

OUTCAST

***One man's journey through a lost world
of the 20th century***

***by Gabor Bain
with Colin Amodeo***



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Preface

Original preface

A long line of shadowy figures moves all around me. I hear dogs from the nearby village howling into the moonless night, perhaps yelping their farewell to the year of 1956. Snow hangs thick on the ghostly branches of a pine forest just ahead. Behind me is the eerie light of a snow-covered field. I hear the village church clock strike midnight when we are stopped by a border guard. Nonchalantly, he indicates that we are to follow him and, after trudging for some distance, he grabs the end of a small flag stuck in the ground.

“You are in Austria,” he says.

In that moment I am reborn.

Over the past forty years I have bored my wife with stories of my past. She is my witness to the authenticity of what is to follow since she also took part in some of my adventures.

I have seen changes of which no previous generation could have dreamed. As a mild-mannered and optimistic Gemini with artistic leanings, I have managed to retain my sanity through all that has happened. My personal odyssey has been a stormy one. Most of my life has not been worth a great deal to anyone except myself. The Damoclean sword seemed to hang over it most of the time.

What I write here is not fiction although in places it might seem so. This story deals with real people and real places. There may be some discomfort for those whose names appear here. To them, I have no sympathy. I have been on both sides of the social fence in a semi-feudal country trying to progress towards Capitalism. I have had the privilege, some would say, of being brought up in the traditions of both Christian and Jew. I am still searching for a Truth that will sustain me.

May I wish you well.

Gabor,
Christchurch, New Zealand
2000 A.D.

Updated Preface

I first met Gabor in 1997 when he attended one of my adult writing classes. His spoken English was fine but his written second-language was insufficient yet he desperately wanted to tell his story in print to an English reading public.

Soon, we agreed on a weekly Saturday morning meeting and, on each occasion, he would supply a portion of text in which he had struggled to turn his native Magyar [Hungarian] into English. The effort often exhausted him – he was in his early 'seventies – but he delighted in our sessions where he received the next few pages in edited form. This meant that some words and spellings were anglicized for the benefit of a wider audience.

Gabor saw himself as a sort of 20th Century François Villon, the 17th Century French poet whose chequered career and various imprisonments led to his eventual banishment. If Villon was an 'outcast' so, within limits, was Gabor Bain.

And yet, he could not quite subscribe to Villon's famous '*en cette foi je veux vivre et mourir*' - in this faith I wish to live and die. Readers will subsequently see why. As his story unfolded, Gabor began to identify himself with the tragic clown in Ruggiero Leoncavallo's 1892 opera *I Pagliacci*. There were also hints of Telemachus in search of his father Odysseus.

After some two years, many cups of tea, plates of black currant shortcake prepared by his loyal wife, and the occasional goulash, I had Gabor's manuscript completed in first draft. Once we had

rubbed off the sharp corners, he was fully appreciative of Jean de la Bruyère's dictum, *'il faut plus que de l'esprit pour être auteur'* - it takes more than wit to become an author.

In 2000, Gabor printed off several formatted sets of his story and, being a former leatherworker, bound these into book form with a domed button tab in the style of an earlier century. One copy came to me but was lost as a result of the 2010 Christchurch earthquakes.

Fortunately, his son Robert had retained the original computer files. These, updated into the present format and re-edited, now provide the basis for Gabor's personal story, *Outcast*.

This is a sad as well as angry memoir of a man who felt he had been torn between two worlds and yet was blessed to have survived both before leaving Europe for New Zealand.

As Gabor Bain said to me one day,
"You have no idea of what it was like."

Many 21st Century readers will surely agree.

Colin Amodeo,
Christchurch, New Zealand
2020 A.D.



Brief timeline

'Hungary is a kingdom without a king, run by a regent [Horthy] who is an admiral without a navy'.

-U.S. President F.D.Roosevelt

1920: The Treaty of Trianon punished Hungary for its support of Germany in World War I by carving off territory and allocating this to neighbouring countries.

1931: Hungarian Regent Miklos Horthy declared martial law following social, political and economic unrest. Certain Communists were imprisoned and some executed. Critics contended that Horthy was attempting to keep the Magyar bloodlines pure by targeting so-called 'foreign' communities in Hungary.

1939: Hungary remained neutral after World War II began.

1941: Hungary joined the Axis Powers largely in order to regain lands lost after the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.

1944 (March): Germany invaded Hungary. Many Hungarian Jews and other citizens were executed or deported.

1945 (April): Budapest was liberated by the Soviet Army a month before the fall of Berlin. During this time, nearly three-quarters of Budapest was destroyed and many thousands of Hungarian citizens were deported to Russian work camps.

1946: severe inflation in Hungary made life increasingly difficult.

1949: The 'People's Republic of Hungary' was created. Show trials of 'enemies of the people' took place in Budapest.

1956: (October) The Hungarian Revolution left Budapest in flames after the riots. Hungary briefly left the Warsaw Pact before re-joining under the new Communist leader, Janos Kadar.

The Legacy of Trianon

Following the end of World War I and the dissolution of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, the states of Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia were to acquire former Hungarian lands and peoples.

This was a recipe for disaster which led to the formation of a Hungarian Soviet Republic with its own Red Army fighting perceived 'invaders' from these countries. Inevitably, a weakened Hungary was defeated. The Royal Romanian Army entered Budapest on 4 August 1919.

In November 1919, the Allies restored the Hungarian state and assisted Admiral Horthy into power but the Hungarian borders were not properly defined. Then, on 4 June 1920 the Treaty of Trianon was signed at the Grand Trianon Palace, Versailles, France, to be effective on 31 July 1921. This was designed to establish Hungary as an independent state.

However, the Hungarian delegation signed the Treaty under protest since the older Kingdom of Hungary would be deprived of a considerable amount of territory and have no direct access to a sea port. There would be ethnic minorities inside the Hungarian borders while many Hungarian groups would now find themselves members of neighbouring states, losing their Hungarian nationality within two years.

The result was increasing bitterness. Most Hungarians regarded the Treaty as a humiliating insult to their truncated country and, in this respect, felt that this was similar to the punishment inflicted on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles of June 1919. Hungarian military forces were to be disbanded, to be reformed into an army of no more than 35,000 men. Heavy artillery and a national air force were forbidden while further railway building would be limited to single tracks since the by the recent war had demonstrated strategic value of double-line railway routes.

The Treaty of Trianon had been designed to create self-determining nations but it proved impossible to establish ethnically homogenous states out of disputed territories. Many Hungarians saw Trianon in terms of '*Nem, nem, soha!*' (No, no, never!) and '*Mindent vissza!*' (return everything!) Such irredentism meant that, inevitably, Hungary received assistance from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy prior to World War II and began to enlarge its borders.

Into this mix of huge political unrest, economic deprivation, severe unemployment and ethnic intolerance comes Gabor Bain, swept along like a leaf on a river current and fighting to stay alive.

Glossary: Hungarian words into English

shekshe: Gentile or non-Jewish

tantus: coin

filler: about one cent

menhely: almshouse

fekete kenyér: bread

hockne: gypsy band gig

more: brother

pudree: children

schamess: usher, assistant

Chanucha: [Hanukka] the eight-day

Jewish winter festival of lights

Pasach: Passover

matzos: unleavened flat bread

palinka: potent fruit brandy
goy: a non- Jewish person
novy: Gabor's word for a feudal serf,
apparently Slavic in origin rather than
Magyar
kifli: crescent-shaped, yeast roll
fonok: boss
boyar: member of the privileged class
haz mester: caretaker or janitor

Part One ***1925 – 1939***

Chapter One: Entering this world

*'Like a big hat, when the cloud moves over the blue sky,
My only remaining friend is the fog.'*
-François Villon

The Twentieth Century had run just twenty-five years on the Continent of Europe but so many disturbing events had already taken place. We all knew of the bloody events of the First World War and its aftermath.

I was born in a crowded State-run hospital right in the middle of 1925 on a Black Friday - not a good omen. I did not know what superstition was. I was not afraid, only defenceless and remained a sport of the gods for quite a long time afterwards.

Apparently consternation had broken out amongst the doctors and nurses when one learned medico pointed out that here was another of Genghis Khan's bastards after he had seen a purple-brown patch on my left buttock and another on my left arm. These were said to have originated from Temujin's son Ogdai who went on the rampage in Hungary in the 12th century, pillaging and raping as was the custom amongst backward races.

Now that I am an adult and have checked this on the map, I can see that there may be some validity in the claim, especially since my high cheek bones and volatility suggests that I am part Mongol and part Magyar. Sometimes it's a bit hard to work out just which are my protecting deities. Soon enough you will see why.

Poor little boy that I was, I could not foretell what I should have to endure just to survive but I did, in spite of the hardship.

I was nothing more than another screaming, hungry little mouth, another baby in the care of the hospital. Being a boy, I was one more prospective bullet-stopper in another war for the benefit of the ruling classes.

Yet my destiny was not for that particular end. While Anne Frank did not survive but left a written record, I did survive to tell of my share in that time of ferment in the country I had been born into.

Anne was sheltered from the misery of the outside world. I was not. I got to know the rough side of life very quickly. The one thing we had in common (despite all our differences) was that certain people - the lowest kind of humanity - were planning our early demise.

I was given birth by a Protestant mother and baptised 'Gabor' in the hospital chapel by a minister called Komlos Gabor. For a godfather, I had a Swabian, Pospishle Gabor, the husband of my mother's sister. When I was searching for details of my background, I found my records in one of the Protestant archives in Budapest. The document reads: *'Irena Turi gave birth to a healthy boy on 13 June 1925.'* Also in this document was the information that my father was an 'Israelite'.

As a little boy, I had been oblivious. Just to be born was enough stress for this little soul. Could I have selected my own parents or decided which family or creed was acceptable? Not a show!

I've been born. But why? Some purpose must have been allocated to me. Nature or the Almighty works in a mysterious way without telling us why.

I begin with my mother and those around her.

The road I have travelled has been bumpy with many dangers. Conquerors not only like to re-write history but also to plan the future.

At the end of the First World War, the League of Nations consisted of members whose interest was to lay down laws and regulations for other nations while seeking to benefit from this themselves. The leading politicians were British, French, Belgian and American and they worked out schemes to cause the biggest

upheavals for those countries who were already weak and defenceless. They created situations in the heart of Europe which were untenable with their slogan that the League would end the possibility of war for ever. The result created hotbeds of nationalistic fervour within those countries affected by the League's manipulations.

At Trianon Palace in Versailles in June 1920, the League representatives dealt with lands and peoples as they thought fit but always to their own advantage. Imperialists themselves, they passed judgement on others. The old Kingdom of Hungary was divided between neighbouring nations: a good chunk going here, another part there, and so it went, leaving the country landlocked with only some 35,000 soldiers to defend it.

The largest, perhaps the most valuable part, went to Roumania whose army already occupied most of the country, including the capital, Budapest. This army then set out systematically on wholesale rape, pillage and looting. They took everything. If the item was bolted down or secured in some other way, it was wrenched out. This rapine was halted only by order of the League of Nations. The Trianon agreement was signed on behalf of Hungary by Graf Aponyi Albert and, indignantly, the Roumanians had to move back to the new frontier allotted to them.

Illustration 1, Image 'Divided Hungary'



A Hungarian patriot's view of the Trianon land-grab.

The League also stripped Hungary of her precious metals, iron, timber, oil and coal. From past experience, Hungarians remember how clever the Roumanians had been in sneaky politicking, always changing sides, leaving alliances in the lurch and gaining from the betrayal. In the 1980s, leaders of the United States and Britain, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, rolled out the red carpet to the staunchest Communist, Ceauşescu, whom they had earlier declared to be their deadly enemy.

In this newly-acquired border land below the Carpathian Alps, there lived about a million Hungarians, the Szekelys, who had been there a thousand years. Side by side with other races, including Roumanian peasants, they had subsisted peacefully all that time. The situation changed with this new League arrangement and the majority became the minority at the point of a gun.

Szekeleys found themselves victims of 'racial cleansing' by the new Authorities. Oppression on an unknown scale began. The first people to be 'cleansed' were those who had been in official positions. My grandfather, I have been told, was the mayor in a town now given a Roumanised name as Târgu Mureş - a major agricultural and cultural centre with a large market place. The River Maros flowed nearby.

My mother's people

I visited Târgu Mureş in 1947 to see if my relations were still living. My mother had been born there, speaking the Roumanian language, as well Hungarian but in the Szekely dialect.

Illustration 2, Image 'Szekeley couple'



A Szekeley couple at the turn of the 20th Century.

Fearing for his family's life and his own, my grandfather escaped to what was left of Hungary. He was twenty-four stone, over two-metres tall and a muscular giant. His presence was awesome. When he lived with us and stood on the doorstep, no light could percolate through into our flat. He was a blacksmith by trade, making boilers for coal-fired locomotives until he became the town mayor.

Among many thousands of other homeless refugees, he and his wife, with their three girls and one boy arrived with few possessions to find a completely looted, ravaged Hungary. Two million Hungarians were estimated to have died during the First World War and many hundreds of thousands were injured. Hungarian soldiers had been forced to fight for the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph. The refugees from Roumania were able to boost Hungary's lost manpower.

The war was finished but the Russians had begun their proletarian revolution. In Hungary, Stalin's cohorts had put up Bela Kun and Tibor Szamuely as puppet leaders in early 1919. There were others, including Idealists and hard-line Communists. Tragically, Russian-trained Hungarians in the black, leather-jacketed Lenin Brigade wrought havoc and misery for months. This period, known as the 'Red Terror', saw thousands of people disappear, murdered at the drop of a hammer and sickle. The Western Powers and the League of Nations had other things on their minds and were not interested in Stalin's game, as yet.

However, with French initiatives backed by European aristocrats, an organisation was set up in Vienna some months later with a naval commander in charge. Hungarian by birth, Miklos Horthy established his headquarters in Hungary's loveliest town, Szeged, in order to begin his upper-class, counter-revolution. Material assistance came covertly from the Western Powers. Far-sighted Hungarians, revolted by the extreme activities of the Lenin Brigades, also gave impetus to the pursuit of his goal.

Illustration 3, Image 'Horthy'



Hungary's dictator, Miklos Horthy.

Unfortunately for ordinary people, these changes were no help. In the aftermath of the struggle many more were killed and general misery prevailed. This period came to be known as the 'White Terror' since it was similar in form to the Spanish Inquisition centuries ago.

My grandfather was soon working in a small smithy forging horseshoes and metal rings for cartwheels. Just when the family fortune turned for the better, my grandmother caught a virus. As a result of the prevailing poor medical standards, she soon gave her soul to the Almighty in whom she believed. However, the breadwinner was left with four school-age children.

Kati, the youngest, stayed at home to do the housekeeping. School wasn't to her liking. She hated it. She had been born with 'O'-shaped, bowed legs, two feet apart at the knee. Only four and a half feet tall, she walked like a goose or a duck, a tragi-comedy. She was very good around the house, a marvellous cook and a splendid housekeeper. A heart of gold, she had, with a lot of fine human qualities. I loved her so much.

Eventually Kati married a *novy*, a simple person like herself. She gave birth to a girl and a boy, perfectly normal, nice children. Like their mother, they were always cheerful, singing, smiling and lovable people.

Jolan, the oldest of my grandmother's girls, was mediocre, a non-achiever who had difficulty learning. I met her once, but I did not get to know her or her Swabian husband. For me, his name was a tongue-twister, Pospishle Gabor, and he was the one who gave me the 'Gabor' name at my baptism.

Interestingly, the chaplain was also called Gabor, an aristocratic name I never liked. My mother's choice was Peter, which I prefer. My Aunt Jolan was always very reserved towards us, like those people who were not so keen about the whole Turi family.

My mother was the middle girl, named Irena. She possessed an attractive body with legs like the legendary Mistinguette, the French ballet dancer of the 1930s. Mother had a lovely face as well as a charming smile which was her strength and her main attribute. Quick to learn, she was intelligent and ready to pick up new ideas. She spoke the Roumanian and Hungarian languages perfectly and sang operatic arias beautifully in Italian. As she worked, she would sing opera or Neapolitan songs and I still remember a few. Had Mother been given the chance to learn to sing properly, she could have been one of the great singers of our time. Sadly, she was not.

Illustration 4, Image 'Mistinguette'



**Mistinguette, who charmed men
by the thousands.**

Mother gave birth to four children and went through a great deal of hardship. Even so, in her sixties, she was as beautiful as in her youthful prime. In my twenties, I used to escort her to certain entertainments and overhear remarks such as, “How lucky that chap is to have such a beauty on his arm.” Acquaintances of mine, not knowing who she was, would ask “How did you manage to pick up such a fantastic chick?” When I told them she was my mother, I was not believed.

The youngest member of grandmother’s family was Joseph who was a good talker but a sponger for most of his life. A shoemaker by trade, he travelled and worked in many parts of Europe. More of him later, when I describe our adventures with the Russians.

My father’s relatives

Father was born in 1895 in the formerly-prosperous city of Veszprem, now suffering a decline. It had been a medieval town and the seat of the government administration, closer to Austria than Pest, a district capital. The ruling Kings of Hungary preferred this place since it was not far from Vienna.

Nevertheless, the country’s lifeline was the River Danube and, as a result, most of the commercial activity and manufacturing was centred in Pest. Such was the progress in this city that all other cities hardly counted in the life of the Hungarian nation. The ruling class and the king shifted to where the action was. They built some splendid castles opposite Pest on the hill of Buda, overlooking the Danube. Below their luxurious abodes, entertainments were available night and day. For easier administration, two towns were later merged and Budapest was born, much to the envy of most European rulers.

Sandor, my father, grew up in old Veszprem within a prosperous and respected Jewish family. His father owned a small furrier factory behind a shop. A good craftsman himself, he employed several people and was doing well. His two sons (one later being my father) also became good craftsmen within the family. Quite by chance, I met my grandfather, since I visited the apartment of my aunt, Janka Ante, twice a week to practise on her grand piano. On this occasion, I found an old man with a foot-long, greyish beard.

Curious, I greeted him with a “hello” and “good day” which he indignantly returned. He spared me a glance, then said nothing more so I went to hammer out my piano practice. Some days later, Ante Janka by name, asked me if I knew who the bearded man had been.

