

The man behind Andre

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By bill simons

It's a trail-of-tears saga worthy of Hollywood. A generational progression that we can begin to track in the early 20th century when Andre Agassi's paternal grandfather left impoverished Armenia for Russia where he would acquire some wealth as a fine carpenter in old St. Petersburg. But times and regimes change and Agassi's grandfather, after fighting with the Communists, fled on foot and donkey through the mountains to Iran.

In Teheran, his family settled into a cramped compound where a cadre of families shared a single primitive toilet and the Agassi's (yes, all nine of them, plus dogs) settled into one more than cozy room. Andre's Dad Mike, then connected with the American mission church and made his first connection with tennis. But, like his Father before him, Mike had a wanderlust and soon headed off to the new world. Eventually landing in Chicago with \$2 in his pocket and no English whatsoever.

Here, no job - elevator operator, busboy, waiter - was below him. But he hated the blustery weather and soon headed off to L.A., and then Vegas where he began teaching his long-haired son who was destined to become the world's most beloved and charismatic player, while all the while working long hours as a casino busboy and waiter.

So, it's not exactly surprising, that even to this day Andre talks of the importance of generously tipping hard-working folks and he happily provides his extended family with generous bungalows and houses so they might relish a lifestyle rather different than the sardine can existence that his dad, aunts and uncles endured in dusty, poor, tyrannical Teheran not that long ago.

Reflecting on his Dad's odyssey, Andre told IT, "What my father has managed to do with his life has been taught to me day after day, year after year in terms of how he carries himself, what he believes in, his spirit and generosity. He's taught me a lot, and what he's taught me is a result of his life. He's worked hard to get us a certain way of life. And it's all been based on a phenomenal work ethic and discipline. He's a man who's hard on himself and always wants to push."

Agassi's Dad, who's just published a book, recently sat down with IT to share his journey.

INSIDE TENNIS: Tell us about your new book

MICHAEL AGASSI: I knew so little about my grandparents, so I wrote the book for my children and grandchildren.

IT: You came directly to Chicago from Iran?

MA: No, I stayed on Ellis Island in New York for two or three weeks, and then went to Chicago.

IT : For many immigrants Ellis Island could be a harrowing experience.

MA: There was no one I could talk to. I didn't know English. I had to wait for my papers to go through. I was alone. I had \$34 or \$35. The bus ticket [to Chicago] was \$22. When I reached Chicago, I had \$2 in my pocket.

IT: What were you thinking on the bus as it went through Pennsylvania and Ohio?

MA: I didn't know where I was going. I saw the big American cities and thought of my country which was all desert with nothing but grain.

IT: Why did you leave Teheran?

MA: For a chance to go to school in Chicago. I went to the YMCA high school and Roosevelt University.

IT: How long did it take for you to become conversant in English?

MA: I still don't talk well. .

IT: You speak beautifully. What do you know about your grandparents?

MA: My great great great grandfather was Syrian. He married an Armenian woman. Their son married an Armenian. Their son married an Armenian. Their son married an Armenian. My father married an Armenian.

IT: What are the best characteristics of the Armenian people?

MA: A lot has happened to us.

IT: That's for sure. So how did you get turned onto tennis in the first place.

MA: I was a member of an American mission church. The soldiers used to play and so at seven or eight I started to ballboy and run after the balls. Eventually somebody got me a racket with wire strings and no grip - it was wood.

IT: Wire and no grip?

MA: I had that racket until I came to Chicago. I loved tennis. It was a one-man game, not a team game. I was a challenge to hit a ball that somebody else couldn't return.

IT: So back to the timeline. After you arrived in Chicago with \$2 ...

MA: I became a member of the CYO and a boxer. In '53, '54 and '55 I won the Golden Gloves I was fast and I had a straight knockout punch.

IT: Andre has the best hand-eye coordination in the sport. He probably got that from you. But is it true, when Andre was an infant, you placed a tennis ball above his cradle.

MA: I had a racket and a ball hanging from his cradle. The ball was moving. The day he came home from the hospital everything was ready. Andre would play with them.

IT: Why did you move from Chicago to Vegas?

MA: I was a tennis player. I couldn't play more than one or two months a year. If I stayed in Chicago my life would have been miserable.

IT: How was Vegas different then from today?

MA: It was all desert. I wish I had the money I have now. I could have bought the whole hotel. Instead I invested in a ball machine. If I could do it again, I would put my kids into golf or baseball. In tennis you have to be in condition 12 months a year and your career is short.

