good grades, and then, as an example, when I encountered Organic Chemistry at Boston University later, I just switched majors from pre-med to psychology. My parents were not hawks about what kind of education I got, so long as I got a "good" one.

The sad irony is that my folks made big sacrifices to pay for my college degree while I didn't work to earn a penny during the first two years. They paid for room and board, tuition at a high-end private school and sent me sending money. I still wince at the thought of that.

Some of that shortfall on my part was made up by the fact that I did work as hard, and as skilfully, as anyone on the farm when I came home over the three months of summer break. By the time I was sixteen, I took over the toughest job at harvest - hanging green tobacco into the kiln which required me to haul 2400 "sticks" of tobacco into the interior of the kiln while I was up there straddling the hanging boards.

I would take the loaded sticks off a conveyor belt running from the tying machine on the ground where the women tied the tobacco hauled in from the field by my brother driving the tractor hauling the wagon.

The total weight that I handled day in, and day out came to at least two tons if you figure twenty pounds a stick. That will get you into shape whether you like it or not.

I took my drinking and weed smoking after work for granted. So long as I worked my tail off, what did it matter? I did get obsessed with one girl after another, however. Was that sign of my addictive self?

I concluded much later, after I sobered up at the age of 46 - 28 years after starting to drink and smoke marijuana heavily - that I had become, or was to start with, an infantile personality who did not want to be held accountable for much of anything, not really.

That attitude, which I didn't even know I held at the time, helps explain why I found myself in a clinical depression after starting my first real job at an ad agency in Chicago after graduating from Loyola University Graduate School of Business with my new MBA.

I was shocked by accountability. I did not like this new reality. I desperately wanted to fit in and impress you. I was an emotional kid in a "man's" ad world where they drink martinis at lunch, which became my habit, too.

Liquor and weed became my escape. Every night and all weekend long. It was my first step into a hell that addiction had ready for my occupancy for a number of long and lonely insane years.

What we learned from this part of the journey was:

1. It doesn't matter that a young man has a great upbringing if he develops a sense of being exempt from the rules.
2. The desire to escape reality is not a conscious choice; it arises from an immature mind coming to twisted conclusions at the time.

3. Alcohol and drug abuse will pave a slippery slope that is impossible to detect until one looks back to see how far and deep the slide can take you.
4. Being an infantile personality who doesn't want to be held accountable for anything he says or does is a shared characteristic of most alcoholics and addicts.