“No,” I answered. “I haven’t a clue.”

“He is not an unfriendly man, you know,” she continued. “He is your grandfather.”

“Oh,” I replied. “Why have I not been told of that?”

Janka Ante, a large Jewish woman with wit and humour, was always kind and helpful, and greatly influenced my outlook on life. In her quiet way, she explained,

“Gabor, your father is a habitual race-goer and gambler, besides his other vices. Your grandfather gave him enough money to establish a decent furrier business here in Budapest. He gave a similar amount to his other son, Franz, who is doing well in Vienna. Sadly, your father spent the lot. He asked for more and was given it but also gambled this away.”

“When your grandfather knew his son was going to marry a Christian girl, your mother, it was the last straw. What a *shekshe*? [Gentile] Never! Never! Yet your father did marry your mother against his own father’s will. Grandfather has not spoken to Sandor since. It’s a pity he was so cool to you.”

Janka Ante was a true bohemian and my Guardian Angel. I would often find her at her door dealing with peasants who brought her poultry and fresh produce. There would be some quiet haggling but the items always ended up on the kitchen table for a decent feed. I knew there would be satisfaction on both sides. It must have been, since these people turned up regularly but I didn’t know if she paid them in money or with superfluous clothing.

Geza, her second husband, (she had lost her first to cancer) was a manager of the largest store in the country. He had a good income but she had a heart of gold and gave, regardless of the cost to herself. She would feed people endlessly, including me, while her husband was away but was often short of money. She would have to pawn expensive jewellery, a fur coat or other items and, when their whereabouts were questioned, she would reply,

“I’ve just taken it for repair, or polishing,” (“What, your fur coat?”) and similar answers. Geza never grumbled. Her items usually went to some shop for cash and then were redeemed, to disappear again for a while at another pawnbroker’s. If he knew of her deals, he never let on. He was satisfied with his charming wife, although she was no beauty. He was a well-dressed and good-looking, attractive to other women but faithful to his Janka.

*

A State Ward

Life in the country was, as a whole, without hope unless you were one of the aristocrats, Catholic clergy, large landowners, members of the administration or an industrialist. Those who had taken part as aggressors in the ‘White Terror’ had been given generous rewards in the shape of land grants, castles or important government positions. The lot of the crippled and landless was, on the other hand, no more than further stringent oppression. The new rulers created a new army from rejects along the lines of the French Legionnaires, all of whom were sycophantic characters and formed a sort of gendarmerie which became the tool for subjugation and tyranny.

They were a law unto themselves, above the law, who killed and maimed - mere hoodlums dressed in a green khaki uniform with tall black hats displaying rich, shiny green cock feathers. They wore Sam Browne-style leather belts to carry heavy pistols and were armed with a .75 calibre Manlicher rifle and a 45mm bayonet attached to the barrel. These gangsters patrolled the streets in a slow stroll, their heavy, high boots reverberating on the footpaths.

Illustration 5, Image ‘Hungarian Gendarmerie’



The image belied the impact on many Hungarian groups.

However, the major towns were out of bounds to them, at least while they were in uniform. A few would venture in to bait the police but disappeared without trace. These two organisations were to remain deadly enemies. Certainly they had differences in education as well as discipline and our police were generally similar to the English 'Bobby' who was liked and respected by law-abiding citizens.

My parents found a small downstairs flat in the middle of Budapest's working class area on Saltpetre Street in the Eighth District, known as Joseph Town. The major boulevard which encircled the suburb was close by. However, their home was a lightless place, with buildings more than four storeys high surrounding a courtyard. Dogs, cats and children, in that order, were prohibited within. The adults made a hell of a racket all day long, far more than any number of screaming children could ever do. At any hour, loud cursings reverberated around the buildings at each level.

We lived amongst the real proletariat. In 1956, this was to spell the doom for some Russian tanks and soldiers. Drunkenness was the norm. We never knew who was sorting out whom. The free circus was always on, coming from different sides and in different volumes. Skirmishes would end when someone landed on the ground from a height. The police would then have to call the State undertaker. This became a familiar occurrence. Cleaning-up was the assistant-janitor's job. It was like a Brueghel painting or Dante's portrait of Hell.

At four years old, I was just a banished creature who had to remain quiet with no crying or loud talk. Mother kept reminding me that if I misbehaved, Drakuj (Dracula in the West) would come and pull me through the chimney. She would threaten me in this way, her rolling eyeballs showing lots of white and, most of the time, she managed to subdue me.

As a result, I was left to amuse myself by quietly observing everything and developing a photographic memory. However, I wasn't alone for long. First Magda was born and then, a year later, Joseph arrived to share my lonely existence. He caught meningitis in the hospital and had to have an operation. This was not successful and he had to carry this affliction for the rest of his life. Yet he was to become a famous painter.

I shared a bed with my brother Joseph while my sister Magda had a small cot at the foot of our parent's bed. Then, sometime later, Mother began crying a lot, even at night and that made me very sad. I did not like her in such moods when her lovely eyes were red and the tears rolled down her face. Why? Was it something to do with what Father and Mother talked about?

One night I fell asleep, to wake next morning to a dreary, rainy day. Even breakfast held no interest. Mother was already feeding Magda while Joseph was on the bottle contentedly sucking his share. I was not allowed to remain in my warm nest as Mother called me for my meal. Reluctantly, I rolled off the bed, to find my best clothes already spread out on a chair.

Breakfast was unusually wholesome and plentiful. Busy with household chores, Mother had not yet eaten.

"Are you all right?" she kept asking. "Is the food warm enough?" yet not looking into my eyes, and sobbing heavily.

"My dear Gabor," she said finally, "we are going to visit a place after you have dressed. We shall take a ride on the tram." This was the most encouraging news of the morning since the rain was pelting down and everything seemed so grey and sombre.

While Mother dressed me, she kept sobbing non-stop.

"The rain is not going to hurt us. It's only water," I chattered in an attempt to cheer her. She did smile, just a little.

"How right you are," she replied. "It's only water."

Soon we were on the way to the nearby tram stop. I liked the tram with its yellow colour and the clanging sound of the bell made by the conductor each time we moved.

Mother gave me a small *tantus* coin to drop into a little box by the door for the fare. I took a window seat to watch the passing houses, the shops and the people walking on the footpath and felt happy.

She lifted me from the tram step at a particular stop and hurried me along the street. Trotting beside her, my mind was still on my recent trip and I could see this lovely vehicle disappearing around a distant corner. That would be my last tram ride for a long time.

We stopped at a grey, two-storey stone building with a large brown door securely closed. It was a forbidding place which I learned much later was a *menhely* or almshouse, in this case a distribution centre for abandoned children.

Mother knocked on the door several times before a grey-haired Matron greeted her. We were escorted into an office where Mother was given a document to read and sign. The Matron looked me over in a bored sort of way while Mother finished writing. A short conversation followed.

“Look Gabor,” the Matron said, “you will be staying here now. Your mother has to leave.” Mother leaned down, adjusted my overcoat, gave me a silent, tearful kiss and a light stroke on my head.

“Yes, my son,” she said, “you have to stay here now. You will be a good boy, won’t you?” Then, without looking back, she hurried away.

I had no chance to protest. My hand was unceremoniously seized by the Matron who hauled me towards a staircase. We had to do some slaloming among the crawling babies all over the floor, dragging their soiled nighties along, crying and screaming. The stench hit me immediately, an overwhelming smell of urine and human waste. I felt nauseated, dizzy and awfully afraid.

Have I been brought to a shithouse?

This is a bad dream, a nightmare. No, it’s only a dream.

The Matron yanked me up every step to the second floor and we went into a dormitory where rows of double bunks were lined up in two columns along each wall. She stopped near the window and pointed to one of these flimsy contraptions.

“That is your place there on the left. Alongside you, on your right, there is another boy and two others sleep at your feet.”

Later, I understood that this was called top-and-tailing, four to a bunk. She was already tearing off my clothing and she commanded another nurse loudly,

“Bring his nightshirt and put these in storage!”

Promptly a coarse, grey sack-like thing was pulled over my head.

“When you hear the bell ring, you must go with the others for your food,” she said, thrusting a small vessel into my hand. I just nodded, not really taking anything in. Confused and feeling betrayed, I did not understand this rapid turn of events. Why was I in this awful place?

I clambered up to my malodorous twenty-centimetre-wide niche with the help of a ladder. For days I did not move far, only when nature called, which happened rarely because I could not eat or drink for a long time. Like the others around me, crying all day long, I even lost the desire to live.

Having seen what the others ate, I was revolted. The boys sucked on a watery porridge which oozed from their mouths and what overflowed and dried, they later scratched off with their spoons and ate. My bed-mates were lazy, doing their business in their beds - including mine - and by morning the dormitory stank strongly enough to strip paint off the walls. The cleaners always had plenty of unpleasant work.

I noticed what was going on around me but understood nothing. I became used to washing myself, enjoying being clean in comparison with the filthy lot beside me. Why we were put together? Did we also have to remain stuck together? There was no way of escaping.

On the floor below was the girls’ dormitory. They were the same age and saw new arrivals every morning when the outside door opened. On the steps there were always several bundles of abandoned baby. This building was a hell-hole, a Dickensian place.

How long must I stay here?

*

A new home

One morning, I noticed how beautifully the sun was shining. The air was fresh and the fetid smell had disappeared. Turning over carefully to avoid disturbing my bed-fellow, I discovered that he was missing and there was no one at my feet either. I was lying on a piece of felt over a pile of straw. A sweet-smelling blanket covered my body and, above me, brown, smiling children's faces with sparkling eyes were watching me closely. Looking to the left and right, I thought my own eyes were playing a joke. Where was I?

There were no answers, only gigglings and flashing, white teeth. They crouched over me and I was confused but, surprisingly, not alarmed. One of the girls offered me a large mug with steaming hot milk full to the brim. I took it eagerly, hiding my face behind it. Another girl thrust a large slice of crusty, black *fekete kenyér* bread into my hand. Such an appetising luxury I had not experienced before.

As soon as I had demolished my meal, I felt life surge back into my body. What a change in my life in such a short time! Where was I? Who were these wonderful people?

The girl who had given me the drink now offered me her hand. I took it and she pulled me up off the bed.

'We are going out to play now,' she explained.

What was "play"? What was "outside"?

No matter. I had to follow her since she did not let go my hand yet I felt that I could trust her.

They pushed me through the door to the bright light outside. The boy they called Steffan began to tease me.

'Come and catch me,' he called and ran away. We dashed round and round the huts but, as hard as I tried, I could not get near him. He was always an arm-length ahead. Pretty soon, I ran out of breath so, to let me rest, they proposed that I should hide and they would search for me. I did not know this game either, so one of the girls showed me a place.

They passed me a few times muttering things such as, 'how clever Gabor is. He has managed to disappear.'

I began to laugh and, after a while, emerged from my lair. It was a kind game, meant to loosen me up, to find myself and be a child again.

These make-believes worked wonders. Happy but tired, I wanted to lie on that sweet-smelling straw bed and finally reached it. My legs seemed to have turned to jelly. I slumped down exhausted and slipped into sleep.

When I woke, another pair of sparkling eyes beamed down on me. These belonged to a large man.

'Hey, precious,' he said. 'You are awake now, aren't you? I am Joska and I like you very much. We shall be good friends.' He stretched out his huge hand towards mine to tap them gently.

'Hey, Sari, our boy is up now. It's time to give him a cuddle,' he yelled towards the open door and then lifted me up, giving me a real bear hug and a resounding kiss on the cheek. Suddenly a woman's skirt swept through the doorway and she hauled me out of his hands. In a second I was nestled against her heaving bosom.

She twirled round and round singing all the while and kissing me. She babbled excitedly words I did not understand. I became dizzy but her infectious happiness encouraged me into uncontrollable laughter. Into this hubbub rushed the other children. Like little devils they danced and sang and yelled, making as much noise as they could. Neighbours strolled in with gifts of food in order to see the newest member of the Kolompar family. I was proudly displayed to them all. The auburn-haired, blue-eyed State Ward Boy was now the star attraction.

When night came, Sari placed me gently on the straw bed between her own children. In turn, everybody fussed over me again and I dropped into a deep sleep.

I must have had bad dreams and woke in fear to look around. It seemed so unreal. On the one side was a girl called Monika and, on the other, were two boys. They were full of vitality, not crawling or crying and making a mess. Most of all, they cared for each other.

Am I dreaming? I'm going to wake to face a dreary reality.

This made me shiver right through my small frame. I snatched another blanket from Monika and she sat up.

“What is the matter, brother?” she asked quietly.

“I’m scared I’ll have to go back to that awful place.” She elbowed me in the ribs and then kissed me on the cheek.

“Gabor, boy, you are mine and nobody is going to take you away.” She laid me beside her again and took my small body to hers.

I woke later to a racket going on around me. Real war was being waged with pillows. My new minders tried to break up the fight but ended up on each other with Sari on top of everybody. We all had a good laugh but this was apparently a routine affair which worked up an appetite for breakfast.

They went for their meal like hungry winter sparrows. It was only a mug of milk and a slice of bread smeared with home-made plum marmalade yet it was wonderful.

I still had not recovered from my nightmare but the others played outside. Sari, a good-looking young woman, spoke to Joska in a language I could not understand. I had not finished my food and, between bites, I had time to look around.

We were in a room some six by five metres and solidly-built. A hard-packed straw and clay mixture formed the walls and was painted lime-white. On the ceiling, below the thickly-packed straw roof, rough-hewn logs ran lengthwise. From them, corn cobs in the husk hung down in pleats and in the company of knots of garlic. A strong aroma from above hit my nose. I also discovered joints of meat and strings of sausages discreetly hidden among the corn.

A ladder leaning against one beam gave access to the attic while around the walls nails, served as wardrobes for their few pieces of clothing. A bulky glory box contained Sari’s personal possessions and a tall, rickety cupboard stored Joska’s important working tuxedo as he was a double bass player in a five-piece Gypsy band. A small low-boy stood beside his straw bed.

There was cast-iron stove for cooking and heating and, above this, were shelves for utensils, pots and pans. Bread-making was a communal affair outside, carried out in a makeshift but useful oven contraption. I noticed that the floor clay was also painted white and was kept scrupulously clean.

As I finished my bread and licked marmalade from my fingers, I saw a tall, brown wooden object leaning against the wall. How curious it was to have so many wires running upward to disappear in the dark near the top of its neck. I could not keep my eyes off it. It pulled me like a magnet.

As I stroked my hands across the strings, it boomed deeply. I liked it and plucked it again and again. The adults watched me with joy. I was only five years old yet I had made a sound on Joska’s double bass. That sound has reverberated continually in my head and there, I believe, was my love of music born. This is the one of the greatest gifts the Almighty has given to Mankind and I treasure this.

Outside, the day was sunny with fluffy clouds and a gentle breeze cooled the warm air. Opposite our hut, rows of acacia trees were in full bloom, their flowers like white grapes and spreading a sweet scent, so much so that my head grew heavy.

There were about fifteen huts with a bench in front of every door where folks could gossip while watching the next generation fooling around. This was a favourite pastime for those who worked at night. Among the huts there were mulberry and cherry trees in flower. It was a joyful picture and, when the time came, there would be plenty of fruit.

Joska and the band usually played in local taverns as well as for weddings or other occasions. They dressed immaculately and worked hard for their livelihood yet they were treated as pariahs most of the time, abused for their culture and race and given little credit for what they did or what they were capable of achieving.

They were forced to live in ‘Gypsy Row’ on the outskirts of Godollo, in regulation cob huts which distinguished them as virtual ‘untouchables’ as if they were still living in the Middle Ages. Unfortunately Joska’s folk also had to ride out the storms created by other gypsies who shied away from regular work and the duties of responsible citizens.

I did not recognise my Joska the first time I saw him dressed and ready for his nightly stint. He was good-looking but clothed in his spotless black attire with a bow tie, sparkling white shirt and shiny black shoes, he looked extremely handsome. Nevertheless, in the pecking order of the band, the bass player was ranked the lowest and his share of the entertainers' fee was always the smallest.

However, this ranking ended within the gypsy community itself. Here, in their homes, they were all equally poor and, since they depended upon each other, they dressed and behaved alike. The men would address each other as *more* or brother, while we children were called *pudree* and everyone loved their pudrees, virtually building their lives around them.

I came to learn that although these people had temptations every day, they were faithful to their wedding vows and took them seriously. I also began to understand something else. I had no idea how I had become part of a dark-skinned Gypsy family. I was a white boy. Why should they want me? Slowly it dawned on me that, to them, I was something special, to be treasured and protected. Only much later did I learn that, as the numbers increased at that dreadful *menhely*, the authorities tried to find homes for abandoned children. A group had been taken out to the town of Godollo and, since the Gypsies loved children so much, I was left with them.

The Gypsies had something in common with the old Celtic race that once inhabited Central Europe. Although the language, culture and costumes were different in certain respects, the Gypsies had their strong family ties and their special hospitality to guests and visitors. However, they had significant differences. Their origin and language is unique but something of a mystery. Perhaps they were the first real Roman settlers in the old Roman provinces of Pannonia and Dacia who came to be known later as 'Romaney's', a belief they hold themselves. Perhaps they came originally from Egypt and the word 'Gypsy' is derived from the term 'Egyptian'. No one really knows.

Unfortunately, they could not handle money. As soon as it came, it flowed like wine from a bottle. They treasured their relatives and their old folks almost as much as their children. If someone dropped in while they were having a meal, the visitor would be invited to share.

Washing and laundering was carried out in the nearby creek. It was a communal affair, like the bread-making, with the pudrees joining in and doing their utmost to make a racket with their splashing and fooling about, even with the onset of winter. They had no shoes and not much in the way of clothing but they hardly ever caught a cold or the 'flu. A hardy lot, for sure, and that was their lifestyle in a nutshell.

And mine, too.

I met Joska later in my life and have visited the community on several occasions. It was always a joyful reunion and the affection they showered on me was something I have not experienced anywhere else, except from one person - my wife. These people had been an important part of my life and, a long time after I left them, someone asked for my name.

