

WITH JUST ONE SUITCASE

by

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Study Notes

by

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Introduction

You have to leave home. Quite suddenly. You know little about your destination except that it is where you will begin a new life. But what of your old life? You can take some of it with you, but which bits? What would you pack in 'just one suitcase'?

When Cheryl Koenig's paternal grandfather died in 1969 her grandmother began to pass on the story of the family's journey across borders and continents, of its improbable survival in the face of war, imprisonment, cultural exclusion and personal trauma.

With Just One Suitcase tells a story of difficult choices, including what to remember from the past, how to survive the present and what to hope for in the future. Cheryl's father, Frici, and father-in-law, Istvan, each left Europe and arrived in Australia with just one suitcase. What they had chosen to pack was determination and discipline, courage and hope, loyalty and love.

Historical Background

At the heart of European history lies a story of ever-shifting borders and cultural transformations. Competing claims over land, as well as political, ethnic and religious rivalries have created tensions and hostilities, many of which remain today. Such tensions are fundamental to the environment in which *With Just Once Suitcase* opens: 1938 western Romania, scripted dramatically into the short gap between World War I and World War II, its geographical frontier jutting sharply between Hungary and Yugoslavia. For our central characters (the König and Löw families, the latter Jewish) the most salient part of this is the looming threat of German invasion.

Romania

Koenig writes: 'For centuries, [Romania] has been likely to argue with its neighbours, to be invaded by them, sometimes to exact revenge ...' (p.2). Rivalry between Romanians and Hungarians goes back to the tenth century, when Magyar (Hungarian) tribes from the east settled in a region already occupied by Romanians, including Transylvania. In 1000 AD the Magyars founded Hungary on this land, with their own king. Thus the rivalry began.

Over the next eight hundred or so years, the region was subject to further invasions that included Slavs (Russians) from the east and Habsburgs (Austrians) from the west, leading to a region whose population consisted of multiple ethnic, religious and language groups, further fractured along economic and political lines. Borders shifted back and forth until finally, in the late nineteenth century, the Romanian principalities (except

Transylvania) established a monarchy with King Carol I. Around the same time, in 1867, Austria and Hungary (both monarchies) formed a union, known as Austria-Hungary or the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Despite being citizens of Romania, both the Königs and Löws descend from families that consider themselves Hungarian (p.11; p.25). Moreover, the König family tree shows the intermarriage not only of Romanians and Hungarians, but Austrians and Hungarians, while Frici's Jewish family had a German nanny—a common occurrence in the Romania of this time.

Indeed, cultural tensions permeate the narrative and throughout the book we see the characters making compromises. The family speaks Hungarian, but outside the home the boys must speak Romanian. Being curious, the children want to know why, so their father tries to explain the centuries-old rivalries and why Romanians are so protective of their land (p.23). The book also illustrates how both world wars heightened Romanian nationalism, exacerbating resentment towards Romanians of Hungarian descent, (pp.61-2).

World War I

Romania's disputes over land with the Hungarians and Austrians continued into the twentieth century. Thus in World War I (1914–1918), Romania decided to join the Allies (Britain, France and Russia) against Austria-Hungary and Germany. However, in the decades following World War I, Romania became increasingly right-wing, as evinced by the formation and rapid growth of the fascist, ultra-nationalist Iron Guard (p.49). A crucial consequence of this was the anti-Semitism that began to colour the national psyche, leading to the eventual flight of the Löw family from their home in 1944. In chapter three, Koenig grimly notes, 'For this is 1938. Timișoara has a population of around ninety-two thousand, of which about ten per cent are Jewish. Not a reassuring statistic to belong to as the decade draws to a close' (p.23).

World War II

Although World War II broke out in 1939, Romania did not take sides straight away. However, in 1941, under the leadership of the anti-Semitic and fascist Prime Minister Ion Antonescu, Romania joined the German invasion of Russia, hoping the Germans would help Romania regain previously lost territory. Romania's efforts to impress Germany with a large fighting force led to the introduction of conscription and the forced secondment of skilled workers (pp.79-80).

