

THE CAPITAL WITH THE EYE OF AN EXPAT

Making it happen

Back in 2007, someone told me that there were 23,000 flats in Budapest owned by absentee Irish landlords. I had no idea how realistic that number was, whether it even came close to reality or whether it was so far removed from it that it was laughable. Then the crash came and the number, whichever number, was decimated as people started offloading flats here to bail themselves out of trouble at home. It wasn't pretty.

■ MARY MURPHY

Last week, I overheard two Italians talking to their Hungarian real estate agent. They'd just signed on their fourth flat. The week before, I overheard a German talking about signing on his third. This week a Hungarian friend told me of how they were offered HUF 40 million for a flat they'd paid 18 million for a few years ago. Things are on the up. People are coming to town looking for places to buy and then to rent.

This creates a demand for people like Lena Lehoczky, the creative talent behind Lenoushka, an interior design studio in the city specialising in handmade soft furnishings.

Lena inherited her passion for beautiful, creative fabrics from her mother and her grandmother, both of whom were born in St. Petersburg, Russia. As a child, the three of them would visit fabric shops. They taught her to knit and

to sew. All three would design their own clothes and knit their own sweaters. Her childhood reading was more Burda than Bunty [a girl's comic I grew up with that had cut-out clothes for paper dolls on the back cover].

At the age of 5, Lena designed her first collection: dresses for her dolls. When she got married, her mum gave her the ultimate wedding gift: a wedding dress she had made for her based on Lena's own design.

Smart enough to realise that having a creative talent often isn't enough, Lena studied economics and business management. Reality meant that she needed to make money before she could realise her dream. She earned her keep as a brand manager at several multinational consumer-goods companies in Hungary. As a hobby she'd decorate apartments, designing her own cushions, curtains and bed linen. And life was good.

Married, a mother to three beautiful children, Lena had a job that paid a

decent wage, and a hobby that kept the creative side of her alive. And then the day came when her ever-patient and heretofore supportive husband finally had enough.

His loud No! to her latest attempt to redecorate their apartment still resonates, she says. She had to choose, to admit that design really was her calling. So she enrolled in an interior design course and finished a UK-based professional home textile decorating course. Smart enough also to know that in the interior design business, currency is everything, that trends dictate, she regularly attends design workshops and is currently studying with a New-York-based design school.

Today, Lena works out of a small studio in Buda from where she's involved in several residential interior design projects, creating bespoke curtains and cushions for private and commercial clients. She has redefined her career and is fulfilling a childhood dream.

In her family she's known as Lenoushka. So her company of the same name is more than the fulfilment of her childhood dream: it's also a tribute to those who helped make her the woman she is today. Check her out at www.Lenoushka.com

It's stories like Lena's and that of Terry V, of whom I wrote last week, that keep me believing in Budapest. Both born outside the country, both now living here. Both have found the energy, the space and the opportunity to make it happen in this city. And while many, for their own reasons, are choosing to leave Hungary, it's nice to hear of those who are choosing to stay.

Mary Murphy is a freelance writer and public speaker who delights in the ordinary. Read more at www.unpackingmybottomdrawer.com



Photo: Tamás Kovács