"My name is Kolompar Joska," I blurted out proudly. I loved that man. With his kindness and generosity, he had given me back my soul, accepted me into his home and his society. He had shared his heart when I needed it most.

Chapter Two: *Kidnapped!*

*'Huzd ra cigany, megittad az arat
Ne logasd a labaid hiaba.'*

[‘Play on old Gypsy; you’ve drunk of sorrow to the full.
Pick yourself up.’]

-Vorosmarty Mihaly
(19th century Hungarian poet and patriot)

Joska was as solid as his musical instrument. Every orchestra needs a foundation, an unobtrusive backing. He was such, a thoroughly trustworthy person. Sadly, my destiny had already been decided in another place and, because of that, my happiness with my Gypsy family had to end.

My father, Sandor, was a craftsman. In a class-structured society, I belonged somewhere else and not with gypsies. Minds were already infected with racial taboos but, despite the fact that I had a Jewish father, I was regarded as white, not coloured. In terms of Hungarian social acceptability, that put me much above the gypsies. I could be a State Ward but not a Gypsy *pudree*.

Looking back now, I can only conjecture that no one on my father’s side cared about what happened to a *shekshe* child, including him. He had seldom been at the Budapest flat, probably only for sleep, pancakes and what the English call ‘crumpet’. I understood later that Mother loathed him and that he had not prevented my being taken off to that dreadful *menhely*. Perhaps the authorities had finally decided, or perhaps responsible Jewish sources had intervened when it was learned I was out in ‘Gypsy Row’. That may explain what happened next.

Alone on the road one bright morning, I was rolling a large metal ring - the worn-out rim of a carriage wheel as big as I was. A small stick helped me to keep it upright and push it along the ground. Busy keeping it going and running after it, with all the other *pudrees* engaged in games elsewhere, I did not see a woman emerge from between two huts. She snatched my arm, hauled me around and tried to pull me towards her.

“You must come with me! You must come with me!” she screeched.

I was terrified. Who was she? Why did she want to take me away? I protested mightily and struggled, calling for help.

Hearing the noise, my gypsy friends came running from the huts. A kidnapping attempt! They grabbed the woman smartly and she was very nearly lynched. Somehow, she managed to free herself shouting loudly and fled the scene.

My rescuers were most unhappy. They gesticulated wildly, cursed and took me back to my own hut. I was badly shaken and felt I was in danger. That night I could not sleep and, in a nightmare, that horrible woman was dragging me back to the *menhely*. Sleepily, Monika put her arm around me and drew me to her.

“You are safe here, Gabor. Go back to sleep,” she said as she dried my tears.

Three days passed. Without knocking, two burly policemen entered the hut, waving their symbols of authority - large sabres where the flat side could batter across defenceless backs. I was afraid as, from previous experience, so were Sari, Monika and the small boys. Joskar was visiting another hut but neighbours, seeing the police, went in to fetch him.

He arrived, dishevelled and in fear.

“Are you Kolompar Joska?” The policeman in charge stepped menacingly close to him.

“Here,” he said, pushing a piece of paper into his hand. “This is an order from the Pest-Pilis District Council, commanding you to give Gabor to this woman. She will care for him in the future.”

A thin, shabbily-dressed woman stepped alongside him - the one with the high-pitched voice in my nightmare and waiting with a sombre face.

“I have a duty to carry out these orders.” The policeman finished threateningly.

Joska seemed to read the document but I doubted if he understood it. He was defenceless as he looked at that paper with tears in his eyes. Slowly, as if in a dream, he turned. His voice shook as he said, “Sari, our boy will have to go. He will be taken from us. Please collect his belongings and give them to that woman.”

My beloved Joska leaned down to me and his eyes were misty.

“Darling boy, you must go with these people. You will be all right. You are strong.”

If I could trust anyone, it was Joska. He took me into his powerful arms, gave me a bear hug and a tender kiss, then gently, as if I were a precious hand-painted *Herendi* porcelain figure, put me down and turned away.

Sari was now at my side with a small bundle of my possessions wrapped in linen. She passed these over to this other woman but never took her eyes off the little boy who had been hers for such a short time. Like Joska, she lifted me to her bosom and wept as she stroked my head. I trembled in fear and sorrow as her tears washed over my face and felt ready to die.

Imagine the scene. A small boy is marched away between two policemen with drawn swords and is parted from the first happiness he has ever experienced.

Fortunately, Sari had dressed me in my overcoat but my whole body shivered. Was I being punished? Did I deserve to be locked up or given to some monster to eat me?

These policemen seemed to be quite decent fellows once their swords were back in their scabbards and they chatted to each other. However, there was no compassion for the tiny soul trying to keep in step between two giants.

Behind me the woman kept repeating firmly, “Do not be afraid, do not be afraid. We will take good care of you.” This was some reassurance but I only half-believed her.

By the time we had covered about a kilometre and it was nearly dusk, I had no idea where I was. We stopped at a rickety, rough-hewn gate. The senior policeman spoke to the woman who nodded and kept saying “Yes...yes...yes...”. I was afraid as he leaned down and put his face near mine but there was no anger in his voice as he said, twirling his thick moustache,

“Look, my boy, you had better be good. Otherwise we will come back and put you in a dark cellar with large snakes.”

I am scared of big things. I don't know what a snake is.

I did not like these people because Joska had obviously not liked them. Why was everybody telling me to be a good boy? I was a good boy!

My new guardian took me by the hand and led me through the gate into a dirty, cluttered peasant yard. It was mostly in shadow and I could see only a small part of the sun as the day faded. Looking up at the woman, I could not see her facial expression properly but it did not seem to be as frightening as earlier.



My new home, first days

The house was rented from a peasant woman who had lost her husband in the First World War. They had not been well-off and the man had left her with little financial support. It was a well-constructed, red brick building with terra cotta roof tiles and a large porch which ran the length of the front wall.

Inside, I was surprised at the size of the house. We stepped into the main room which combined the dining, sitting and kitchen areas. There was a large cast-iron stove and its chimney ran through the ceiling rather than from the side of the house. Alongside stood a table on which a clean cloth had been spread.

Outside, the sun faded to a grey-hued shimmer with only a few rays darting timidly over the horizon. Before long, the woman lit a kerosene lamp which radiated a warm light onto the cream-painted walls. Everything seemed to be clean and orderly. Even the smooth, white floor suggested freshness. My nose told

me it had all been painted recently and I was suddenly overtaken by curiosity. My legs were no longer trembling and I wanted to explore.

Behind me, a door opened. Two excited girls, one older than the other, greeted me when it closed. The taller one leaned down into my face.

"Hello, nice boy. I am Bertha and this is Edithke," she said, pointing to her younger sister. "I think you will be getting hot in here with that heavy coat on. You'd better take it off. I'll put it in a safe place so you can find it again," and she chattered away non-stop.

"What's your name?" asked Edithke.

"My name is Kolompar Joska and I am five years old," I replied seriously. They laughed so much that tears streamed from their eyes.

"No. You are not Kolompar and not Joska."

However, I had answered in this way for some time. So many things had happened over the past months that I was confused and had forgotten my real name.

"Look, nice boy," said Bertha, "Weiss Nane will give you a good meal but you must be washed first."

Weiss Nane was apparently my new minder. Before long, Bertha had stripped off my clothes and Edithke brought a pitcher of warm water, sloshing it into a large basin on a chair. Without ceremony, I was lifted into it gently and Bertha picked up a soft sponge.

Suddenly her raised hand stopped in mid-air. She stared down at my belly, right at the small prickle (popularly known as a 'whistle') between my legs. Her eyes popped. She was so excited.

"Call your mother," she said to Edithke. "Quickly!"

"What's the matter?" Weiss Nane asked. "Can't you do it?"

"Of course I can," Bertha replied, "but look."

She pointed to my whistle. Weiss Nane crossed her arms over her stomach in deep thought.

"Oh," she said. "He has not been molinated yet. We shall have to see about this another time." I knew I had no blemishes on my body so what was wrong? I knew that girls did not have a 'whistle' and boys did but I could see nothing wrong in that.

At last the bathing ritual was over. I was dried with a soft towel and Bertha placed a large plate of goulash on the table for me. I demolished this smartly and, just to make sure I'd missed nothing, I gave the plate a thorough lick. It made them laugh again.

"Look, Nane, he's saved us the bother of washing it, and done a good job," Bertha remarked, laughing all the time.

I was shown my bed on a proper couch in one of the bedrooms. I went out like the proverbial light and, the last thing I remembered, was Bertha covering me with a blanket.

However, I did not sleep for long. I had been wrenched from familiar surroundings. This, my first single bed, was different. The smell was different since I no longer shared the covers with five Gypsy *pudrees* and my feelings were all mixed up. As my couch was at the foot of the adults' large bed and I was awake, I could hear the man and woman above me talking in a strange language. I now know it was Yiddish and listened for a while, trying to make something of it. Finally, the stress of the day told on me and I dropped into a deep sleep.

I woke when someone shook me by the shoulder.

"Hey, nice boy. There is a meal for you on the table." I threw back the duvet and leapt off the mattress. With some difficulty, I sloshed water from an enamel basin over my face and hands, thinking it necessary in this place.

Bertha came in to undress and wash me. Her attention was focused on my belly.

Oh well, she's a girl. Perhaps she's jealous of my little whistle.

I did not know what was for breakfast but I saw the whole family was there. At the head of the table sat my new guardian, an odd-looking, nearly bald and hunch-backed man. He gave me a grimacing smile that was frightening. His few teeth were grotesquely shaped, broken and stained yellow.

I had not then seen a gorilla or Charles Laughton's performance in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Later, after I had seen the film, I thought that the guardian of the Notre Dame bells would have lost out in any

competition to Weiss Papa, whom I called my 'Old Man'. I don't think he wanted to frighten me. He was doing his best to appear friendly and his manner was gentle but a quirk of nature had cursed him with the way he was.

Unfairly, as I came to understand, he was taunted by young and old wherever he went. He had to show his strength of character towards adults when things got out of hand and took on people with a lion-like roar and force them to retreat. He was also as strong as a weightlifter but the poor man had to fight for every bit of respect in this country town.

I had been brought to Godollo, some 24 kilometres from Budapest and the terminus of the capital's electric railway line. Some five thousand people lived there but it was also a dormitory town where most came home after a day's dirty factory work and returned to the city at dawn. Some of these *proletars* rented houses from small landholders called *kulaks* by the Russians. They possessed some five to seven hectares and lived at the back of the property in cob-walled dwellings where, inside a courtyard, poultry ran wild. Outside in a primitive shed some had a couple of cows, a few pigs and several had a horse.

To make a living, these kulaks had to work from dawn to dusk using primitive hand tools. Compared to the landless *novys* and *proletars*, these peasants were well-off and, in some cases, quite rich. Most had a small vineyard situated outside the town and, dug into the hillsides, were wine cellars where they went with friends and family members to drown their woes.

On the main street in Godollo there was a single-storey red brick building known as the Industrial Union where a special organisation had been set up under the guise of a male-voice choir. In reality it was a hardcore, clandestine and officially unacceptable *Iredenta* of small-holders who were anti-worker and anti-Semitic. The land around the town was owned by *grafs*, princes and other forms of aristocrat as well as the pious Catholic clergy. With the aid of the hated gendarmerie, they ruled with an iron fist.

The Hungarian Regent, Miklos Horthy, liked to drive from Budapest to Godollo with his large escort of knights, *leventes* (personal bodyguards) and other sycophants who would all kick up their heels at Graf Festetich's large castle. In front of the shooting lodge, a seven-hectare park was open to commoners who were permitted to stroll amongst the trees. There was a huge, well-tended grassy sward which created tranquility and the park was really a lovers' paradise for the local bourgeoisie. What went on in the shrubbery on balmy summer evenings was the talk of the town. It was generally accepted that many distinguished Godollites had been conceived there.

I had my own special experience in the park but not the kind the philanderers enjoyed. More of this later. There is no record left of how Horthy acquired this magnificent place but it was his favourite. Every morning around ten o'clock he would appear mounted on a white Lipizzaner mare, splendidly dressed with his sword at his side and a full display of medals and sash regalia across his chest. He was a glorious sight but we, the plebs, were expected to stand with our hats off and heads bowed as he rode through our small market place surrounded by his knights and *leventes*. Unfortunately, as a result of his presence there was a large gendarme barrack just off the main street.

By comparison, there was only a small police detachment in a building overlooking the market square although, for good surveillance, the windows were quite large. In command was a 1.4-metre sergeant named Vajas ('battered'). His height was the same as his sword which he held near his waist to avoid tripping. Beneath his nose grew a magnificent, curling moustache.

Occasionally he would run out from his office, sabre drawn and red in the face, just to show who was in charge, muttering weird curses, rolling his eyes and stabbing wildly in the air for no apparent reason. Eventually he would slide his weapon back into its scabbard and retire blaspheming. Steamed up with coarse red *furedi* wine confiscated from peasants, he would blow off his pressure valve and everything would return to normal. He was certainly a comical figure and we, who witnessed these interludes, knew that he was on the bottle again.

Sadly, no one took him seriously, and most thought he was a joke and not at all like the feared gendarmes whose presence meant business - bloody and merciless.

Godollo had a street of shops, hotels and taverns, two doctors, a cinema and, in summer, a large theatre. History now records that this town saw the birth of the Hungarian Nazi Party with its dreaded arrow cross

based on the German swastika but with barbed not squared-off ends. In charge of this organisation was the District headman, Endre Bela, a sort of minor governor-general who, with his cohorts set up his headquarters in Pecel, some 28 kilometres from Godollo. His influence was to be stamped indelibly on the town's political life.

Bela, his commander-in-chief Baky Laszlo and Hain Bela were eventually decorated with a thick rope around their necks on a pole before a very large crowd in Budapest's enclosed Marko Street magistrates' courtyard. This, I witnessed with a glad heart but felt they deserved much more since many thousands of people had suffered physical and mental deaths as a result of their treasons.

One good thing in Godollo and its environs was the variety of cultures. One learned early to count and converse in other languages besides Hungarian. These folk lived their whole lives in separate villages and usually managed to co-exist peacefully. Unfortunately, it was a different matter with religion or social class. Marriages between the cultures and creeds were forcefully discouraged and there was also the question of the size of one's land and the amount of one's dowry.

Beneath the surface, there was considerable prejudice and it was inevitable that minor skirmishes would occasionally occur. Nineteenth century poet Arany Janos happily recorded something of this in his *Fulemule*: a nightingale sings in Peter's tree which overhangs Paul's fence. Each demands his rights to the bird's song so they go to court. The magistrate extracts five crowns from both, explains the bird sings for each of them and then says "bugger off!"

By nature, most Hungarians will give their shirts to absolute strangers but, among themselves, they always look for conflict, argue and build up a head of steam. A Western psychologist would have a field day in a Magyar tavern, if he survived! Where there is no contention, it is insufferable and one is soon created. My countrymen are generally good people but they do have their faults. Their delusion that they are clever also makes them gullible. This easily gets them into trouble.

It's probably in the genes rather than the fault of climate or distance from the sea. Ex-patriots carry it with them. I visited a Christchurch garage sale where a man showed me the items on display. When his wife appeared, he went outside to talk to another customer and I chatted to her, learning that she had been born and educated in Christchurch but had travelled to Europe and had been married in England.

Eventually she asked me where I came from and I told her, as I always do. To my surprise, she answered in my native tongue saying that her husband (whom I had just met) was also Hungarian. We prattled on and then to my surprise she said,

"I have lived in your country, observed the customs, enjoyed the food and had a good time but there is something I don't understand. How come you were talking before and yet you weren't arguing?"

Without hesitation I replied,

"It must be that neither of us knew the other was Hungarian!" and we had a good laugh.

I have been reminded many times that I am not really a Hungarian but a Jew. Yet to the Jews, I am not Jewish but Hungarian. Who should I believe? One thing is sure - I am somewhere in between. I loathe fomenting arguments. I like to listen and consider things carefully before opening my mouth. This must be my father Sandor's legacy through some fifty generations, diluting the Magyar intemperance that breaks out in others like a horde of yelling horsemen from the desert steppe-lands.

On the question of my being a Hungarian or a Jew I am, like many others, "a Hungarian born into the Israelite faith." Sadly, later in their lives such folk paid a gruesome price for this mistaken notion. Historically Jews have been industrious workers and were once some of the best farmers in the Middle East. Then, during the Diaspora, they were robbed of their lands by the Babylonians. Being mentally strong enough to find alternative means of living, they often became prosperous and were always in the forefront of progress because they made good wherever they chose to settle.

Naturally, this makes other people jealous and often grows into hatred in naïve minds. Power-hungry, speculating politicians find fertile ground for manipulating racial tensions and hostility by singling out odd-looking characters, especially Orthodox Jews, and using them as pawns in their Machiavellian games. There are the people who ask,

“How is it that the Jews have the temerity to live, in spite of being oppressed and killed over the last five thousand years?”

Does Charles Darwin have the solution or, as the rabbi once said, “I know the answer but what was the question?”

I digress. Perhaps it is my so-called Jewishness!



Back to my new home.

I discovered that 14-year old Bertha had been adopted, having been orphaned after her own family’s tragic demise ten years earlier. She was a great help around the house to Weiss Nane who was about 35 but whose manner and dress suggested that she had survived many more winters.

Hungarian custom requires one to address elders by their surnames with a suffix as a mark of respect. For men it is *tse* (*csi*) and for women *na* or *ne*. Younger folk are given the diminutive suffix *ke* or *ka* as in Edith-ke, Gabor-ka and so on. For easier understanding, I shall be disrespectful and call them “Old Man” and “Old Girl” but in reality they were not old at all.

The Old Man and Old Girl were active in the town. There were some fifty to eighty Jewish families living there, well-established in professions, crafts and trade. That they were able to build a small, compact synagogue and school with surprisingly few people was remarkable. However, they were industrious and determined to succeed so that within a small allotment of land they had found a place to accommodate the Rabbi, Verger, Teacher and also the Christian caretakers.