This political reality is woven into the narrative, as the Löws become increasingly aware of the anti-Semitism that is threatening to annihilate everything they hold dear. We see many examples of this mounting horror, as workers dig an underground bunker in the Löws' yard (p.44), while Sigismund receives letters detailing the establishment of ghettos in a nearby county (p.69). Frici's professor at the Israelite Lyceum warns of the fanaticism of Hitler's youth (p.64), Jewish businesses are forcibly closed and Sigismund is taken in the night by the authorities (pp.71-73).

Similarly, Istvan becomes aware of the pervasive racism when his schoolmate Andor blithely watches Jewish children being bullied in the street, commenting '...so what? Who cares about the *Jews*?' ... 'My father says they are getting what they deserve.' (p.63) Although Istvan is not Jewish, he is indignant at such ignorance.

From monarchy to Communism

Two years into the war, the Romanian people witnessed a stunning reversal of allegiance from their government. In 1943 Germany began losing the war and Romania, including Timișoara, suffered much in Allied bombing raids (p.76). In desperation, the young King Michael led a coup that removed Prime Minister Antonescu and, on August 23 1944, broadcast that Romania would sign an armistice with the Allies and was now at war with Germany (p.94).

The war ended in 1945, but Russian troops remained stationed in Romania, installing a 'brutal regime of terror' on behalf of Stalin's Soviet Union. Soviet intimidation is demonstrated when Frici witnesses the shooting of a civilian by a Russian soldier (pp.107-109) and Istvan is taken to a Soviet labour camp (p.99). The author notes that 'Anyone trying to flee...if caught, can expect death, or if they're lucky, torture and the gulag.'

In the 1946 elections, Romanians voted in a left-wing (socialist) leadership. The Communists secured key posts and in December 1947 the king was forced to abdicate. By February 1948 other left-wing parties merged with the Communist Party and Romania became a totalitarian regime. Resentment towards Hungary and Hungarians continued, as illustrated by the treatment of Istvan's family at the Romanian border in 1973 (pp.271-273).

Narrative

With Just One Suitcase is a memoir, or a biographical narrative—the story of the lives of real people. Although herself a 'character' in the story, Koenig writes in the third person,

which emphasises her role as observer rather than participant. This allows her to step back from her subjective involvement and offer an honest account of the character, actions and experiences of her parents and grandparents. Koenig also writes predominantly in the present tense, which encourages the reader to travel closely with each character in time and place.

The story opens at a busy farmers' market in a west Romanian town, with a meeting between Anna Löw and Katarina König. The former is an aristocratic housewife carefully selecting poultry for her dinner table. The latter is the farmer who raises these very fowl. Both women have their sons present; Frici is attending the shopping expedition on sufferance, while Istvan is helping his mother man the stall.

The author uses the future tense to foreshadow the eventual merging of the two disparate families who open the narrative: 'one day [Katarina's] bloodline will blend with that of the stunning woman whose wardrobe and elegance she covets.' These glimpses into the future whet the reader's appetite, sparking interest not only in *what* will happen next, but *how* these outcomes will eventuate.

The text is divided into two sections. Opening in 1938, the first section covers the war and early post-war years, including Istvan's internment in a labour camp and Frici's flight across the Romanian border. This section follows the separate but parallel lives of Frici and Istvan—both residents of Timișoara, but members of vastly different cultural and socio-economic groups. They do not know each other, nor that they will eventually flee their homeland simultaneously and both head for Sydney. Section One finishes with Frici and Istvan leaving Europe for Australia in 1949 and 1950 respectively. The second section has been given a heading—'Sydney, Australia'—which acts as an announcement of Frici's and Istvan's new life as migrants.

The central characters' stories are told in alternating chapters. For example, chapter one is headed 'Katarina Timișoara, Romania 1938' while chapter three is 'Anna Timișoara, Romania 1938'. The parallel accounts not only chronicle the story of each character, but offer contrasting or mirrored personalities, feelings and experiences. If we compare chapters eleven and twelve, for example, we see the contrasting effects of war on Frici's and Istvan's families. Sigismund's business is collapsing and Anna is 'crippled by extreme anxiety' (p.73), while Nikolaus has been forcibly seconded by the army and Katarina 'can barely function' (p.81).

