

On a steep, winding street off Coldwater Canyon in Beverly Hills, a rambling house hides behind a high, thick hedge and a wrought-iron gate. Made of brick with a black slate roof, the structure is set on a rise above the street, fronted by a modest lawn and flower beds. Nothing distinguishes it from the other houses in this quiet neighborhood— at least nothing that is immediately visible.

Back in the early 1960s, however, the accoutrements that had been added to make life comfortable in this house were far beyond those of the typical upscale Coldwater Canyon home. The house featured an enormous mechanized turntable in the driveway so that friends who dropped by at odd hours could easily turn around their Jaguars and Rolls-Royces and Mercedes-Benzes. The two older girls in the family could frolic in the backyard pool, which was next to a Japanese garden; the youngest girl, a baby, had her own nursery in a new two-story wing. An intricate system of television sets and hi-fi's piped entertainment indoors and out. A sixteenth-century antique harpsichord and a pet donkey named Piccolo were among the more unusual inhabitants. Callers who phoned when the owners were not home were greeted by an answering machine message with an impeccable English accent—this at a time when answering machines were virtually unknown.

A graceful brick archway over the driveway divided the main house from a smaller structure, a garage that had been transformed into a den. For its owner, Ernie Kovacs, this comfortably cluttered, wood-paneled, leather-furnished den was the pulsing heart of the house, the material and symbolic manifestation of the comedian's lifetime motto, "Nothing in moderation." Once a poor Trenton boy from an immigrant Hungarian family, now a rich television and movie star, Ernie had outfitted his den with most of what was significant to him in life.

Dominating the uppermost level of the three-story space was a green-felt card table for his favorite (some said dangerously so) pastime, poker; here he would

hold marathon card parties with such close friends as Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis, Dean Martin, and Billy Wilder, quite often losing but never wanting to stop. A library was filled not just with books but with a beautiful collection of valuable military artifacts: “a brace of French dueling pistols,” as one visitor observed, “helmets (Spanish, Roman, Saracen), an old Persian shield, Spanish breastplates, a Chinese cannon, an ivory-inlaid blunderbuss, medieval shields and suits of armor.” The library also contained an oversized desk built especially to accommodate Ernie’s six-foot-two, 215-pound frame. This held a panel of electronic controls from which he could communicate with his household via an intercom network, manipulate the gadgets inside the house and out, and experiment with the video and sound effects that he loved. Decorations included a stuffed rhinoceros head, an indoor waterfall, and an enormous polar-bearskin rug, onto which his collection of 14,000 records often overflowed. In the original bath he had enlarged the shower and added a steam-bathing room, and several times a day (or night) he might repair to the latter for a lengthy steam bath. Beneath the main space was a wine cellar stocked with the finest wines and champagnes, which his special-effects men sprayed with rubber cobwebs and fuller’s earth to lend a properly aged look. Most important of all was the electric sign just outside the den’s entrance. Like a home-style version of an ON AIR sign, it read NOT NOW, and nobody—colleagues, family, friends, servants—was allowed to enter when it was lit. Often he’d spend all night there, for he worked best at night, and his daughters or his second wife, singer-actress Edie Adams, would wake to find the sign still on and wonder whether he had slept at all.

This was an extraordinary level of escape to have achieved, an extraordinary amount of control to have over one’s environment. But why did he need to escape; why did he crave the control? By 1961—in only a decade—Kovacs had made a unique mark upon the young medium of TV. Behind his signature black mustache and ever-present Havana cigar, Ernie Kovacs possessed the most bizarre, anarchic comic mind ever to have hit the tube. He instinctively understood the special, intimate qualities and vast electronic potential of the small screen, and he was adventuresome and imaginative and funny enough to exploit them:

ERNIE DRAWS A STICK OF DYNAMITE . . . IT EXPLODES

ERNIE SAWS THROUGH THE TREE BRANCH HE’S SITTING
ON . . . THE TRUNK FALLS

ERNIE DRIVES A GOLFBALL INTO THE CAMERA LENS . . . THE
GLASS SHATTERS

ERNIE PAINTS OUR TV SCREEN BLACK

The comedy that Ernie was creating was truly visionary. It could not exist on the vaudeville or nightclub stage, would not work in the oversized scale of the motion picture screen. It took view of the fact that the audience was sitting around at home watching a magical box that hadn’t been there a decade or two earlier. Ernie’s special gift to his viewers was to enter their living rooms and pull as many delightful visions out of his head as he could, like rabbits out of a hat.

Ernie Kovacs was a man of vast extremes, an ambitious and supremely gifted workaholic, a compulsive and self-destructive gambler, a generous and sometimes frustrating lover, father, and friend. He deliberately lived his life at a fever pitch, and by 1961 he had experienced much joy, but he had also trapped himself within many situations from which he yearned to escape.

Always the high roller, the biggest of the big spenders, at the peak of his professional stature he had driven his finances into the ground. He was deeply in debt from gambling, from excessive high living, from overspending on production budgets, and from having neglected to pay his income taxes. He was working for superhuman stretches of up to forty hours with little or no sleep and pouring whatever energy he had left into frantic efforts to hide the monetary problems from his wife, whom he felt it was his duty to protect. There were other difficulties—disappointment over his failure to do auteur-level work in the movies, for example, and frustration with his inability to make progress on various literary projects. Cracks were beginning to show in his marriage and family life; strain was beginning to show in his darkly handsome face.