Only the Rabbi had a single role because it was his duty to hold his flock together and be like a general manager. The Teacher was a red-headed, lean and short chap who was also the Cantor or Chanter. He was blessed with a tremendously good voice and played the Bechstein grand piano like a master. Mr Goldstein, the Verger, had a large kitchen-smelling wife. He doubled as the one who, for a small fee, severed the throats of the poultry and goats and, in that particular capacity, was known as the *Sachter*. His sharp, cut-throat razor made short work of his ‘victims’. He was also called the *Mohlen* when performing a ritual baptism. The Teacher and the Verger both had a small income but their lives were frugal. Did the Almighty to whom they prayed not listen to their entreaties?

The caretakers, who carried out duties prohibited to Jews under Talmudic Law, appeared to have a happy life with a better-than-average worker’s income for the light work they had to do, plus accommodation and perks from all sorts of sources. Their son, Sandor, became my playmate since he was my age and we both had adventurous times together, remaining good friends for many years.

As Miksa, my Old Man, was horribly deformed with what is now called spina bifida, he had been unable to get a proper job. He had formerly lived on a pittance as a *schamess* or usher in the large Tobacco Street synagogue in Budapest. His wife, Hermina, had been a poorly-paid seamstress in a sweat shop. Since they had a small girl to bring up, their situation had been grim and there seemed no prospect of advancement. Somehow, through the grapevine, Miksa learned that an usher was needed in the synagogue at Godollo. By reducing the size of their meals they managed to save enough for the tram fare and he offered himself for the position.

Jews have a mutual budgetary advice service which they call *Chevra Kadisha*. The Godollo committee had to find someone to maintain synagogue protocol. They also considered the plight of this hapless person. One look at the Old Man convinced them he was fierce enough to fit the role. A piddling salary was offered but transfer costs were provided as well as assistance in finding accommodation. He would also be given a tiny cash loan in order to set up a stall in the market place. By such means the Almighty protects his sons.

This generosity proved a great blessing. The Old Man shifted his family and their few possessions to Godollo. Accepting useful advice, he purchased a few slabs of yeast, cutting them into fifty 100-gram pieces and wrapping them for sale in a small box at the market. Like hot cakes at a winter wedding, his packages disappeared rapidly since people needed yeast to bake their own bread. The profit was small but business

was brisk and the deformed Jew became very popular, his handicap overlooked. Miksa had found his niche. For the first time in his life he felt he was needed and, in his heart, there was happiness.

During this, my first introduction to the Old Man, his large balding head sprouting from his small, twisted body and his grim smile was not encouraging. He tried hard to impress me, saying that I added to the number of males in his household although I did not know if this was a cause for concern. However, his manner indicated he was a good man and not to be feared. Nevertheless, I could not help comparing him to my handsome Kolompar Joska.

I soon learned that the Old Man was deeply religious and faithfully performed his synagogue duties. He would flash his grim smile here and there to the puzzlement of those who encountered it. They never knew if he was about to attack them or was in a good mood and seeking friendship. His small income prevented him from indulging his passion for smoking and any other vices but his piety seemed to make up for this. His activities generally began and ended with a prayer while, in everything, he was controlled by some rule set down in the Talmud. Food had to be ritually and clinically cleansed, including cutlery, kitchen utensils and cloths in order to make them *kosher*.

Yet, in one respect, he overlooked these commandments. He liked to buy fifty or a hundred grams of aniseed sweets as a Saturday or *shabbat* treat, depending on his weekly takings at the market. This was his only iniquity since he bought his aniseed from a small stall that was scarcely *kosher* for perfect cleanliness! He would suck away on his lollies and occasionally offer one to me.

His business picked up as he began supplying more merchandise - shoe polish, lace, sticky fly papers, matches, candles and many other things although most of his profit went into purchasing further items. However, in such matters of business the Old Man and the Old Girl fought bruising encounters.

She was a tough character. You could hear her high-pitched, whining voice from fifty metres away. If she got wound up over something this distance increased ten-fold! The Old Man had the strength and noise of a gorilla so that, as soon as they started a fight, it became a free circus for the locals. You knew only from the sounds who had hit whom. It could go on for twenty minutes at times and then they would nurse their injuries for several days. All would be peaceful for a couple of months while they acted like pussy cats to each other. Then the neighbours would be treated to a repeat performance.

The first time this happened, I ran away in fear. Bertha had difficulty in finding me.

“Don’t be afraid,” she explained. “You’ll get used to it.”

She was right but I was still not keen on their games. The Old Girl was very quick with her hands and a slap could be painful. Any small insubordination was met instantly with one in the face and is still a painful recollection. Gentleness was reserved for her only daughter Edithke, short, auburn-haired, hunchbacked and a year older than me.

I had the feeling that Edithke had not taken to me. She behaved very coolly. In the mornings she had to lead me to the kindergarten before she went off to her own school. Later, the kind nanny called Muncy Nane who lived opposite did this and I used to wait outside her house until she appeared.

Hand in hand we went to her kindergarten. She was a spinster, somewhere between thirty and forty years old, lean and tall and always dressed in black. Her hair was cut Beetle-style but no man was apparently attracted to her. She loved children although she must have had a difficult task looking after some fifty youngsters of my age.

We did not have many toys and made do with what was at hand, soon learning to make kites, whistles, bows and arrows from twigs and willow cuttings. Then there was the sandpit for building castles and tunnels while the swings and slides certainly kept us occupied. The other children were aware of my social background although I doubt if they actually understood much of what their parents told them. I was just another boy dressed in ill-fitting, coarse garb. Primitively-designed and finished in the cheapest third-grade material, this had been issued to me very early on by the State.

I remember this outfit well, from the underwear to the shirt and the other things. I could not sit down properly because my shorts forced me to remain upright. However, the Old Girl had brought them home victoriously from the issuing office to give to the poor boy I then was. Wisely, or unwisely as it turned out for me, only two sizes had been manufactured to fit children between the ages of six and fourteen. She had

selected mine with the idea that I would grow into them and being a qualified seamstress, she envisaged no problem making the necessary adjustments.

I had to stand in front of a metre-long mirror as she put me into my top coat in order to shorten it.

“Perhaps this should not go down to your knee,” she observed. “Those dilettantes cut the sleeves too long even for chimpanzees. The waist is okay.”

This was her verdict as she gathered a handful of fabric behind my back. Soon she was stabbing pins here and there, dabbing chalk on certain spots on the front or rear and seemed happy to be returning to her old trade in this small way. Then, removing the cover from her treasured treadle sewing machine, she whirled away for another masterly creation.

She assured me how well I would look but I took that with a pinch of salt, or rather a handful! I was made to dress up again before she was fully satisfied and then, with more tagging on the sleeves I was allowed to escape.

Unfortunately, I was to stand out amongst the other children like an inkblot on white paper. One arm was longer than the other, the neck was partially rolled up as a special scarf which came down to my knee and in order to sit down, I had to take off all the outer garments or remain standing all day. The problem was that she was not used to tailoring for male clients. Perhaps the way I looked was what persuaded sympathetic and generous little girls to offer me a nicely-prepared lunch.

I never used to bring any. While waiting outside Muncy Nane’s house I would have already scoffed my miserable black bread with its patina of thinly-spread marmalade which the Old Girl had provided. The unsolicited lunch offerings came in handy and the news soon spread that I would tackle everything. In fact, by being a convenient waste disposal, I averted complaints from the girls’ families if the little darlings took their food back home. Does not the Almighty look after His own?

Poor little Gabor was always hungry. The Old Girl managed to cook food so lacking in taste that I could not eat it and waited for unguarded moments when she was looking the other way and shoved things into my large pockets. The rule was that only when my plate was empty could I leave the table. Fortunately, we had a nanny goat which would eat anything, even the debris from my pockets. The big problem was how to get rid of the usually moist traces. I would be accused of peeing my pants because my shorts were wet. I always said I had been drawing water from the well and spilled the bucket or I had fed the goat and got splashed. I don’t think the Old Girl ever suspected me.

Our home was alongside a cobbler’s shop and rented his backyard outhouse near the cowshed and vegetable garden. The cobbler’s wife was an ordinary peasant who had a big hand loom in one room. With nothing better to do, I went and saw her weaving a large woollen Persian carpet with Hungarian motifs. She counted every knot according to a specially-drawn design, matching the colours and working the shuttle and I begged her to let me join in. With a laugh, she agreed and very soon I was doing just as well as she. As a reward she gave me spicy home-made pork goodies but I had to promise I would not tell the Family Weiss.

“For them it is taboo,” she said, “but for you it’s okay. After all, they are made from white pork. It is the black that is not *kosher*,” she added. Not that I needed encouragement. I loved to help her on the loom and, for me, the small presents were enough.

I had fun with the weaving but this was not play and I would tire and lose concentration. The cobbler and his wife had no children, Edithke was not keen on boys’ games and so I had to look elsewhere for entertainment. I thought that our kindergarten nanny might be of help. She would surely know a suitable playmate for me.

The Old Girl did not like to be disturbed while she was working but I was prepared to suffer a frowning “yes” or “no” when I asked permission to visit Muncy Nane. To my surprise, or perhaps to get rid of me, the Old Girl agreed.

“Go and bother her for a change,” she growled.

I was overjoyed and covered the hundred metres of road in seconds to knock frantically on the high fence since I could not reach the doorbell. Muncy Nane must have been nearby as she quickly let me in to her elegant courtyard. Everything was beautifully clean and orderly. She lived alone and so her only love was her home.

Her attractive rooms were enchanting, especially the large, round walnut dining table and her porcelain figurines. Then I told her about my problem of finding a playmate.

“Oh, let me see what I can do,” she said, lifting me to her height and tickling me in the ribs. I slipped out of her grasp and ran to the other side of the table.

“I’m going to catch you,” she replied, stretching forward.

“No, you’re not,” and I took off. I did a few rounds like this and became very hot. Outside the temperature was enough to make you perspire. Inside, it must have been even warmer. I became very flushed. Then she caught me and rewarded me with more rib tickling.

“Well, Gabor, you are hot now. You had better have a wash.” I thought that was a good idea and soon she had a basin on a chair, a soft-scented sponge in her hand, my pants off and was merrily splashing water over me.

“Oh,” she said. “Your whistle is up. Let me see if it shrills if I blow it.” She tried a few times and her face turned pink with the effort but no shrills. I did not mind this. Somehow I felt good and would not have objected if she had carried on further. Perhaps next time she would succeed. However, I think she had lost her breath trying. Never mind, we could attempt it again the next day and perhaps be more fortunate.

“Oh, Gabor, we had a good game, didn’t we? You deserve a cool drink. You know,” she said, “this is our special secret. No one else should find out about it, otherwise we won’t be able to play it again.”

“Yes,” I replied. “It was a good game. I won’t tell anyone. It is only for the two of us. Yes, I want to play it some more.”

We make a visit

The Weiss business began to pick up and more merchandise was offered for sale. The small tray was discarded and the Old Man no longer needed to walk up and down selling his wares. He acquired a trestle and a board to display his goods and, with some ingenuity, he erected a canvas roof above it. By the standards of the time, it was a handsome affair and one of the few in circulation.

In fact, his success had been so rapid that he needed a reliable contraption to transport all this gear. They managed to find a large flat-deck wheelbarrow and, for me, it was a new thing to try out. It had hardly been pushed through the gate before I was on it for a short ride. This was sensational and knowing when he would be packing up, I would be at the market pretending to be so tired that he usually offered me a ride on the canvas covering his goods. It was a real treat.

Otherwise life was the same stale daily existence except when the limping Town Crier brought some excitement. A large leather strap around his neck held his snare drum in place and he would beat small rumblings to declare important messages from the administration: who was dead, who had got married and other useful information.

He had a large following, mostly about my age, so that on the street corners we could also recite the latest news. Before nightfall, another lame character appeared, this time with a bell and loudly singing his message:

“The clocks have beaten eight, nine, ten. Everybody should retire. Take care of fire and flood and do not let your house burn down.”

As far as flood was concerned, there was only a miserably small creek and most of the time dry. It was my hunting ground for frogs when there was any moisture. Of course the gendarmes with their loud, military steps could be heard patrolling the streets after curfew. Not a soul appeared if they were around.

My kindergarten began its Summer holiday with a small celebration before we departed. I had been going to Muncy Nane’s twice a week for a game of “I’m going to catch you”. She would get very red and hot in the face and, like me, she would laugh heartily. I always let her try to blow my whistle again but without success while she showered my body with kisses. Her special drinks and cookies and her physical attentions seemed to make up for something missing from her own life.

Time passed quickly and we were soon celebrating our first King Stephen’s birthday which is also the Thanksgiving Day in the Calendar and the most important National Day of Celebration with pomp and ceremony everywhere.

The harvest had been largely gathered in with only the most important grapes left on the vine to finish ripening. The trees were showing some yellow and pink and the air became musky and very warm. The first sign of autumn came when the heavy-scented chrysanthemums started to bloom. However, we townspeople noted with some sadness that the days were growing shorter and shorter.

I had passed my sixth birthday yet, when the kindergarten re-opened, I was back in my usual place. I did not mind since the sandwiches were as good as before, my playmates were agreeable and the thought of having a secret with Muncy Nane was sweet. By this time, I was dressing myself and not letting the girls at home ogle me. I was ready to go and wanted to take to the road but no, my Old Girl had something else in store for me.

“Son,” she said in the kindest voice she could muster, “we are going to visit a place in the town today. Bertha will put other clothes on you.” Obviously it was important. I did not understand Bertha’s sheepish expression as she dressed me. Girls are so inscrutable at times.

When I was ready, the Old Girl took me by the hand and we walked towards the town. Halfway there, we turned off our usual route and went into a tree-lined street. In the middle was a wrought-iron gate and a large building with a cupola. In front was a sign which I knew was not written in Hungarian.

We walked along an asphalt pathway among large trees and then turned towards a house with a full-length veranda. A lady waiting for us near the door greeted us kindly and stroked my head gently before leading us into a darkened room. A man with a large bushy beard and a skull cap his head stood up from his chair with a book in his hand. He must have been reading some very small print because they were not the sort of letters I was used to.

He welcomed me and offered me a large chaise longue to sit on. It seemed a boring sort of place and I thought of the kindergarten sandwiches I was going to miss.

“What is your name?” he enquired and then asked some other tedious questions after telling me that he was Rabbi Braun. His attention was diverted by the arrival of a shortish man with a goatee beard and a large black hat.

“Hello, Mr Goldstein,” the Rabbi said. They became wrapped in conversation, leaving me to my own devices on the chaise longue. The Old Girl was deep in discussion with the lady who had brought us in and they looked in my direction, gesticulating wildly. In the meantime, my Old Man had also materialised and the three men began their own talk and arm waving.

All I could see were these oldies and, while this harangue was going on, I was missing out on lovely sandwiches. There were no toys and nothing friendly in here.

Mr Goldstein had brought in a long, narrow leather case. Rabbi Braun asked him if it was in good condition and he was answered with a repeated wink and a nodding head. Then all three men put on their prayer shawls and, books in hand, began murmuring some incantation. It was interesting the way the swaying and bowing was engulfed by their mumbling. The lady, seeing that I had been left alone, came over to me.

“Oh, darling boy,” she said, “you must be feeling lonely. Would you like a nice warm mug of cocoa?”

Would I? What a question! I rarely had this sort of beverage and I liked it so much. She must have seen how eagerly I accepted the offer because she quickly put into my hand a really large mug. I wrapped both hands around it and savoured every drop. She was obviously pleased at the way I licked my lips.

That was really something - the most expensive and dangerous refreshment I had ever had - but how was I to know? I was happy and drowsy. It felt good to sit on the chaise longue and I quietly leaned over, lay down and went blissfully to sleep.

Chapter Three: My 'accident'

'One is never as unhappy as one thinks, nor as happy as one hopes.'
-François, Duc de La Rochefoucauld,
Sentences et Maximes de Morale, 1664

The stupid flies did not let me rest. They persisted in settling on my face as I rested under a mulberry tree. It was so pleasant lying on the push barrow and looking up into the branches with their heavy load of white, sweet-smelling fruit. Some of the berries had ripened and dropped to the ground. The congregation of flies seemed to love that as they swarmed around in the still air of our Indian summer.

My bladder felt it was going to burst. Still drowsy and scarcely able to stand, I staggered forwards, my stomach in pain.

It seemed that I had forgotten to button up the fly of my shorts. Did it really matter? I was just about to pee when ouch! It hurt as I touched a large, gauze turban on the end of my small whistle. It was stained a greenish-brown with iodine and stopped the bleeding.

Whatever it was, I had to pee. Then I vomited and, wailing, staggered back to the house.

"What's the matter?" called the Old Girl. "Why are you making such a racket? Isn't it enough that you are running around injured and causing trouble and us having to spend money to get the doctor to get you right?" *So sympathetic.*

I must have been naughty again but realised she was not going to hit me.

Surely the hurt would heal quickly, as usual. The girls were kind. They gave me sweets but carrying the little gauze bundle between my legs was uncomfortable. My coarse nightgown rubbed on my most tender part and it was better to wear nothing more than loose underpants.

"You can't go to kindergarten in that condition," commented the Old Girl and on the third day, after what they mendaciously called "my accident," Bertha again took charge of my small body.

"Brother," she said gently, "we are going to have a good wash and see what your wound looks like." Tenderly she sponged me before peeling away the gauze. At last all would be revealed. Now there was a small mushroom instead of the end bit as before.

"Isn't that tidy?" Bertha giggled cheekily. "There's nothing wrong with you now and, of course, you are a strong boy." Pride awakened, I agreed.

"The Old Man told me your accident is a manly affair."

Such things men have to take on the chin. Is this the Almighty's way of honouring our selection as His Chosen Ones?

I was allowed to wear soft underpants beneath my shorts and could do anything I wanted, including going back to kindergarten or seeing Muncy Nane in her home. I crossed the street, knocked on her gate and she let me in. Everything was as normal as it could possibly be. Delighted to see me again, she lifted me hugs and kisses and I was just as joyful.

Wow! This time it was really painful. She must have rubbed her body against my still-tender skin and I let out a yell.

"Oh, dear. What's the matter?" she asked. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, Nane," I explained, "there was an accident to my whistle. It's still very sore."