Frici and Istvan—though unaware of each other upon their arrival in Australia and having no clue that one day their bloodlines would merge—share a desire to blend in with local culture. This is epitomised in their separate, but simultaneous, decision to Anglicise their names: Frici Löw become Fred Loew and Istvan König become Steven Koenig. Hence, in the second section of the text chapters begin to be headed 'Fred' and 'Steven'.

The narrative opens with Anna and Katarina meeting in Timișoara market and circles back to these very same individuals some decades later, in Australia. In 1938, Romania had provided a safe and comfortable home for the Königs and Löws. Koenig's account concludes in 1982 with the passing of Anna, the last of that generation of Koenig's predecessors. The subsequent generations go on to have a safe and comfortable home in their adopted country, Australia.

Characterisation

Frici/Fred

We first meet Frici, aged seven, accompanying his mother to market. He is uncomfortable, both with his formal clothes and with the live chickens, and soon breaks free of his mother's handhold. As he grows up, Frici continues to be determined to do things his own way, whether by sneaking out of home to practise football (p.67) or escaping the migrant hostel to seek work in Sydney (p.179).

Frici's determination is also demonstrated in his competitiveness—he loves to beat his older brother Gyuri in games (pp.40, 52) and has his heart set on becoming a successful footballer (p.109). But his competitiveness leads him into dangerous situations, which sometimes trigger his fiery temper. Aged twelve, Frici refuses to run from the anti-Semitic and violent 'brown shirts' (p.67). Aged seventeen, he takes up the challenge of selling cigarettes on the black market (p.149). And as an adult, he turns to gambling, convinced he can win enough to provide a better life for his family (p.254).

On many occasions, Frici shows an awareness of a changing world and how it affects his family. He shows sensitivity to the pain of others: he is alert to his mother's anxiety when his father is late home from work, deciding he 'hates this war' (p.59); and, to his father's concerns for post-war Romania (p.102). It is an astute and self-sacrificing Frici who is prepared to relinquish his place in the National Youth Football Squad, urging his family to leave Romania (pp.116-117). And it is a heavy-hearted Frici who supports his mother in her brokenness while dealing with his own grief at the passing of his father (p.257).

In Australia, though in denial about the consequences of his gambling habit, Frici is motivated by a genuine desire to provide what he believes his wife, Joan, deserves (p.235 and 254). This leads him to encounter the criminal underworld and though Joan is the love of his life, the ensuing stress on their relationship is not enough to turn Frici from his proclivities. It is only when he nearly loses Joan in a car accident that he transforms into 'the most reliable, devoted and selfless life partner [Joan] could have wished for' (p.254).

A pattern of defiance can be seen in Frici's character throughout the book: he broke away from his mother in the marketplace and again when he married Joan, a non-Jew. But although he eschews Jewish ritual, Frici Löw firmly embraces the family loyalty embedded in that tradition.

Istvan/Steven

We also meet Istvan at the market with his mother, Katarina. He despises the younger Frici's behaviour, calling him a 'spoilt brat' and 'sissy' (p.7). When Istvan glibly includes 'Jew' in his name-calling, his mother's forceful reprimand shocks him. It is here he demonstrates his great respect for her, responding with genuine contrition (p.9).

Like Frici, Istvan prefers to be active and would rather be playing football than studying for school (p.34). His mother notices he is competitive, adventurous and even-tempered.

These qualities enable Istvan to survive his years of internment (including a stint in solitary confinement) and to help others along the way (pp.111 and 145). Istvan attempts to escape the labour camp twice, demonstrating enormous boldness, and perhaps naiveté. In due course, he also demonstrates patience and resourcefulness as he makes longer-term plans for freedom (p.140).

The same qualities enable Istvan to make the most of his life in Australia and are demonstrated in his wooing of Stephanie (pp.194-195), in his strong work ethic (p.216) and as a provider for his family (p.259). Like his father, Istvan tends to act decisively and independently, for example, accepting jobs or buying property without consulting his wife. We are not told whether Stephanie resents these sorts of decisions, but when their daughter Rosemary becomes ill, it is clear their relationship is strained (p.262). Istvan, the resourceful problem-solver, cannot do anything about Rosemary's unnamed and worsening condition. To survive, he throws himself into work, growing distant from Stephanie. But with the eventual prognosis of the illness, Istvan rallies and, once again, draws on his resourcefulness and determination to be present for his wife and children.