IT: You taught all of your kid's tennis, but when did you sense that Andre was going to be special?

MA: Teaching the other kids [Rita, Tammy and Phil] I learned how to teach the little one better. Andre showed a lot of potential, a lot of desire. He would practice. From age four, he used to hit against Connors, Borg, Roscoe Tanner, Brian Gottfried, Harold Solomon, Ilie Nastase. He had an exhibition match in '84 [when he was four] with Bobby Riggs. He played a complete game.

IT: You taught him his great strokes with his short backswings?

MA: I taught him to take the ball early. By taking the ball early, you cannot have a long backswing. When you take the ball early, you have to move to where the ball bounces. I couldn't do that feeding him the ball - I had to use the ball machine. I taught him to move to the ball, hit the ball and back up. You have to teach someone how to hit hard. It's not just swinging hard.

IT: As a father, was it hard to send your son across the country to a tennis academy.

MA: That was hard. I didn't sleep many nights. I was on the phone every day with him. I was very concerned whether the coaches were child molesters. I was very concerned how happy Andre was. I had to go back and forth continuously.

IT: Nick Bollettieri wrote that there were small Jack Daniels whisky bottles in Andre's room.

MA: I didn't know anything about it. You have a camp with pros working for six, seven dollars an hour. They've come from Colombia, Puerto Rico. Maybe they sold drugs. But my son didn't do drugs. But they never told me [about the drinking]. I asked Andre, 'Are there any drugs, is there any drinking?' He would say, 'No.' So I would ask, 'Do you know anybody who does?' He would say, 'don't ask me that.' If Andre had a drink in his room, shame on him. He didn't tell me.

IT: Andre was with Bollettieri for many years, but after he left, he was highly critical.

MA: The only good thing about Andre going there was that he got some people to play with. The worse part was that Andre had a great serve and was a great net player, but ended up just being a baseline player. The academy uses great players. Don't forget, the kids learn from each other. They didn't help Andre as much as Andre helped the academy. Andre developed the academy. The whole world came to the academy because Andre Agassi was there.

IT: It sounds like you're saying that Andre would have been a serve and volleyer if he hadn't gone to Bollettieri's. Anyway - bottom line - if you could do it again, would you send your son there?

MA: I wouldn't because he suffered enough on the tennis court.

IT: What quality about Andre are you most proud of?

MA: His endurance. The type of a person he is. His generosity. His relationship with the media, the public. He's beloved.

IT: But it should be noted that many felt that, as a teen, Andre was a kid who was very full of himself and had plenty had of 'tude. Now he's evolved into an incredibly thoughtful, reflective, caring and...

MA: What did he say as a teen?

IT: Oh I don't know. For instance, before taking off for a Davis Cup tie in South America, he said he wanted to squash the Paraguayans like the insects they were.

MA: He was a child. [Former Sports Illustrated writer] Curry Kirkpatrick wrote 18 pages to destroy him just because he was drinking Pepsi Cola. He called it a six pack. But it was just Pepsi. He wrote that his father never saw him. His mother never saw him. His grandfather never met him. My country was under Khomeni. You know what kind of country we came from. They do everything they can to destroy somebody.

IT: Then Andre was reamed out big time just because he said at the U.S. Open that he would beat Connors in straight sets -- 3, 3 and 3.

MA: He did. But what about what Connors said about Andre? The media told Connors he was going to playing a young kid. So then Connors said, "Maybe Andre's my son, I spent a lot of time with a lot of

women over there in Vegas."

IT: But let's get positive. Andre's obviously a great guy. How did he evolve?

MA: When he was six years old, he had memorized the whole Bible. I thought he was going to be a preacher - not a tennis player. Christianity stayed with him and he switched his rebelliousness to become a kind person.

IT: What did his wife Steffi bring to the table?

MA: Steffi Graf is the best thing to happen in Andre's life. She's stable.

IT: And if you had to choose just one or two words to summarize the man who's inspired so many?

MA: He's the most passionate person I've ever met. He's been great to his workers. There was a woman who had cancer who was working for him. He sent her to see her parents in Poland several times. He sent the parents to Hawaii on vacation. He paid all their expenses. The day that she was dying he was playing [Sebastien] Grosjean in Paris. They told him that she was dying. He didn't know if she would make it or not. He lost on purpose and then flew to San Francisco, or Vegas to see her before she died and he did. He never told anyone.