"Oh, my little darling. What happened?" I explained what I had been told.

"Let me see. I hope it's not dangerous." She used to see many other boys' whistles at the kindergarten as she helped them to undo their clothing so I had nothing to hide.

She shuddered. Her hands trembled as she helped me back into my clothes. Tears streamed down her face.

“Oh, my precious. You have been badly hurt.” Yet I noticed her eyes were not on me but on some spot in the distance. I realised then that our game had come to an end. There would be no more.

I went over to her home many times after this episode but she never again tried to blow my whistle. Looking back now, I am grateful to her. Unwittingly, she had established the direction of my sexuality. Later there were to be occasions when I might have been tempted to become homosexual. Thanks to her, I did not.

A further step forward

Another morning brought the usual breakfast bustle while the Old Girl sorted out everyone’s daily tasks. Bertha was to attend to various household chores, Edithke was to escort me to school and keep an eye on me. School? I thought she was mistaken but no, she put a brown bag with leather straps over my shoulders.

“You are grown up now,” the Old Girl said. “You are now a school boy to learn what life is all about. Hurry!”

Should I be overjoyed? Who could tell what would come from this?

Hand-in-hand with Edithke, I arrived at the place where I was to learn “what life is all about”. I soon understood I was the youngest and poorest of the pupils. The class of fourteen - a mixture of ages drawn from well-to-do traders and craftsmen - must have known of my status with Edithke and the Family Weiss.

A hawkish-faced, red-headed bachelor, lean and elegant, was our teacher who also doubled as the Synagogue’s Cantor. He introduced himself as “Heinz Herman Bela” who lived to the left of the schoolroom in spacious quarters containing a grand piano in the lounge. He was a highly-competent player of classical music who also had a voice tremendous in tone and volume.

After he had come to know me, I was permitted to listen to his practising on this piano and the last I heard of him was his escape to Switzerland before the Nazis began to humiliate the Jews. He must have foreseen something of the coming tragedy and was one of the lucky ones.

I had to introduce myself and, to my surprise, I learned I was not only in a Jewish school but that my name was not Gabor.

“You are Jankev ben Avraham Ovinu,” I was informed, which was all right as long as I was called something. Only years later did I unravel my real, but unknown, given name. In translation it meant *Abraham’s illegitimate child Eugene*, an unpleasant discrimination. After all, I had my legitimate father. He was not Abraham but Alexander (Sandor) and although Mother was a Christian, surely that did not make me illegitimate.

I accepted the accounts by various scribes in old manuscripts that this particular long-bearded Abraham liked a bit of crumpet when the occasion arose and spread his wild oats around. Unfortunately, this did not help at all and I was to remain ‘illegitimate’ with these Jewish brethren for ever. There was no way I could fight it.

For the first time I had come up against discrimination. My teacher soon turned my low status to his advantage. As his small *schamess*, I had to do his shopping for items from toothpaste to fruit or whatever he needed since, being cadaverously red-headed, he did not like to appear in public too much. A charwoman did his cleaning, cooking and other work. He deliberately lived a secluded life in Godollo to avoid ridicule but, as he loved his music, he would give concerts to sophisticated audiences in Budapest. He would also occasionally give me money for sweets and, as I was a quick learner, he kept his eye on me.

Over six years old by now and distinctive in my State-issue garb and oversized boots, to make matters worse, the Old Girl cut my curly hair almost back to my scalp.

“It’s easier to keep it clean,” she explained. A photo taken at the end of the school term, when a tableau was presented, reveals a small potato-shaped monkey sitting on the ground to the left of the group. Me! The school had a benefactor, the Honorable Banyai Beni whose aristocratic name suited his bearing and appearance. Occasionally he gave money to the school for equipment and he paid for my copy of this photograph. It was a wholesome gesture since he provided something I needed when things were going badly.

The school curriculum demanded that I should be taught Hebrew writing. This was picturesque drawing for me but I also learned how to read and became model pupil. In this way, the gap between the well-to-do children and poor little Gabor could be bridged. I had to show the others that I was worthy, that my poverty was not my fault and that they should view me for my positive capabilities. When visitors came into the class, I would be expected to recite poems or read aloud - window dressing some might call it.

Without too much difficulty, I mastered the difficult task of reading and writing Hebrew. The Hungarian alphabet contained 36 letters with many consonants and high vowels, with single or double dashes or dots above these. The Hebrew alphabet had only 24 letters. The vowels were indicated below the letter by one, two or three dots although these might not always be used. The Torah and the old books were written this way.

Early on, I decided to work on ahead in order to be ready for anything. It was rather like playing chess. Not that I won every time in my games for acceptance. The distance between the haves and the have-nots had to be maintained in a class-conscious society. One example was the denial of my win at a fancy dress ball.

Such an event is momentous in the life of any school. In those times of world Depression, it was even more notable. Everyone was asked to make it as memorable as possible. The Old Girl was excited since her boy Gabor (now called Jankev) was a good mimic. She could use him to satirise her social betters.

The Old Girl pestered me to show her the way our peasant neighbour's daughter walked. National costume for females required many petticoats beneath the overskirt and some women sported as many as twenty, with good reason. The more they wore, the richer they were. It was an outward sign of rank.

Once the women were dressed in all their finery with petticoats puffed out like multi-coloured carnations, you had to give them a wide berth when passing. Whether all this material created a wild swinging of the hips, or whether the swinging was deliberate, I could not tell. Such displays from scantily-clad models on today's catwalks suggest a dislocated hip.

I used to imitate my neighbour Marika's walk to amuse bystanders and agreed to do this to get the Old Girl off my back.

"You are a rascal!" she chortled. I knew she was up to something and it had to do with the masked ball. She would giggle like a young girl each time I came in sight.

The great day arrived, the contestants lined up before parading past the judges, with me in a face mask and shawl, wearing Marika's best outfit and swinging my hip flirtatiously. The judges and audience were puzzled. Who was this charming, cheeky girl?

We passed around the room three times until five were selected and three chosen as prize-winners. The five judges often pointed in my direction so I performed some smart dance steps and a sort of pirouette, bending over at the hip to show a dozen petticoats. They liked it so, being a bit more cheeky, I blew a kiss from my tiny hand.

They were faced with a difficult decision. Make the wrong choice and they would be clobbered later. Beside me, two well-dressed girls were the daughters of a wealthy merchant. How could the judges give a prize to an unknown contestant? With much gesticulation and the dignity of self-appointed power, the chief judge asked us to remove our masks. Suddenly there was consternation.

"That impudent State Ward boy has played a trick on us all!" The decision was quick. I was awarded third prize, a packet of cheap loose sweets, while first and second each received a large box of chocolates. For me, it was a punch on the jaw. I had been put properly in my place. However, the finale was memorable.

While I had been prancing around waiting for the judges' decision, there had an unsolicited call of nature. Close to exploding when the show ended, I stormed into the men's toilet at the bottom of the property but a chap who was already there turned towards me.

"Hey," he said. "Girls go next door. You're in the wrong place."

"I'm in a hurry." I lifted my petticoats as high as my chin and let the floodgates open. Beside me, the fellow was awestruck. When I'd finished, I left with a swish of my skirt and swung my hips. Mind you, that was the last time I dressed as a girl!

Being prepared

I was restless. School work was not enough. A few months earlier the Old Girl had enrolled me in the Scout Movement and decked me out with a Cub's brown scarf which required its special reef knot. I had my tidy lemon squeezer hat and my chic ankle socks with frilly leather garters and was I thrilled! It was marvellous fun to dress up in my gear and go down to the park once a week to meet the boys in my patrol. We would fool about, play 'Cowboys and Indians' and, if we had any breath left by nightfall, settle in front of an open fire, sing songs and recite poems.

On one occasion we erected a rickety tent, cooked meals and got ourselves thoroughly smoked out by our clumsy Boy Scout fire. I was fond of my uniform and liked to greet fellow Cubs with the raised right hand and two forefingers slightly extended to the brim of my hat. 'Be Alert' was our motto. Remembering that at certain times was to save my life more than once.

We attended the 1933 World Jamboree in Godollo's Queen Elizabeth Park (named for the Hapsburg Empress assassinated in 1898) parading before the Great Man, Lord Baden-Powell, in his kilt with his pipe in his mouth. We understood not one word of what he was saying since it was in English but his translator told us how happy he was to see all the visitors gathered together in harmony. This was the first time we had seen American Indians in full feathered head dress or boys from India in turbans, Egyptians wearing the fez and Albanians or Greeks in what seemed like tutus and pompom hats.

Illustration 5 and 5A, Image 'Scout badge and poster'



Memorabilia from the 1933 World Jamboree in Godollo.

There were many other nationalities in colourful attire but none of them created as much interest among the girls and women as the Scots in their kilts. For us, they looked like skirts but these lads gave a good display on the bagpipes. However, as the pipes are also one of Hungary's folk instruments, for us at least, it did not cause much of a stir.

The wonder was what these chaps wore under their kilts. We wished the wind would blow to give us a peek. Sadly, in Hungary's summer, there is none for weeks on end.

Women would try get an eyeful when the kilted ones sat down. No such luck. In broken English, someone asked one of the lads if anything was worn under the kilt. The answer came with a wink. “Nothing. It’s all in good nick!” I guess she had to settle for that old joke.

The Cubs collected autographs and whatever else we could exchange, acquiring unnecessary souvenirs and bartering them for something equally useless, especially when you were offered an item you thought you had ‘sold’ the previous day.

This was 1933 and I was past eight years old. On the surface, everything seemed okay except that, outside Munich, the Nazis were building a concentration camp at Dachau and filling it with slave labour.

For us Godollo boys, we just had a good time. Our town was busy and prospering, Regent Horthy was satisfied in seeing Westerners about and he hoped to build more sympathy outside Hungary for his regime. Unfortunately, his Minister-President with his Axis fixation saw things differently. This spherical-shaped fellow, Gombos, came to the conclusion that boys our age could be turned into a particular asset.

A new youth cadet organisation was established, known as the *Leventeservezetek*, shortened to ‘Levente’. The orders went out in late 1933 and were pasted on every lamp post in the area. Our limping Town Crier whacked away at his snare drum like a medieval braggart soldier, proclaiming that “every boy over the age of eight must attend cadet drill at the Sports Ground every Sunday morning between ten and twelve!”

We also learned that failure to turn up would invite inquiry from the gendarmerie and everyone knew what that meant.

Oh, dear! We put up with enough compulsion from the clergy to attend lectures or special appointments and now this. It seemed that, if our souls were being whipped into shape, so were our bodies, literally. A few philosophic rebels who had disappeared between Saturday and Monday were dragged from their beds in the middle of the night and severely beaten. The word spread quickly.

“Don’t forget to turn up. There’s no excuse for absenteeism when it’s a matter of duty to the nation.”

Gombos and his cronies had conveniently forgotten the millions who had died a generation earlier for the same reason.

Illustration 6, Image ‘Levente’



This Levente poster of heroic youth saving the nation belied its more sinister intention of creating a cadre of right-wing soldiers comparable to the Hitler Youth Movement in Germany.

This Levente business was one of the most stupid activities I have ever endured. The pride of our town arrived at the Sports Ground, completely mystified, and milled around until a foul-mouthed army corporal herded us together with obscenities unfit for young ears. We were then sorted out according to height, showered with more curses and formed into platoons eight abreast, two feet apart and ten rows long.

This corporal monster marched us up and down, turned us in half and full circles, drilled us to dress to the right or left and stand at ease, all to the accompaniment of a symphony of expletives. I was lucky to be in the middle so my mistakes went unnoticed. The poor fellows at the front or the sides had to do push-ups or laps around the Sports Ground if their concentration wavered. Sadists such as this corporal were destined to become gendarmes while we cadets were being indoctrinated as the vanguard of the Hungarian Nazi movement, the Arrow Cross.

We young ones were to become the 'Pillars of the Nation' but all Gombos achieved was to tie Hungary to Germany's doomed waggon. Had our country not suffered enough in the months before and after Trianon? Would our leaders never learn? Worse than the ostrich with its head in the sand, is the one with its head up another's bum. Fat Gombos was leading us to a ruin from which we never recovered.

You can fool most of the people most of the time and, on 10 October 1936, he was buried in Budapest with great ceremony after five years at the helm. Leading clergy plus the European bigwigs gave him a spectacular send-off and he was laid to rest surrounded by special white marble statues. Goering & Co. arrived to pay their respects with a large wreath.

So much achieved in so short a time, was the catchword that day. What they really meant was that Hungary was now firmly in Germany's pocket all over again.

In later years I used to see the top of the Gombos monument inside the high fence as my tram travelled along Kerepesi Street. Many times I wanted to go to his crypt with a four-by-two and give it a good thrashing. There were plenty of others who had a similar desire.

Gabor on Gombos

Julius Gombos had been a captain on the General Staff before Horthy appointed him Prime Minister-President of Hungary in 1931. He was a very robust, gregarious and rotund person, similar in stature and manner to Benito Mussolini. He also had a grandiose scheme for a power bloc in Central Europe, consisting of Italy, Austria, Germany and Hungary, of which he intended to be head.

In Berlin, in June 1932, he gained an audience with Hitler who was driving Germany towards a dictatorship. Gombos was fobbed off with a promise that Germany would pay its post-war debt to Hungary and, in July 1933, he signed the Axis pact with Italy, Austria and Germany. A Swabian, Gombos understood and concurred with Hitler's goals and within weeks he enacted laws designed to please the Nazi leadership.

This meant effectively abolishing parliamentary-style government in Hungary while maintaining a semblance of democracy to please Horthy. The establishment of a one-party system would thereby destroy opposition parties, personal freedoms and encourage dictatorship.

As Hungary's President, Gombos was a specially-invited guest at the Berlin Olympic Games between 1 and 15 October, 1936 and enjoyed his few days in the young Third Reich. Did he know that Horthy had already met Hitler in Berlin on 22 August to discuss Germany's failure to repay its debt, as well as matters such as the return of parts of the old Hungary which had been seized by Roumania, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia and the Ukraine?

It is also possible that Gombos' personal goals had been analysed since both leaders disliked him.

During his Games visit, Gombos fell ill and was hospitalised near Berlin. Within a few days he was dead. The official explanation was that complications had caused his demise but did German efficiency really fail? It took three days to return his body to Hungary. Neither Horthy nor Hitler were unhappy with this serendipitous turn of events. Horthy appointed Imredy Bela as his new Prime Minister. Hitler also approved this choice, unaware of Imredy's Jewish antecedents.

High jinks and holy days

Christmas 1933 arrived. With my Christian friend, Sandor the caretaker's son who had set up a nativity scene in a cardboard box, plus three others we went from house to house singing carols and wishing everyone a

“Merry Christmas”. This was the custom amongst the Faithful and we were rewarded with cakes, nuts, as well as a little money.

This was great fun. The streets were snow-covered, the trees had their sugar-coating and our breath left tiny clouds behind us as we made a huge racket along the way and had lots of snowball fights. The temperature swung between 20 and 35 degrees below zero yet we never felt cold. The Old Girl was happy because loose change would fall out of my pockets when I got ready for bed.

Just like other boys, although I was supposed to be Jewish, I awaited Father Niklaus with excitement. Our shoes had to be polished so that He, with his short-sight, would notice. The shinier they were, the better were the chances of finding presents in our carefully-placed socks. *Why does he have to come so late at night?* I liked the idea of meeting him and cajoling him into giving me substantial presents. I believed in his generosity towards “good” children and I tried to catch him in the act but he always managed to elude me.

He must have been around fairly late on Christmas morning. Our shoes were on the frost-covered window sill and contained sweets and a new pair of socks. Father Niklaus must have been impartial and this was a bit of a bore as, every year, I received the same presents. He seemed to be without imagination.

In a Hungarian Jewish household, the celebration of *Chanucha* falls at the same time as Christmas. We did not have a decorated pine tree like our neighbours yet we had a game to play with spindles which had Hebrew letters on each of the four sides. It was a never-ending wonder which letter would be on top and a sort of happy gambling with nuts as a stake.

I would wander over to the neighbour’s house to admire the decorations and the toys. I had never been given a toy. Any I possessed, I had made myself. The point was, I seldom had time to play since I had to cut twigs and wood to size and store them near the stove, then find fresh grass and greens to feed Mitzi, our milking nanny goat. During the spring growing season, I had to digging and turning over the garden soil, not only ours but others for a small reward.

On one occasion I had to take Mitzi as a bride to her “groom” (as the Old Girl said, “to rough her up a bit”), leading her to a large, curly-horned male goat. I could smell him from a distance but he did not seem to be keen on Mitzi for a bride and made faces at her. I was fascinated with his prancing about and thought he wanted to push Mitzi out of his yard. He was really angry, climbing halfway up on her, pushing hard. Poor Mitzi. She was chained to a post and could not escape his rough manners. Then I had to lead her back home, seemingly for nothing.

The “groom” had apparently not been happy with her and I told the Old Girl what had taken place with our poor little milker. Then I went out to find fresh fodder to help soothe her pain. She was a good goat and I had grown up on her milk. Thanks to goat’s milk, I had never been seriously ill, even when I was sleeping alongside my continuously sick brother, Joseph. He could not drink goat's milk but cow’s milk bought for hard cash.

By Easter, Mitzi had presented us with two tiny kids. I was puzzled how one day there had been only Mitzi in the yard and the next there were two shivering, small smelly ones beside her. It was fascinating to watch them suckle her, one on each side tugging hard where the Old Girl used to get the milk out, while Mitzi contentedly munched dried hay and clover.

About this time our house was thoroughly scrubbed out. Everything had to be renewed for the great celebration of *Pasach* (known to Christians as the Passover). No breadcrumbs could be left lying around. Linen, pots and pans were brought out from the cupboard all new and only to be used on this special occasion. Instead of bread, a goodly number of *matzos* had been bought in cardboard boxes. Then we had to fast for a whole day, being allowed to drink only water. This was followed by a great deal of ceremony in the house as well as in the synagogue with lots of thanks to the Almighty for saving us while the Angel of Death passed by our house and left us alone.