Istvan is also tested when his mother dies. Though strong, his relationship with her is not without tension. At sixteen, he farewells her and doesn't see her again until his visit to Romania eighteen years later. While there, his brother, Jani, reprimands him for not having written home during his internment. Jani tells him their mother cried 'for years', believing Istvan to be dead. In response, Istvan claims he had simply not wanted to 'burden' her (pp.245-246), although he feels the grief of letting his mother down. Eight years later, with Katarina's passing, Istvan reflects that his life has been a 'one-way journey from ... her arms that held such a sacred bond' (p.261).

Katarina

Katarina is born in 1898 in Sarhégy, Hungary. In World War I, her two older brothers and her husband-to-be, Nikolaus, join the Austro-Hungarian army to fight alongside Germany. She is only a teenager when she marries Nikolaus while he is on leave. The Königs move to Romania when Katarina is pregnant with her sixth child, Istvan. Although Katarina rolls her eyes at the timing, she doesn't question Nikolaus' decision to relocate, as she is 'a devoted and acquiescent wife' (p.13).

Katarina is hardworking and practical; she grows fruit and vegetables, raises and sells chickens to supplement the family income. She also expects her children to work hard, in their studies and in their chores. But though firm, she is patient and aware that her children have differing personalities—for example, Hermina is not very useful about the house, and Istvan has a more 'casual' disposition than his brothers (p.33).

Brought up as a Christian (Roman Catholic), Katarina is unwavering in her faith. She thanks God for good times (p.14) and cries out to him for help in hard times (p. 101). That's not to say her faith is not tested. Nor that she is without vulnerabilities, ranging from mild envy of Mrs Löw's 'quality' (pp.4-5), to near-collapse when Nikolaus is taken by the army (pp.81 and 89). In fact, her concern for Nikolaus causes her to become dangerously unwell (p.89). She eventually recovers physically, but it's not until her husband and four eldest sons return home that she begins to recover emotionally (p.101). The last time we see Katarina, she demonstrates both her strength and fragility as, through her tears, she bravely farewells Istvan, saying out loud what they both know to be true—that this is their last goodbye (p.250).

Anna (known as Anyu to her children and grandchildren)

Born in 1900 in Hungarian Nagyvarad (renamed Oradea after World War I) Anna is the child of Jewish aristocrats. Anna is cultivated, intelligent and twenty-six when she meets Sigismund Löw, and although he is from a working class family, they soon marry. Sigismund joins the family business, taking over the branch in Timișoara, Romania. Anna is used to comfort and is 'relieved' when they can finally afford a townhouse on an exclusive boulevard (p.28). Her standards are forced to shift when she leaves Romania for Australia. The '[b]eautiful, impressive' hotel (p.205) where she spends her last night in Europe contrasts starkly with the 'two-room bedsitter' that will be her home in Australia (p.211).

Though privileged, Anna is no snob when interacting with others. In Romania, she often enters her kitchen to take over from the cook. And in the opening scene at the market, she is not embarrassed by Katarina's familiarity and engages warmly in a conversation about their surnames. In fact, the two mothers—one a member of Timișoara

high society and the other a farmer—find camaraderie in the mutual trials and tribulations of raising sons (p.6).

Being Jewish, Anna's family observes several religious traditions; they belong to a synagogue, the sons undergo the ritual of Bar Mitzvah and attend a Jewish school. Anna's faith is expressed not so much in verbal devotion and prayer (like those of Katarina), but in her desire to pass on Jewish traditions to her children. Hence, Frici's eventual marrying of a Christian woman causes Anna some heartache (p.223). However, in the end family ties win out (p.251) and Anna shifts from resistance to resignation (p.284).

Once in Australia, and despite the joy of living close to her sons and the added joy of grandchildren, Anna remains wistful about her previous life. This comes to the fore with the death of her husband, as she retreats deeply into rose-coloured recollections (p.285). It is in this state of longing and nostalgia that Anna begins to pass on to her grandchildren 'her most valuable possession: her life story' (p.258), including her memory of meeting Katarina and Istvan many decades earlier.