“I like to be onstage,” Ernie once confided to his writer Rex Lardner, “because nobody can bother me there. Lawyers, process servers, insurance salesmen—anyone.” On a sound stage, behind the shielding glass of the television screen, Ernie Kovacs felt safe and in control, and these were the conditions he attempted to reproduce in his extravagant Beverly Hills den made-to-order. Performing on TV or locked up inside his den, protected by electric signs warning people away, Ernie could shut out the rest of the world, with its never-ending money worries and personal conflicts and professional frustrations. He could take control and let his imagination run wild and create glorious illusions to

bring pleasure to his audiences and to himself. He could live in a dream, his own private Kovacsland.

The archetypal start for a life of high drama is to be born into humble surroundings. This Ernest Edward Kovacs was, in Trenton, New Jersey, on January 23, 1919. His father was Andrew John Kovacs, a tall, big-boned, kindly man with bushy black eyebrows, thick hair, and an equally thick foreign accent. He had emigrated from the town of Pálháza, Hungary, in his teens, had learned to speak English, and had recently obtained a job as a foot patrolman in the first and second precincts of Trenton. Ernie's mother, born Mary M. Chebonick to Hungarian parents who had also immigrated to Trenton, was a devout Catholic who nevertheless swore gustily in both Hungarian and English (a trait she would pass on to her only son). Ernest was baptized on February 3 at St. Stephen's Catholic Church, in the heart of Trenton's Hungarian community, and Mary would raise him as a Catholic. Although he stopped attending church regularly as an adult, his daughters would later remember him kneeling by his bed every night to pray before removing the St. Christopher medal he always wore and placing it on the night table next to him.

Andrew Kovacs was part of the great wave of Hungarian immigrants who made the arduous and uncertain journey to America between 1880 and 1914. Like the vast numbers of Irish, Italians, Germans, Slavs, Swedes, Greeks, Chinese, and others who also went through the port of entry at Ellis Island, the Hungarians were motivated almost exclusively by economic considerations. Largely young men of peasant stock, they were "the people who had been displaced from their traditional agricultural pursuits," according to historian Steven Bela Vardy. "Having been made superfluous in their native village, and finding no meaningful employment opportunities in the country's industrial centers, they were forced to seek their fortunes abroad, particularly in the United States."

Of the 1.7 million Hungarians who transplanted themselves to the United States during this period, the largest number came in 1907: 185,000, nearly 1 percent of Hungary's entire population. From Ellis Island the arriving immigrant had to make his or her way to a job, waiting family members, a community of others from the same homeland. Many were attracted to nearby New Jersey, whose burgeoning industrial and commercial cities provided a wealth of job opportunities. The capital, Trenton, was a particularly strong magnet, with its potter-

ies and foundries, rubber manufacturers and cigar factories. The main highway bridge over the Delaware River into Trenton announced the city's manufacturing prowess with a gigantic sign: TRENTON MAKES—THE WORLD TAKES.

András János Kovács had immigrated in 1906, at the age of sixteen. He chose to settle in Trenton, and there is a record of his having obtained a job as a diemaker at a wire-rope factory in Trenton—probably the enormous John A. Roebling's Sons Company, which was started by the civil engineer who had built the Brooklyn Bridge. Like most immigrants, he found room and board with a family from his homeland, Joseph and Elizabeth Homa.

As of the 1910 census, when he was living at the Homas' house only a few blocks from Roebling's, Andrew had not filed for U.S. citizenship. He married shortly thereafter, and in 1912 his wife bore a son, Thomas. The marriage ended in divorce within a few years. Andrew took on the responsibility of raising Tommy, who would grow up to look like a tall, thin version of his father, although without the thick head of hair.

It is not known how and when Andrew met Mary Chebonick, but a Trenton directory of the period shows them living very near one another—Andrew having moved by 1917 to South Clinton Avenue, in Trenton's Hungarian neighborhood, and Mary living with her family on Genesee Street, just a block south of Clinton. Andrew's status as a divorced man apparently didn't bother the Catholic Mary, who was wedded to him on January 13, 1918, at St. Stephen's Church; he was twenty-seven and she, twenty-one. The union would be a mixture of happiness and conflict. Their common ethnic heritage was a significant bond, and both loved to throw parties. But they also shared a tendency toward volatility, and they would fight when Mary's fierce ambitions ran up against Andrew's more relaxed attitude toward their fortunes.

Maria M. Csebenyák was born on December 5, 1896, most likely at her family's home (her birth certificate shows her birthplace as Genesee Street). Both her parents had emigrated from Hungary. Mary's father, John Chebonick, found work in a Trenton factory, and when he was in his early twenties he suffered an industrial accident so severe that he had to have both legs amputated. (Violent maiming and death were common in the industrial workplaces where many Hungarian immigrants took jobs.) John developed gangrene and died, leaving his wife, Susanna Torony Chebonick, with a houseful of children to raise. Mary was eight years old. "She had no idea of what death was at eight, so she just went on," says Kippie Kovacs, one of Mary's granddaugh-