Easter in our town was more or less the same throughout Europe and, since I had a foot in both the Jewish and the Christian camps, I could also enjoy this festival. Somewhere about the middle of April, the cold outside was very bitter so no one was eager to spend much time away from the warmth of the house. There were occasional snowfalls, the ground was frosted hard and even the ditches were frozen.

Nevertheless, we cut slabs of wood into wedge shapes, took two slots out at each end for tying this with string to our shoes and went skating. Edithke and I had a lot of fun and any spare time was spent swishing about on these or pushing each other on a toboggan. We would work up a decent appetite with these rumbles, the cold fresh air turning our winter faces pink. Here and there, our pants were torn, thereby inducing a slap in the face and a grumble from the Old Girl but this wore off as had all the other smackings.

To Hungarians, Easter meant going to church late at night to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Later, there could also be many injuries in consequence of drinking strong home brew, a sort of cheap and nasty brandy. It would burn a hole in your trousers if you spilled it, yet this *palinka* concoction was drunk in copious quantities. Under the influence of such a potent liquid, the more temperamental could be at each other's throats with pocket knives.

Long before Easter, the women would have been cooking, baking and boiling eggs for colouring or painting with native motifs. Many of these could be put alongside a Faberge masterpiece and not be out of place in a competition. During Easter, merry bachelors tanked up on high-octane spirit would go around the houses of marriageable females.

Poor ladies. They were likely to be hauled out of bed in their nighties, kidnapped and taken to be dunked in the nearest frozen water trough. As they scrambled away and ran off, they would probably be drenched by a bucket of cold water. This was a sort of procreation rite yet usually accompanied by laughter and screams. You were free to guess who did what but it was all regarded as good fun!

More drinks, followed by offerings of food plus the painted Easter eggs, and the celebration was well under way. However, after this things usually began to get out of hand. Knife injuries could occur. Yet it was actually a happy occasion if you didn't count the dead and half-dead.

We all looked forward to it. Weeks before, in the chemist's shop and in the markets, people were persuaded to buy fancy bottled scented stuff such as "Eau de Cologne". These were pungent local concoctions which you would not find in the German town of Koln but smelly enough to be envied by those who couldn't afford it. It was for a kind of fertility ritual although most people had probably forgotten its original meaning. Poor young fellows lacking hard cash had to make their own arrangements and hunt for narrow-necked bottles to fill with coloured, "aromatic" liquid and fit them into their pockets.

My mates, my brother Joseph and I solved this problem cleverly. Knowing that others would have strong-smelling scent to sprinkle over the young women they hoped to visit, we opted for soapy water with light beetroot juice for colour. The neck was covered in butter muslin and tied with string. We knocked on doors asking permission to sprinkle the flowers in the house, saying we would freshen up the older ones. We usually followed on behind others who had made the place smell like a perfume factory so no one discovered what we had been splashing about.

This piece of make-believe was designed to show neighbours and friends how popular you were. Every visitor was counted and later you boasted about how many eggs you had received. This one-upmanship was important in a town where social distinctions were rigidly observed.

Up until noon, it was all go from house to house with our pockets filling with eggs or inside our shirts. Then we ate them until we thought we would burst and finally threw the remaining eggs at each other instead of snowballs. If you didn't find a human target, the snow-covered street would be left streaked with yellow and other colours. The crows had a good time too, following behind us. We could also become sick from stuffing ourselves with the ever-popular Easter cakes while we staggered around after drinking forbidden liquids. For the Old Girl, ever hard-up, the loose change was her main interest. We never gave money a thought. Easter was a grand time!

I have been away from this for four decades and realise the customs have now largely changed. My wife returned from visiting her mother in Budapest in 1992 and said that there had been preparations for the arrival of an old man who still observed the Easter traditions. Unfortunately, the old chap came in drunk and to everyone's disappointment went away without doing any sprinkling. He had forgotten the purpose of his visit!

These things are now commercialised and based on the amount of time expended. Is this not a shame? Perhaps, as little Morice found out when asking his father for help with Mathematics homework:

“What’s two plus two, Dad?”
“All depends, son. Are we buying or selling?”

Chapter Four: Storm clouds gathering

‘There is no scandal like rags, nor any crime so shameful as poverty.’
-George Farquhar, *The Beaux Stratagem*, 1707

One Sunday morning a good-looking lady knocked on our door. The Old Girl was in a happy frame of mind and I was inside, near enough to overhear the conversation.

“Does Weiss Nane live here” the lady asked. “I am the mother of Gabor.”

Suddenly the temperature dropped very low. The Old Girl’s reply was far from friendly and she called me with a vicious edge to her voice.

“Look who is here for you, Gabor! Your own mother. Huh!”

Sadly, I could not instantly relate to her. Parted for so long, I could not remember her face. *Should I call her “Mother”?*

She broke the ice instead.

“My son,” she confirmed, kissing me, “you’ve grown quite a lot since I last saw you. I’ve brought you some lollies. And a hat. Let me see if it fits. Oh, how happy I am to see you.”

Hovering about, the Old Girl, looked pensive. Should I show affection towards this mother of mine? The baby whom King Solomon was going to divide probably had the same problem.

The Old Girl gave grudging permission for us to go to the town gardens and we said little as we walked towards the Princess Zita statue. Mother had a box camera and took a picture of me looking as if I had swallowed a whole sword yet I was perplexed. I was now Jewish, relatively successful and scarcely a child, but suddenly confronted by a Christian mother who was a complete stranger. On our return, the Old Girl extended little hospitality and my mother quickly departed, leaving me to a hostile atmosphere.

For days the Old Girl eyed me as if I was about to commit treason. Some time later she called me.

“Do you remember your brother Joseph.”

Vaguely. The memory of a small room and a baby sleeping alongside me, something better forgotten.

“You’ll see him soon,” she said. “He is coming to live here.”

Here was my past suddenly encroaching on my world.

“You know the Polyaks from the market with the fruit stand and shop inside the police station courtyard,” she continued. “They are Swabians. The man is the commander of the gendarmes in the main barracks and her son-in-law is also a gendarme. Your sister Magda is in their care.”

This was a shock. However, the Old Girl hadn’t finished.

“I’ll ask Polyak Nane to bring your sister to the market next week. You can meet her there.” This was a problem. My sister was with Christians. The Old Girl added to my fears.

“The Polyaks have stupid notions about Jews. Don’t hold out much hope for your sister’s attitude to you.” She then began to rant. “Oppression breeds oppression and what she sees around her now will stick with her for life. Mark my words, if she gets near Power, she will use it to the full!”

I thought the Old Girl was babbling nonsense. As things turned out a decade later, she was right on target.

At the next market day, a small, shy, dark-eyed girl was hiding behind the Polyak’s fruit stall. She seemed frightened and kept turning her face away, trying to bury herself amongst the baskets. Little Magda had

evidently been forced to live a secluded life although surrounded by rough language as well as the brutality of the barracks.

“Give your brother a kiss,” urged Polyak Nane but Magda refused.

I was to see her again at the Polyak’s home some time later where the top gendarme brass had gathered, their tall hats richly decorated with cock feathers, and themselves armed to the teeth. Although they extended friendly gestures towards me (I was a white boy, after all) I knew they had tortured and bayoneted helpless people. And Magda was to remain a stranger with beautiful eyes but a cold heart.

What had they and my parents done to her? What had Hungary done to her?

That weekend the Family Weiss prepared for my brother. Mother brought him to the house, frail and just over five years old, dark-eyed like my sister. This puzzled me. The mirror told me that mine were bluish-grey.

I soon discovered he was vexatious and accident-prone. His inner ear infection at birth caused him pain and, with his balance disturbed, he kept falling into things. Today they call it ‘viral labyrinthitis’; back then, I called it a nuisance since I was blamed for not looking after him properly.

Nevertheless, we rubbed along together, sometimes playing but most of the time working. It was the season for gathering horse chestnuts and selling sacks of them at a good price as winter fodder for the animals in Horthy’s wild games. A German chemical company also paid well for large beetles which were jellied down to make a cosmetic or ointment. We shook them from trees or bushes onto a tarpaulin and I shovelled them into a sack. At the factory, a cauldron was already boiling, ready for the load. We weren’t hot on animal rights in the 1930s and they were only insects, after all. Who enjoys boiled crab or lobster today?

Joseph was some help in collecting chamomile and lime tree flowers when spring next came around and, at the time when many were unemployed, I supplied herbs and blossoms to the markets. This money helped towards our upkeep. There were no freeloaders in this household.

Even so, the Family Weiss were resourceful foster parents. The State paid them four *pengo* (about a dollar) a month for each of the children in their care. This was not much but it was guaranteed to arrive monthly in the mail. In addition, the well-to-do Bretheren contributed groceries and discarded garments, being generous towards charity cases. Some made the most of this and, in the synagogue, would show off in their appointed positions, never letting up on how important they were.

At the given time the Old Man, or the Old Girl, would visit their homes to pick up contributions in the push barrow. This was usually a fifty-kilo sack of flour, five to ten kilos of sugar, dried beans and other legumes, bread and one or two geese or ducks. There was always a packet of cigarettes for him and loose sweets for the children. This really made the Old Man’s day as he loved to puff away on a cigarette but could never afford to buy his own. He would normally ration himself to two a day, which was the equivalent of one *filler*, about one cent. A whole packet of twenty was a dream come true and he would float between the clouds and moon.

We appreciated our share of the sweets, and the feast the Old Girl prepared was not always burned to charcoal. Our joy would be spoiled only by her over-excitement. I also had a fear of having to wear the cast-off garments after she had made some “readjustment”, possibly because her husband and daughter were deformed and I could not be allowed to appear as normal.

Perhaps I misjudged her. She was a seamstress but ignorant of male proportions. Her measuring consisted of grabbing a handful of material at my back. In front, everything was tight but as soon as I put it on I was lost in it.

“You’ll grow into it soon,” was her verdict. Later, when I had seen Walt Disney’s movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, I recognised myself in the cheerful, silent ‘Dopey’ of the long, flowing clothes.

One morning, there was great excitement. Bertha had disappeared during the night. Her dresses were in the right place but her bed had not been slept in and we assumed that she had eloped. This had been inevitable since she was buxom, strong and tall with an attractive baby face.

She also exuded what we today would call pheromones, although they were not known as such then. She possessed a sexual attraction that seemed to float out on the wind. The Old Girl had anticipated trouble and kept her under a house curfew, seldom letting her out to buy food and groceries.

In the next street, four wheelwrights made hand-carved, wooden cartwheels. It was heavy, physical work. The apprentice, who was over twenty, got the scent of our Bertha and never missed any time she might happen

to pass the shop. Full of beans he was and, when the hormones kicked in, nothing could stop him. He went for Bertha like a steamroller. Mind you, she needed little encouragement since she was more than ready for “fulfilment”, and they would be talking over the fence, holding hands and even kissing when the Old Girl was away on her rounds.

At Easter I knew who was knocking on the door wanting to sprinkle “holy water”. There he was, over six feet, all muscle, lantern-jawed with a sexy moustache. There was a special sprinkling protocol and the first thus blessed was the one whose permission had been sought, followed by other females. Bertha’s face was rainbow-hued.

“My name is Menyhart Mihaly. Just call me Misi.”

The way he received the painted eggs from Bertha was observed closely and the Old Girl smelled a rat. It had been too early for my brother Joseph and I to go to our own round of sprinklings and the atmosphere in the room suddenly grew chill. The Old Girl knew she must observe tradition and could not kick Misi out immediately but she could read minds as well as body language. Courteously, she managed to break up the admiring looks, and cleverly too.

“Now, Bertha, this young man has lots of other girls to attend to. He cannot waste too much time with you,” she joked.

I was not versed in affairs of the heart and did not understand. Other folk arrived and I forgot Misi and Bertha’s little amour. I had no idea what went on during the next few weeks but this seventeen year-old’s behaviour changed noticeably. She worked diligently around the house but her eyes were alive.

One Sunday morning a smartly-dressed Misi knocked at the door. He was a no-nonsense chap and went straight to the point.

“I love your daughter,” he told the Old Girl. “She loves me. Please agree to our getting married.”

The Old Girl was speechless, which made a change. Things going on behind her back was bad enough but to let Bertha marry a *goy* was entirely out of the question. No self-respecting Jewish girl could possibly want to marry a Christian!

Poor Misi. Suddenly he was showered with so much screaming abuse that his ears must have been singed for days. She pushed him out of the house in great indignation.

“I’ll throw a bucket of hot water over you, if you ever come back again!” she bellowed.

Misi did not have the temerity to try his luck again and the Old Girl was fuming for days.

“How dare a *goy* think about asking for a Jewish girl’s hand!” she stormed. “I refuse to start a trend! You’d better forget this stupid notion and him. We shall find you a decent Jewish boy when the time comes.”

Such an irony! Since he was a Christian like my mother, Misi was *goy* and *shekshe*, forbidden to unite with Bertha because both were born into a different faith. Why is there no toleration?

I am sure they did the right thing. Much time was spent by the police and gendarmes searching for them but without success. Their hideout was well-prepared and Misi had found a job elsewhere. It was only after Bertha had her own baby boy that I discovered them. Misi turned out to be a good husband and father, a good provider and a totally decent fellow.

The Old Girl never forgave Bertha and, for years, refused to hear any news of her. Yet a chance meeting when Bertha was pushing her pram on the street one day softened her stance. I had been away from Godollo for many years before I met them both again and learned that Misi and Bertha were on good terms with the Family Weisse. An inventive and industrious chap, Misi had his own establishment and, contrary to the average Hungarian, was sober, sensible and likable.

The Old Girl was not to have a similar experience with her own beloved daughter. Poor Edithke was not the kind to lure boys into an elopement. At the age of twenty, the Nazis took her away, still a virgin, to die in Bergen-Belsen.

Yet Edithke still had ten years to live before this, pursuing her sheltered life with more orphans. We had been surprised when we were joined by a three-year old boy and a baby girl about six-months old. After school, Edithke had to take over the work Bertha had previously done while I continued to collect firewood and feed the nanny goat.

My mate Miska:

There was a small lake on the outskirts of Godollo where horses were driven to be washed down. I was summer water-mad, happy to dive into anything bigger than a basin and here I met a new friend, Miska.

Not far from the lake lived an outcast family, the Kosdas. I had never seen a man around the house to which Miska brought me. He introduced me to his mother and his two young sisters. They really were different to us boys. They wore no clothing around the house and ran around stark naked outside

Later, I heard that Miska's mother was trading her favours with certain fellows who had a bike, as well as those who had not. The bad-mouthing gossips also maintained that her older, twelve-year old daughter was following in her mother's footsteps.

Miska was already known for his misdeeds but he was simply another boy whose knowledge would benefit me when gathering firewood or fresh grass. Yet he was more than just a rascal. Years later, he was to be hanged for bank robbery and murder.

He knew where to find the best dry branches in a large forest some kilometres away and owned by the Bishop. Unfortunately, wood gathering was forbidden there and this Pillar of the Church employed rangers who patrolled in pairs to drive off poachers and thieves. Not at like Victor Hugo's cleric in *Les Miserables*!

Our families could not afford to buy wood for cooking or heating yet we needed this stuff badly. Miska and I would sneak into the forest to collect lighter, drier twigs and branches, tie them with string into bundles and sling them across our backs before creeping away unnoticed. On one occasion, we were caught and expected to get a good hiding. Instead, we were introduced to a sadistic subtlety.

"Hey, nice boys," we were informed. "You've been caught. We're not going to hurt you. No, we are good men and are kind to youngsters. But you must do something first."

They're not going to kick us or hit us so why not co-operate? One of them lined us up face to face.

"Is he your friend?" he asked, pointing to Miska. "Thought so. Okay, now we play the game. If you do it well you can take your bundles and go. Fair enough." It seemed so.

"You start on the count of three," he continued. "Spit in each other's face as much as you can."

Reluctantly, we did until we had no spit left.

"That wasn't painful, was it?" No comment.

"You must play the second part of the game. On the count of three, you will slap each other but," he added with a touch of menace, "you must do a good job or we will show you how to do it!"

Miska and I went at each other, fearing the force of the men's hands. I don't know how long it lasted but we were staggering and finally slumped to the ground. I heard their rude remarks and cruel laughter before I lost.

Towards sunset, we stumbled home holding each other up and we must have fallen several times because our knees were covered in blood. I guess we had been lucky. Adults caught pinching this holy man's wood would have been hauled off to the Gendarmes and severely punished.

Illustration 7, Image 'Gendarmes 2'



Gendarmes, a paramilitary police force designed to intimidate rather than protect.

That episode had one benefit. Although we had given each other a good hiding, it brought home the real meaning of the Boy Scout slogan '*Be Prepared*'. Never before had I played a game of spit-in-the-face and knock each other to pulp. This sharp lesson was to save my life when the Nazis made things unbearable and the Russians copied them later.

We had to find fuel. Our weekly fifteen-kilogramme bundles were barely sufficient for cooking and heating. Miska was a shrewd customer and worked out a system to beat the rangers. This combined orienteering and native cunning. One would stay on watch while the other collected the bundles. We kept each other in sight and searched an area of no more than two hundred metres at any one time.

Water boy

My good luck stepped in to rescue me from this risky chore. During the school vacation, I helped the Old Man on his market stall. One job was to fetch a pail of water from the artesian well nearby. On hot, windless summer days, this was often necessary since others close to our stand were generously given free cold drinks when they asked for them.

Over on one side of the market, six Bulgarian vegetable growers had their produce on display. One day while carrying the water past their stand, one of them asked for a drink. I obliged and soon his colleagues surrounded me and emptied my pail. It took three more trips to quench their thirst but they were pleased. Then I ran off to oblige the Family Weiss and their neighbours.

Towards evening I was heading home with the Old Man, pushing the barrow with its leftovers on top, when the Bulgarians stopped me.

"Hey, nice boy," they called. "Come here." I left the barrow with the startled Old Man. "See this produce. Take as much as you like."

Then they spoke to him.

"You, good man over there, you've got a good son. Push yourself across here with that contraption. We shall fill the spare space with these," and they pointed to the beautiful vegetables.

The Old Man was puzzled and embarrassed. He was a proud man and loath to accept alms. He protested.