Sigismund

Sigismund Löw is pragmatic, focused and primarily driven by protecting his family. Being Jewish, he is not in danger of conscription, but World War II takes a great toll on his family nevertheless.

Though not what Anna would term a 'hands-on' father, Sigismund tries to explain to his sons what is happening in their world, but is wise enough to realise that some things should be left unsaid. So he explains such things as the tensions between Romania and its neighbours, but leaves his cousin Imre's experiences in a concentration camp undiscussed (p.56; pp.102-3).

Sigismund is astute and resourceful. He listens carefully to the radio for updates about the war and watches what happens to his Jewish family, friends and colleagues; eventually this causes him to become uncharacteristically anxious. For several years, he uses his money and connections to bribe officials and keep his business going and family safe (p.58). One evening Sigismund is taken by uniformed men, and only returns because he lies about being a train driver (p.73).

Sigismund is also astute enough to realise that even post-war Romania is unsafe for Jews, and so plans the family's escape. However, only the Löw sons manage to cross the border to freedom initially. It is not until 1953 that Sigismund and Anna are able to follow their sons. Sigismund tries to assure his apprehensive wife that 'All will be fine', but in his conversation with a new shipboard acquaintance, he reveals his own underlying cynicism about the world (p.207).

It is perhaps not surprising that upon Sigismund's arrival in Australia, Frici recognises that his father is a changed man. Sigismund has physically survived 'the loss of his home, business and the extermination of most of his family and friends' (p.213), but something inside has died.

Nikolaus

Katarina's husband Nikolaus König is introduced as a man of strength, stubbornness and practical skill. On return from active service in World War I, he is astute enough to see that post-war food shortages and increased birth rates will call for modernised farm techniques. Within a few years, he 'informs' his wife of his decision to move to Romania where there are opportunities to set up his own farm machinery business. Decisive actions such as this are mirrored in his 'strong, often stubbornly set, square jaws' and steely eyes (p.32).

Born in 1895, Nikolaus could have been conscripted when Romania joined the war, but instead he was seconded by the army for his engineering skills and sent to a work camp. According to Mr Nagy, an acquaintance of Katarina, many men died in such camps from overwork or malnutrition. Nikolaus' physical strength and determination play a key role in his survival, just as they do in Istvan's.

We glimpse only a few interactions between Nikolaus and his children. Prior to the war, he seems confident in their futures and allows them to choose their own paths. When Katarina worries that she can't see what lies ahead for Istvan, Nikolaus responds with 'Whatever he does, he'll be fine' (p.35). And there is no doubt that he loves his children and they love him. Istvan enjoys helping his father with jobs around the farm and Hermina is happiest when her father is around (pp.19-20). Though usually not overtly emotional, he sheds a tear on hearing that Istvan has been interned, and when Istvan leaves Romania for the last time, their 'embrace is intense' (p.249).

Joan

Fred's wife Joan Miley loves golf, bush walking and dancing. She engages positively with life and, despite being divorced, doesn't hesitate to embark on a new relationship. When Fred and Joan marry twelve months after meeting, Fred's parents refuse to attend because Joan is not Jewish. But she determines to win them over and we get a glimpse of her generosity of spirit as she comforts Fred, rather than expressing her own disappointment.

Her love for Fred is tested when she realises he has turned to gambling. By now she has quit her job as a dance teacher to look after their children, which eventually number five. Joan is 'no fool' (p.236) and sees through Fred's lies. Because she loves him dearly,

and knows he loves her, she often challenges him about his habit, and time after time 'rescues' him from various gambling misadventures. As a small child, Koenig wonders why her mother yells at her father, but is reassured by her grandmother that 'mummy ... is a very good wife for Daddy—just what he needs' (p.253).

Joan's mettle is tested again when she is seriously injured in a car accident. But rather than feel sorry for herself, and having been influenced by the growing feminist movement, she goes on to complete tertiary studies in psychology and become involved in local government, making a huge contribution to her local community. Joan continues to face significant health challenges, but lives to see the marriage of her daughter Cheryl to Robert Koenig, and the birth of their two children.