"This is our appreciation for your good boy," they replied. The Old Man had been unaware of my supplying them. When I told him, he looked upon me with his deformed smile, showing all the tenderness he could. He was obviously proud of his "son".

There was real consternation when we arrived home since we had brought more than could be earned in a month. The Old Girl stared at me and, for once, she was very quiet.

Before we left for our next market day the following week, she surprised me.

"Look, son, take this water can and this mug. You offer water to whoever wants it. Don't ask for money or anything. Just give it."

"Fresh water and for nothing!" I would yell all around the sweltering summer market. Everybody appreciated it and I began to accumulate a little store of small coins. By the end of the day, I had earned my first money, the eighty-two *fillers* [cents] and all unsolicited. The Family Weiss went up a notch in public estimation.

During those times when drinks were not in demand, the Bulgarians had me watering the horses then placing their wheat and chaff feed bags around their necks. After that, I would harness them to the cart and drive them to the horse enclosure on the side street. They were mighty workhorses, the size of Clydesdales, and my favourite hoofers. Huge, strong and gentle power-houses, yet I could do anything with them. They seemed to like having small fry like me around.

I loved these Bulgarians. They grew the best vegetables but they were also kind, good mannered and popular. Soon, they asked me to help on their stand, sorting, stacking and selling. The reward was enough to keep four families fed with their produce.

One day towards noon, I was selling fresh large paprika to a well-dressed woman. A man looking like an elegant film star stood beside her. They finished their purchase and I attended to more customers but the couple stayed, watching me closely. I was used to this sort of thing and thought nothing of it. Suddenly the gentleman was alongside me.

"You like your job?" he enquired.

“Yes,” I replied. “They like me and I like them.”

“Would you like to earn some money?” he continued.

“Yes, if I can,” I replied.

“My wife would like to see you this afternoon. Come to the theatre over there,” and he pointed to a hotel-restaurant complex, a very posh place with a large terrace in front. I used to go there to listen outside to the Gypsy musicians playing inside.

“We will pay you to go from house to house with invitation brochures. Are you interested?”

“I have to ask permission first,” I replied and found Dimitri, one of the gardeners who told me talk to my Old Folks. At two *pengo* [two dollars] this was too good to resist. My minders thought so, too, and I ran back to these refined people.

“I will be there as soon as I have washed and changed.” The lady’s face lit up with an encouraging smile while mine, with its smudged dirt and rivulets of sweat, must have looked rather stunned. This was going to be an adventure. I knew it would also change my life.

Fast on the takeoff, that was me! The lady’s perfume was most attractive but there was something else that I could not explain.

Stage-struck

I walked to the theatre wondering what lay ahead and knocked timidly at the side door. This was opened by a lean, good-looking carpenter chap with a long pencil at the top of his ear. He had a folded ruler sticking from his trouser pocket.

“What’s up, duckie?” he enquired.

“My name is not Duckie,” I replied and put him right with my proper one.

“I have come to see Director Dorogi.”

He guided me through a tangle of rope and canvas on the stage. Everywhere there was a great bustle of perspiring, well-muscled men in an atmosphere of sawdust, fresh paint and glue all mixed up with the aromas of perfume and talcum powder. Never had I seen such sights before.

This was another another world.

My escort, introducing himself as “Erich” piloted me towards a door isolated from the chaos.

“Knock on there,” he said. “There might be someone around,” and left me. I tapped humbly, breathing rapidly. The door opened a little later and there was “The Boss” himself, Director Dorogi.

“Oh, it’s you. Lovely to see you,” he exclaimed. “I shall call Tuni.” He looked so polished and elegant in his silk dressing gown that it was almost like greeting an imagined king.

“I am Joseph, but everybody calls me Joey. You may do so as well.” Just then an angelic face, framed by long hair, looked in. This was Tuni, also clad in a light dressing gown but the belt about her hips failed to conceal a creamy, shapely calf. Her slippers were so feminine and she was so sexy that I turned from red through white to purple.

I was nearly nine years old yet my heart and hormones were much older. *If I could settle be close to this vision.* She was more beautiful than Marilyn Monroe. My mind was whirling.

Her perfume, her refinement pervaded the office. Without hesitation, she leaned down and, as she kissed me on the cheeks, her breasts and her fire nearly knocked me into the middle of next week. I just about peed my pants.

“I’m happy to see you,” she beamed, running her hand through my curly hair. She sat down and pulled me between her thighs to fondle me. Joey looked at her thoughtfully.

“You have come to take the invitations to the houses, haven’t you?” he said, cutting short our little tête-à-tête. “Here is a handful. Once you’ve run out, come back and I shall give you more. Now, off you go.” I shot out and raced back three times, always hoping to see my lovely vision again.

These brochures were about fifteen by twenty centimetres and invited you to Joseph Dorogi’s theatrical production of popular works by Strauss and Lehar with some comedy as well. Performances would be on Wednesday and Saturday with a special gala night on Sunday, formal dress requested.

By nightfall, I had covered the top part of the town and intended to do the bottom area the following day. My reward of two *pengo* seemed like a small fortune. I was prompt the following morning for two reasons, the second being Josey's charming wife, and my heart was a-flame.

Sweet business

I arrived early for my second day's deliveries and walked in through the side door to the backstage clutter. Erich, somewhat over thirty, and also the stage manager, greeted me.

"You back for more work?" I nodded, my eyes darting about, taking it all in. He waved me away to the office. Joey was still in his dressing gown but in lively conversation with an older colleague. Both held a wad of paper and were gesticulating as if arguing. Later, I understood they were rehearsing.

Joey stopped.

"There you are," he said. "Cut along now with these leaflets," indicating the bundle on a side table. "Hurry. We have only two days until we open on Saturday."

I was disappointed at not seeing my Angel but trotted out quickly in order to return for another glimpse of her. By noon, I had completed my whole round and my luck was in. She was there to cuddle and kiss me.

"I have a surprise for you. Would you like to work here with us?"

She told me that one actress, Zita Ante, was very old. There was not much work for her and she had little income. I should be a great help to her.

"I think you are the right boy to sell sweets during interval. The carpenters will make you a tray with a harness to hang around your neck. Zita Ante will organise the sweets, the chocolate and the roasted peanuts and you'll have your share of the profit. Does that sound alright?"

Being paid for my work! I asked the Old Girl about this offer, was told "yes", raced back and was introduced to a frail old lady. Lean, gaunt with wispy grey hair, her face looked as if it needed ironing while her clothing hung on her like sodden leaves after rain.

She hurried to a chair to take the weight off her feet. Carefully, she sat down and yet, she wasn't such a bad-looking oldie and smelled as good as my Angel. She asked me for a cuddle and I was rewarded with kisses.

Hey, this isn't so bad. I had never been caressed so much before and Zita Ante was over the moon about our business venture.



Dawn on Saturday saw me excited, except that I had to uphold Jewish tradition. *Shabbat* had to be observed from Friday night when the candles were lit on the menorah. Everybody dressed for our modest dinner and the Old Man shaved off his weekly bristle.

For ordinary folk, adherence to old beliefs and rituals is no great problem but, in some religions, the use of metal to cut hair is forbidden. Remember Samson suffering from Delilah's dirty trick. As a result, many good Jews go around with beards and side locks. Yet part of the face still has to be shaved.

At least two thousand years ago the Hashimids concocted a jelly-like substance – a sort of distilled horse and camel manure with an added fragrance. My first acquaintance with this came when the Old Man took out a jar of the stuff and a wooden spatula. He smeared a handful on his cheeks and left it to work into the skin to rot the hair follicles. Ten minutes later, he scraped off the whole mess. The smell was like rotten fish and lasted for days.

The Old Man took off outside but the first whiff told us of his hideout. The house-proud Old Girl was always indignant, showering him with a colourful, five-minute tongue-lashing in Yiddish. The first time I endured this particular altercation, I was surprised. We hadn't eaten fish since Easter, not being Friday Catholics. He had to skulk around outdoors and, with a strong sense of self-preservation, we never gave him the chance to shave inside.

I went with him to the synagogue for *shabbat* and he shared his few aniseed sweets. My first time there was a strange experience. It was a U-shaped building and the Holy Book was taken out from an enclosed cabinet

between the rows of seats. The parchment scrolls were covered in blue and wine-coloured velvet, with an ornamented silver shield and two small bells hanging from the top handle. In solemn procession the Elders and the Rabbi would end up in the middle of the room and, with much murmuring and gesturing, the Torah would be uncovered and laid on a lectern prior to a reading. The Verger accompanied them with a 20-centimetre long wand which would be used by the reader of the selected passage.

All the while the Cantor, my school teacher, chanted and embellished something which was a mystery to me. The swaying and bowing from side to side was a complete puzzle. I guessed there must be a form of rhythmical hyphenation of the verbs in the sentences giving this peculiar scansion. I also wondered if many of those present knew what they were intoning. Still, although it was curious, it did not seem to do any harm.

Also harmless was the kissing of the prayer shawl before placing it around the shoulders. Even at home, the Old Man would perform this as an established ritual before he began praying.

“Shma Yisrael, Adonay Alayhenu, Adonay Ahod,” which I understood to mean “Hear, O Israel, the Almighty is the only one true God.” It had been designed to attract the attention of Him to beseech for help in the daily struggle. The same words were often spoken with the last breaths in the gas chambers where six million were to die. So much for taking care of God’s Chosen People. I doubt if the Nazis were impressed. They had a different god, a fellow with histrionic ability, a funny moustache and slicked-down hair.

Up there in the synagogue, I was fascinated. I thought the Old Man was off his rocker and, after the first visit, I asked Bertha.

“Is he alright?”

“Of course he is,” she retorted. “He is calling on God to get us out of trouble.”

I thought about that. That was why I had so many difficulties. I had not called on anybody to help me.

This latest *shabbat* Saturday was awfully long and I had to be at the theatre by seven pm to see Zita Ante and also savour the atmosphere of this complex place. Stage manager Erich was human yo-yo, up in the attic to sort out a canvas backdrop, attend to numerous ropes and pulleys, gesticulating wildly with a wad of drawings in his fist and then giving orders to the fellows operating the lights or pulling the curtains.

He had scrounged the props from local personalities on the promise of complimentary tickets. This was quite a coup which had required diplomacy and cunning. Surrounded by over fifty stage crew, I could see how much work was needed to present just one show - an armada of unseen folk who disappeared before the curtain went up. They were the reality which created the illusion.

Opening night was Franz Lehar’s wonderful light opera *The Merry Widow* with its music, dancing and singing, as well as a huge amount of costuming and wigs for a two-hour performance. We had a five-piece ensemble in the orchestra pit. The ’cellist befriended me right away and, years later, became my piano teacher. The drummer, surrounded by all his instruments, sat on a small rostrum like the conductor-pianist, to see and follow the action. There was a jovial clarinet-saxophonist plus a rotund violinist who also tinkled skillfully on bells, rattles, triangles and other gadgets.

Illustration 8, Image ‘Merry Widow’



Downstage, a bespectacled old lady was helped into a small compartment in the front of the stage floor. Inside an upturned metal shell officially known as 'The Prompt', she would mouth lines for actors who had forgotten or muffed their lines.

Zita Ante was excited. This was her opening night and she had prepared a tray stocked with chocolate boxes, roasted peanuts and other goodies, plus a small card displaying the prices. It was clear that this meant a great deal to her and she had dressed in a crinoline big enough to accommodate three boys of my size. Her poor, old face was smeared grotesquely with make-up.

Joey had told me what to do in the aisles during the intervals and before the curtain opened.

"Once the music starts you shoot out of the way smartly. When the curtain comes down, you come back and call out "sweets, chocolates and peanuts!" You'll have to be loud and keep an eye on the change. This is the first time we've done this. I don't know how it will turn out but I think we're into something good."

I had my instructions but too much was going on around me and too fast. It was as if I had to act with only a short script.

That Saturday night I stood at the top of the aisle waiting for the show to start. In came the musicians and this created a small stir as they began to tune up. The pianist signalled and the drummer began an upbeat tempo that had the audience all in a whirl. Then there was a hush as we waited. The ensemble set the mood with a rousing overture and a gutsy beginning where sweet-sounding waltzes wafted through the expectant air and soaked into your skin.

It was opening night, formal yet happy with everyone looking splendid in their best outfits. After the curtain went up, the music had me in thrall. It was the first time I had ever seen such a spectacle. The place seemed to spin around me and I was completely over-awed. When Tuni-ka, our prima donna sang the popular solo 'Vilia' (*How nice and wonderful you are. Be mine and never let me go*), the audience began swaying and humming the tune like hundreds of bees. Joey appeared on stage and a great sigh went up from the ladies. The *bon-vivant*, he looked so wonderful in his moustache, top hat and evening tails. Women must have dreamed of him for weeks afterwards.

Lizi, the soubrette, was young, good-looking and gave men a buzz of a different sort, being known to accept their invitations. The money on stage wasn't that good. Off-stage, she was willing to perform in a private capacity and it was rumoured she was doing well. In the show, she never missed a beat. Her voice was good and her slinky movements entrancing. She knew how to stimulate men's lustful desires and, later in her career, she acted in several movies. It was my good luck to actually see her in her dressing room in the flesh, not on some canvas screen.

The first half ended with a resounding crescendo of chords from the ensemble and a tremendous ovation from the audience, including several encores. Up came the auditorium lights and I was on! To buck up my courage, I let out a loud, thin yell.

"Sweets, chocolates, peanuts!"

By this time, people were standing and happily discussing the spectacle. They looked up startled and I was stopped smartly by a number of fellows wanting to do business. Soon others surrounded me making a grab for my confections and within a few minutes the tray was empty.

"Keep the change, boy," was the usual reply. Between the second and third acts I had time to replenish supplies with help from an excited Zita Ante, thrilled with all the money I had brought to her. During the next intervals, I was mobbed and they paid like cavaliers.

The show was excellent, a full house and good box office returns but poor Zita Ante was no good at handling money. I paid her what she requested and found that, with the tips, I had made more than she. When Joey and Tuni finally escaped from their admirers and turned up in her small room, they immediately saw our beaming triumph. This 'Premiere Evening' was not one to forget. It should have been called "My Land of Smiles" or the "Sweet Smell of Success."

Makers of dreams

It was over and nearly eleven o'clock. I was not permitted to stay for the celebration next door in the Station Hotel where the actors lived. By then, most of the audience had departed, catching the last train to Budapest or the outlying towns. Godollo hoteliers were pleased since their accommodations were packed and so were the watering holes.

Later, I listened avidly to the saxophonist bragging of that night's revelry. Joey, already with a skinful, had shouted several rounds of champagne. Admirers and hopeful high-ranking Horthy-minders, along with the large estate owners, joined in with their own personal contributions. Glasses were quaffed and flung down, much liquid joyfully spilled and certain ladies, willing objects of male designs, were serenaded by the well-paid Gypsy band. As was the custom, generous banknotes found their way onto the end of the lead violinist's bow as he pirouetted about the tables of the chosen ones. It was an alluring make-believe and everyone knew what was at stake.

The Dorogi's attitude to each other was now obvious. Joey had his bevy of lady admirers, my prima donna Tuni-ka had a few herself and Lizi, was highly popular. I believe it was Louis Mayer, of Metro-Goldwin-Mayer, who provided the American public with the word *bimbo*. This, in his own Hungarian language, meant 'a burgeoning tree bud.'

Lizi was certainly that, projecting a calculated youthful chic amongst the well-heeled old *roues* surrounding her like wasps at a honey pot. She played their strings masterfully. Mind you, youth and allure is short-lasting and she was aware of it. No doubt Joey was also aware of this and went harvesting whenever he could.

It took the cast and crew two days to recover before the repeat performance the following Wednesday. I arrived early in Tuni's dressing room to find Lizi already there drinking coffee. They were putting on their makeup and yawning non-stop but I had my share of kisses and cuddles from each of them and *gratis*. There was also a seemingly humorous vein in their conversation.

"You know, Tuni, I'm tired even though I've taken my rest after three," Lizi remarked.

"Lucky you," replied my weary-looking Angel. "I must be getting old. I need my rest after two," and they giggled away, just like young girls. Whatever for?

Once again, the show played to a packed house with many curtain calls and good business for me. That really said something since times were hard, money was scarce and a *novy* labourer was lucky to earn only four *pengo* a week. I was easily making ten in the space of two hours. I was also the youngest and, therefore, the most cherished member of the team. Joey particularly favoured me since he had discovered me originally. I wasn't bad-looking and he evidently wanted a boy to succeed him as Tuni-ka (like Marilyn Monroe) had been unable to oblige him.

He would push money into my pocket and buy me big ice creams with the plea not to tell her. These confections did not go on sale in Budapest itself for another five years, and were something special in Godollo. As Tuni-ka did the same with a similar request, I kept my mouth shut. *Why should I spoil their fun?*

Nevertheless, this thespian life had its down-side. The programme had to be changed fortnightly in order to bring in the audiences. In some shows, between my selling sweets in the intervals, I was allowed to walk on, say a few words and be petted before being sent out. I guess I was a child actor in a small way with an extra boost to my income. The Old Girl was appreciative, especially when I provided the family with free tickets to a performance.

The Weisses had never experienced such excitement before. I told the usherette to make a good deal of fuss over them.

"Be very polite, please," I said. "The way you escort important people. Just for show, would you?" She was a good sport and gave them every attention.

Why not keep up the make-believe.?

In the interval, I strolled in with my outfit and a large box of chocolates, stopped alongside and, in a loud voice, presented them to the Old Girl "with the compliments of Director Dorogi."

Not that Joey knew of this. By now I had learned for myself the art of impressing people. The Old Girl blushed redly, tears flowed and that was a night she would always remember. For once, she was important in

front of other people and I thought she might faint. This story, which she related later at the market as well as to her synagogue friends, was elaborated. It had raised the Family Weiss standing considerably and little, blue-eyed me grew in importance to them.

Behind the glitz and glamour

I was living an enviable nine-year old's life, spending more and more time in the theatre and learning what lay behind the painted scenery. The apparently *laissez-faire* life-style concealed large problems. To keep the money rolling in, the Dorogis had to keep a fickle market satisfied. As a result, they produced variety shows ranging from operetta to comedy and tragedy or any other works that would guarantee box office success. It was often necessary to sell the show, not on its merits, but through subterfuges.