Stephanie

We meet Istvan's future wife Stephanie (later Steffie) not long after Istvan's arrival in Australia. Like Istvan, Stephanie Heidrichas' father works as a cabinetmaker for Berryman Furniture, so Steffie lives in an on-site caravan with her family on the same company housing block as Istvan, now 'Steven'. She is typical of many immigrants at the time, having mixed parentage—a German father and a Lithuanian mother—resulting in her sense of belonging nowhere. Steffie displays both shyness and confidence during her first encounter with Steven, and proves to be a sympathetic listener and an honest teller of her own tale. She finds she has much in common with the polite Romanian visitor and that she trusts him.

They marry within a year. Steffie is surrounded by her family, but from her first meeting with Steven she has been sensitive to the fact that he had to leave his family behind in Europe. Her appreciation of his loss is demonstrated when she encourages him to visit his ailing father in Romania.

When their daughter Rosemary becomes ill, Steven chooses to immerse himself in work and the soccer club, but Steffie patiently and persistently takes Rosemary to specialist after specialist. She does this for years, despite sometimes being regarded as simply 'an ignorant and emotional' mother (p.263). Eventually Steffie finds a specialist interested in pursuing Rosemary's case, absorbing his grim diagnosis of her beloved daughter's condition. Steffie finds her courage and the family faces the ongoing challenge of filling Rosemary's remaining days with happy experiences, including a trip to Europe.

Themes, Ideas and Values

Just one suitcase

The upheaval of World War II forces many characters to relocate 'with just one suitcase', each departure signalling a poignant moment in Koenig's account.

Firstly, in 1939 the Löws' German nanny returns to Berlin. Frau Schröder is somewhat secretive about her reasons, but we know that Nazi anti-Semitism had been growing in the lead-up to the war. 'With small case in hand', she departs. Despite her sadness at the nanny's departure, Anna bolts the door behind her, supposedly 'securing the family home'.

In 1940, Katarina's sons Ferenc and Nick König leave home, seeking their fortunes in the city. As they turn to farewell their family, 'with suitcases in hand', they are unaware that what they carry will be their only link with home until the end of the war.

By 1944, Sigismund Löw believes his family will be safer in the countryside, and tells them to pack 'only the bare necessities', which for Frici is a football. Sigismund intends their leave to be temporary, so the football symbolises a belief that one day life will get back to normal. However, the next time Frici leaves home, he knows he is sacrificing his football career, and packs something that turns out to be much more useful: his stamp album. We're not told what else he and Gyuri pack, but Frici carries this one suitcase all over Europe and finally to Australia. Its battered state is evidence of the adversity the boys endure, but its arrival in Australia also shows the continuity one can maintain with one's past despite major geographical and cultural shifts.

In 1945, when Istvan leaves home for a Soviet labour camp, he takes with him something even more basic: a food basket. But the food is soon gone; the journey is long and cold, and Istvan generously shares the food with a fellow prisoner. In this sense Istvan carries with him no links to home, except his memories and the generosity and fortitude inherited from his parents.

In contrast, when Sigismund and Anna pack for their move to Australia, they know where they are going and that they won't be coming back. So they pack virtually their whole lives. But thanks to dishonest dock-workers, everything is left behind, even their suitcases. Like Istvan, all they take from home are their memories.

Q: It would be interesting to consider what you might pack in just one suitcase. What are your 'bare necessities', and how important is it to include memories? Are all of these physical objects, or would you include intangible items such as memories, stories, songs?

Survival

Koenig's honest account of her parents' and grandparents' choices raises questions about what is lawful versus what is right. We have no reason to think that, prior to the war, Sigismund is anything other than a hardworking and honest, albeit astute, businessman. He and Anna embrace traditional male and female roles—Sigismund is provider and protector, Anna is nurturer and homemaker. When his family is threatened, Sigismund turns to bribery and the pragmatic covering up of the truth as a means of ensuring their survival.

We may consider Sigismund's actions justified in time of war and persecution, but it seems he set up a paradigm (model) of behaviour for his son. During the war years, Frici closely observes his father's actions and learns that maintaining their quality of life depends on money and useful connections (p.73). When he and Gyuri are on their own in Salzburg, Frici first sells his precious stamp album, then turns to the black market as a way of 'topping up his and Gyuri's lifestyle' (p. 150). Years later, Frici's desire to follow in his father's footsteps leads him to engage in further illegal risk-taking behaviour. He tries to 'provide Joan with the kind of life he experienced in Timișoara: a life of *quality*' (p.254), using the connections and monetary gains of his gambling career. However, Frici has the potential to be a hard worker, and an honest one; this manifests in his joy and relief at being awarded his own taxi plates. He can set up his own business and no longer feels the need to make 'a quick buck' (p.266).

Q: You may like to consider whether dishonesty and law breaking are ever justified.

Continuity and change

At its core, *With Just One Suitcase* explores the process of relocating from one culture to another, of survival, adaptation, compromise. Koenig's account begins in Romania and she reminds readers that 'This is not the English-speaking world, of course.' At various points throughout the text, Koenig also flavours the story with the culture of her parents and grandparents: Hungarian food is vividly described (p.18; p.20); local vocabulary is integrated (Katarina spends much time in the *nyári konyha*, the summer kitchen). This helps us better appreciate the sense of loss her family would have experienced as they left behind so much that was familiar.

But despite the dislocation, there is some continuity to their lives as the Löws and Königs bring much of their European-ness with them.

The families bring their languages. Anna encourages Frici to teach the children Hungarian, while Istvan and Steffi first converse in German. Despite making a swift

commitment to learning English upon arrival in Australia (pp.179-80), Fred and George effortlessly lapse into their mother tongue when interacting with their parents (p.211).

They bring their food. When Sigismund and Anna first arrive in Australia, Frici is glad he can introduce them to some local stores that sell Hungarian delicacies. Later Anna passes on Hungarian recipes to her daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

Frici and Istvan are able to play football again and both immerse themselves in local clubs. How proud they are when, as elderly men, they can sit together, watching their grandsons play at an elite level.

A more significant example is the change in lifestyle for Sigismund and Anna, both accustomed to the gentility and comfort of life in Romania. On her last night in Europe, Anna realises that 'her interest in anything other than her family' has faded (p.205). Gradually she adapts to her new life, focussing on the non-material joys of being a matriarch to an ever-growing family. However, this takes time, and upon arriving in Sydney, Anna is shocked at the modest material circumstances; 'Why are the sofa, bed and armoire all in one room?' she innocently asks (p.212).

Sigismund is disinterested in adapting to a new culture. For example, it's not long before Frici notes that 'Father won't even try to learn more English' (p. 213). In an excruciating episode of cultural misattunement, his father embarrasses and angers Fred by visiting Joan's parents and asking about a dowry, a custom that baffles and offends his Australian in-laws.

For Steven, having his parents so far away was difficult, especially as they grew older. Yet when he visits his childhood home and spends time with family, he is convinced he made the right decision not to return to Romania (p.247). There is complexity in his feelings about his birthplace—grim, oppressive, parochial and provincial. Steven dreads saying goodbye for the final time, but welcomes his return to Australia, ready to leave behind 'the bleakness [that] infuses not only the buildings but also its occupants' (p.248).

Some things, of course, are happily left behind. Frici Löw and Istvan König become Fred Loew and Steven Koenig, and when they sit together watching soccer as elderly migrants, 'they never really talk of their past experiences', but they *do* speak in English, showing an active desire to merge with the culture of their new home.

Essay topics

1. In 1945, Sigismund says: '... although the war is over, another one has begun.' What do you think he means? In your response, reflect on the nature of war and peace.
2. 'Determination and resourcefulness are innate as well as learnt.'
Discuss in relation to Istvan and Frici.
3. 'Relationships sometimes require tolerance, sometimes compromise.'
How is this illustrated in *With Just One Suitcase*?
4. 'Conflict is most dramatic when it is personal.' Koenig provides a parallel account of the lives of her parents and grandparents. To what extent does this technique help the reader appreciate the impacts of World War II?
5. '*With Just One Suitcase* resonates with readers because the importance of family is central to most cultures.' Do you agree?
6. To what extent do you think writing in third person gives Koenig freedom to analyse members her family?