A new work may be presented with high hopes but, within half an hour, the experts know it's going to be a failure. Such fiascoes may be avoided only through the manipulation of an unsuspecting public.

Quietly dispersed among the audience, our 'special reserve' of three men and one woman would await the signal from their boss, *Gyorgi*, large and portly. He would begin to chortle. Slightly behind him, gaunt *Stefan* would follow with a different kind of low laugh and remark to his neighbour,

"Did you hear? He said she got such a big chest you could shelter beneath it from the rain. Ha, ha, ha."

At the top of the aisle, *Bory*, impressively Junoesque, would stand making a loudly indignant remark. Our third man, *Erno*, would join in with a slow, infectious laugh. No one could resist this charade. Their acting was superb and they soon had the audience roaring with laughter. This chicanery has succeeded down through the ages. You find it in Aristophanes and, over two thousand years later, Luigi Pirandello, uses the same approach.

If you watch the one-hour opera *Bajazzo*, better known as *I Pagliacci* (in English, *The Strolling Players*), you feel you are in the middle of the show and taking part in it. Our 'reserve' team created that sort of atmosphere, provoking real laughter, not the canned stuff of today's television. They were artists in their own right and well worth their wages.

After each performance, there would be a small cast party. Invited critics would be sufficiently well-oiled to provide glowing reviews in the newspapers and I don't think they realised they were being duped.

Down below in 'The Prompt' cubby hole, short-sighted Iona would be hitting the bottle. Cooped up in her small shell and reciting the script line by line could be boring. She must have kept a placebo in her handbag and, after a while, would be swigging away merrily, throwing in lines that weren't even in the script - comic lines when it was meant to be a thriller, and worse. Sober, she was okay and only the first three rows of the audience could hear her but once under way in full volume, the tenth row were likely to hear the dialogue twice. She was unstoppable. You needed wax stuffed in your ears to avoid her expletives. Odysseus and the Sirens had nothing on her.

This was a continuing problem for Joey. What state of inebriation would she reveal? Of course, if no sound came at all it was likely she was asleep, to suddenly jerk awake and deliver a line that could turn a heart-rending tragedy into hilarious comedy. On one occasion, an actor dried up and waited desperately for the prompt. He peered down at her but she was out cold, lying on the script in a stupor. He mimed something to allow him to wander about the forestage and pick a flower from a pot near her cubby hole. Then he gave the metal side of her shell a bloody good kick.

It didn't work. The poor actor limped about with a broken toe and finally staggered off the stage to uproariously derisive laughter. Down came the curtain and Joey walked out front.

"It's a technical hitch," he bellowed. Meanwhile the hastily-reorganised cubby hole was ordered not to spoil the drama any further.

Golden goose

I had a good life with sweets, money and loving attention. I was a sort of star in the theatre and outside in everyday life. Nevertheless, my earnings went to my guardians with only a small part for me to purchase a popular weekly comic called *Bonzo Muky's Adventure* featuring a beagle, and a crossword puzzle on the back page. This I slavishly filled in with help from others, scrounging whatever information I could. There were

prizes for correct entries and, in this way, I earned books: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Jules Verne's *Round the World in 80 Days*, and other classics translated into Hungarian.

I was having a wonderful time with my bohemian theatre people, thinking that this was the life for me. Unfortunately, there was a rude awakening. Tuni-ka and Joey Dorogi desperately wanted their own child. They knew my background and decided to adopt me. The summer theatre season was to end in a few days and they would shift back to their home in Budapest. Before leaving Godollo, they decided to visit the Weisses and asked me to say they would be calling.

The Dorogis arrived in fine style, their feet covered by travelling blankets, seated in a splendid four-horse carriage, grey-painted with an assortment of fancy harness and a driver in his best outfit. Tuni-ka was attired in her usual jewellery and a mink coat. Joey sported a top hat and his black formal dress as Danillo in *The Merry Widow*.

The Old Girl was on her guard immediately. It was an indescribable honour and she courteously invited them to enter but the mood was serious. I had no idea what this meant yet my stomach was in a knot. Tuni-ka sat me on her knee while the Old Girl eyed us, arms folded and wary.

Joey, presented her with a box of bon-bons and a silk scarf before launching into it.

"We cannot have children," he began. "We would dearly love a son. Do you have any objection to allowing us to adopt Gabor?"

The Old Girl's face begin to change.

"We shall make a suitable arrangement with his mother since she is really the one to make the decision. For your trouble," he continued, "you will be paid two hundred *pengo*."

That was a big sum for those times but a hurricane suddenly lashed around inside the house.

The Old Girl turned white then crimson. Before Joey could finish, she screamed full blast, "How could Your Excellency think of such a thing! Is it because we are poor and our life is simple? No, Your Grace, you are not getting anything from here. You had better take away your bon-bons and your scarf, and your fancy wife, before I get really angry!"

She added a torrent of unpleasant expletives, making the Dorogis most uncomfortable.

Joey saw he had failed. His soothing words were met by a blank stare and more torrid outbursts. After all, I was a little gold mine and she was not going to let that go. She refused to budge.

Tuni-ka, in tears, released me with a large sigh.

The Old Girl's only concession was to allow the Dorogis was to keep me for the remainder of the season. Obviously upset but a gentleman to the last, Joey courteously bade farewell, comforting his wife and helping her into the carriage.

Our street was alive with people standing outside their houses watching all the goings-on. If the fancy carriage had not alerted them, then the Old Girl's shrilling did it for sure. The Weisses at it again! Children of all ages surrounded the Dorogis and this visit became the talk of the town for a few days. Rumours were rife with neighbours' heads nodding like birds in a mating frenzy. *Did you hear about the Family Weiss?* This spectacle livened up a warm high summer.

I had only a few days left. Saturday matinee and evening and the Sunday gala night were to be my swan song. Just as in Leoncavallo's heart-breaking aria in *Pagliacci*, brave tenor Canio, sings, sobbing,

*"We clowns are playing to you,
laughing for you,
pretending everything is rosy,
yet our hearts may be breaking
while nothing of this is seen."*

So it was with me.

Illustration 9, Image 'Pagliacci'



I knew the truth behind the company's tender gestures and soothing words.

"We'll be back. You will be with us again, you'll see."

Our last evening was the hardest. I had lost a magical, make-believe varied sort of life.

Our farewell night was, for us, a sombre *'la commedia e finita'* of the sort that Canio sang in *Pagliacci*. We put on our brave faces and I was consoled with the thought that I had helped to improve the life of an old actress. The stage crew had seen me as a merry, young face and player of pranks. For Tuni-ka, I had been a hope. Joey had the hardest part to play.

He escorted me to the ice cream parlour for a large double cone, gave me a hug, kissed my cheek and gave me a final pat on the head.

"Gabor," he said miserably, "we love you but *c'est la vie*. We shall meet again somewhere. Till then, be a good boy."

Tenth Autumn

The days grew shorter as we advanced towards autumn. The Family Weiss had acquired a good marquee and were doing a brisk trade with fresh vegetables and other produce. My old friends, the Bulgarians, loved to see me around their water melon mountains and mosaics of red and green peppers. Even their horses remembered me. My patting them on the rump as I fed and watered them was rewarded with a sort of horsey smile and a gentle, repeated nickering.

Who said animals were dumb?

No more hawking around with the water can. An old man was now Gunga Din, charging a *filler* for a drink. Not that I minded, seeing how needy he was. He had to make a living too. Besides, I was now an experienced hand, well-known and liked through my theatre work. This attracted people to our marquee to exchange a few words with me as they purchased some knick-knack. It was good for me, too. There was no time to reflect on my tragedies.

The Family Weiss took their stall and stock to a market about eight kilometres away and I went with them. Locals here made a pilgrimage to the Roman Catholic church asking its catalogue of saints for blessings on the harvest just ended.

It had all the trimmings of a village fair, being a good time to trade for horses or cattle, purchase fabrics, acquire new shoes and presents for family, friends or lovers. It was a merry whirl of people amongst the dust along with large quantities of well-watered wine and spicy, freshly-roasted small goods. Just the sort of picture you'd see in a Breughel canvas. Ah, those smells wafting around a Gabor forbidden to sample the delights in the presence of the kosher Family Weiss.

About these pilgrimages. The clergy seemed to find reasons for having them. Save the souls of the faithful. Perhaps they were becoming stale in their large curias, or even because there was profit in it. In reality, it was just another sort of make-believe for the masses.

For brother Joseph and Edithke and me, it meant waking early but it was exciting to prepare for the journey on the one-horse bone-shaker of a carriage, a wooden peasant cart. By the time we had covered five kilometres, squashed between the gear and the goods, we were overjoyed to step onto firm ground, find a suitable tree or bush around which to let off steam, or other things.

The roads were awful affairs with potholes big enough to sink a bath and some shingle in between. One morning, we were imprisoned in one and single horsepower was not enough to pull us out. It took a great deal of heave-ho-ing with our small lean shoulders to the wheels to get moving. We finally arrived at our destination thankful for the chance to rest and uncross our eyes. Going home in the dark that evening, our boozed-up driver managed to locate the hole we had sunk into earlier.

We had adventures but no great joy in such outings yet we would not miss any in case there should be something of interest. 'To travel in hope', observes Robert Louis Stevenson. We would have agreed.

Just before the close of school in 1935, I was ten years old and my birthday came at the same time as Edithke's. Like a good Jewish mother, the Old Girl decided to have a party and invite the daughters of her Budapest relative as well as folk from the school and the neighbour's kids.

By this time, the Family Weiss was renting as their home an outbuilding from the local baker, Kovesi. He and his wife were an industrious Jewish couple with three teenage sons. Very obliging was Kovesi, and a blessing. For tiny pay, he baked for the town, selling his own tasty products in his small shop on the main street. I have ever had such good bread rolls and fresh, crispy horseshoe-shaped *kifli*.

Out of the goodness of their hearts, they looked after the near-senile Armin who had collapsed outside their door one day with no possessions, nowhere to go and hungry. Kovesi was a giant of a man, used to slinging 80-kilogramme sacks of flour over his shoulder. He had carried Armin to one of his small outhouses. After gathering strength from good food, Armin told a garbled tale of being tossed out into the world by his aristocratic relations. Kovesi had a vague picture of what had taken place and said quietly,

"He is a human being in need of shelter and care. We're strong enough to look after him. God has helped us so far. Let's give him a life here with us."

A few weeks later, Armin was given a basket of fresh rolls to sell around the houses.

"Two *filler* for three large rolls. A baker's dozen for ten filler," he was supposed to say.

That's thirteen rolls. Not many people know that today. Unfortunately, the poor fellow, although in his forties, could not read or write and became the village idiot. There were few who did not cheat or taunt him. Maybe he did not understand what they were saying.

Our birthday celebration was arranged with a generous contribution from the Kovesi bakery. I had my mates, plus the Kovesi boys, and Edithke entertained her girlfriends and visiting relations. I felt happier too. The Dorogis were now distant memory. The State Ward boy had been accepted grudgingly by the Jewish Brethren although he still remained *shekshe*. Nothing would change that but at least I had a place in the pecking order, even if at the bottom. The party was a success, we had plenty to eat and the Old Girl was in a good mood. Everyone was having a good time when we were presented with an unforgettable spectacle.

Armin had decided to bathe himself, apparently a rare occurrence. Normally he emanated the odour of unwashed old socks. For this special occasion he conjured up his courage to celebrate with us. Washing had to be performed in a large basin or a wooden trough in the courtyard which was also a playground at the back of the property. We boys were busy with our horseplay and the girls were sedately occupied with theirs.

Armin arrived during the heat of our games. Everyone froze as if struck by lightning. He was in the buff, trotting towards the trough with his you-know-what swinging in a mat of black fur. Kovesi, seeing what the kids should not, went after him and Charlie Chaplin chased by the Keystone Cops was nothing on this. Imagine a large man waving a broom pursuing a gaunt nude male. Nor was Armin a Jew. He had more to show.

He did not spoil our fun in the least. He added to it and the girls could not stop giggling. You tend to remember these delights, especially when the next year's birthday party saw invitations go out to some Christians. However, these good people were to ignore us completely. You could sense things were already brewing in the background.

Writing on the wall

On the surface, life still seemed good. I used to watch the bakers at work in the bakery. They wore nothing more than a foot-square loin cloth, winter as well as summer, and no shoes. It was fascinating to see them, often under 50 kilogrammes themselves, run outside in a temperature of minus-20 or more to unload the 80 kilogramme flour sacks from a cart which needed four large horses to pull it into the yard. The men would stagger across the hundred metres under their huge loads, one after the other like ants bringing gifts to their Queen. They were awake at midnight to prepare the dough in big vats by hand then, after two hours' rest they returned to make the breads and the rolls.

There were several ovens. The largest one to be fed with two-metre-long logs which they unloaded from a cart, then split and stored nearby. A second oven baked slowly while a third was retired until the next firing. If the clay top cracked or broke off in the heat, someone had to climb into the oven and patch it up. They would go in wrapped in a wet sack and, since temperature was around 80 degrees centigrade, it was a mystery the way they managed amongst the baking loaves without coming out sporting a crunchy crust themselves. They were all masters in the craft and their products were of the highest quality.

Kovesi *fonok* [boss] was a good employer and working in his bakery was regarded as good fortune because you had to produce a good reference to get the job. Conditions were superior to other bakeries. His men had their own accommodation, received good pay and ate cooked food every day. You couldn't ask for better than that, especially when he gave them paid time off for free days and holidays. His men were part of his family.

In a similar way was the Family Fischer who had three sons, Jewish butchers in the town. Their employees were well-treated and, if any one died or shifted somewhere else, his friend would fill in for him. Yet there was something in the air and they reacted early to the changing mood in Godollo, sold up and disappeared to Budapest. I was to meet them there later, not working at their trade but in some low-paid job and no one suspecting what creed they had been born into. Rugged individuals they were, who managed to survive all the upheaval except for the oldest lad, Arpad, whom the Arrow Cross caught and shot.

Illustration 10, Image 'Arrow Cross'



Largely a Hungarian working-class movement, the fiercely anti-Communist and anti-Semitic Arrow Cross Party had grown out of the perceived injustice of the Trianon settlement. Its aims and methods had much in common with the Nazi Party in Germany.

One day the Old Girl was sorting my clothing and Edithke's worn-out dresses and had these piled up in the middle of the room. She was deep in thought and I followed her around. Finally, I got her to open up.

"We're going to the Estate farm to see the land workers," she began. "You know, the poor *novys* who work their guts out from daybreak to the dusk all year round and for a pittance."

I was aware of it and nodded.

"Not only that," she continued, "but they're not allowed to move anywhere without their *boyar's* permission, even to go to the market. If they forget, the servants and dogs and gendarmes are set on them."

It made me think of the gypsies.

“Not much good being beaten to pulp so they stay around the farm and their huts. You’ll see what a pitiful existence they have.”

My own situation didn’t seem so bad.

“Always working that hard isn’t much of a life,” I said.

“How right you are,” she replied. “You see, you might have to go to school and that cursed *Levante* to get you ready for the army but they are not allowed to. When they are five, the boys start gardening around the castle and the girls go into service inside.”

“Do they get any pay?”

“Not nearly enough. They’re fed scraps from the nobleman’s table and whatever else they can scrounge, but little money. That’s the law over there. It goes back to the days when the serfs were owned body and soul by those bastards.”

Later in my life, I learned the English word ‘feudal’ and realised how accurate the Old Girl’s description had been.

Illustration 11, Image ‘Novy children ploughing’



In semi-feudal Hungarian rural society, *novy* child labour could be exploited.

She unusually talkative.

“Don’t just stand about. Put those clothes nicely into that wicker basket. We’ll fetch some flour and corn and we might bring back a couple of ducks or geese and some fresh eggs.”

With hands on her hips, she surveyed the heap on the floor, then picked up a dress belonging to Bertha.

“That girl was itching to elope with Misi.” Then her eyes wandered away.

“This will do for a girl wanting to be married. If she gets permission, it will be someone who lives on milord’s estate.”

I was all ears as she continued,

“In the old days, if she was good looking, she was probably sampled at the age of fifteen. Her master even had the right to the first night after she was wed. She would have to be ugly to be spared that initiation.”

Ius prima noctae, cruel and absurd, but this ancient law had been the unchallenged right of the Magyar grand seigneur. *Novys* had to obey.

The Old Girl was knowledgeable about many things and it paid to listen. Whether it was in the genes or five thousand years of experience ingrained in her Jewish mind, she seemed to be able to see further than the rest of us.

“This would not be happening if our 1848 Revolution had succeeded. Those bloody Russians murdered our best Hungarian patriots. They even took away our poet Sandor Petofi’s remains along with numberless prisoners and loot.”

She became even more serious.

“Hungarians have suffered a great deal from others. No wonder our compatriots believe what the politicians tell them and we Jews get blamed.”

Years later, I understood that if our so-called compatriots had been literate they would have known that only five per cent of Hungarians were Jewish. “Who can tell what the future holds?” she sighed as she let down the lid of the basket. The way she put it, things did not look so good.

“Now, boy, that’s enough for today. Clear off and feed the goat.”

Illustration 12, Image ‘Louis Kossuth’



Louis Kossuth opened the way for a newer, better Hungary in 1848. However, the optimism generated by this Hungarian Revolution did not last.

Peasants

The Old Girl and I, plus the other foster children, bounced along some fifteen kilometres to the Estate on our usual boneshaker. Here and there we were permitted to climb down to stretch or, in being boys, pee on wheel spokes while the girls discreetly disappeared behind a bush. At last we spotted the settlement through the dewy morning haze. It was already late autumn, with few leaves left on the acacia trees bordering the road and we could see the freshly-ploughed fields. Smell them too. Horse manure had been spread over the opened ground, providing a rich ammonia which tickled your nose.

We stopped for a warm mug of chicory coffee and a slice of bread. Our arrival was unexpected but we were soon noticed. Women and children gathered around the cart ready to barter. Used dresses, good shoes, yeast for bread-making, coloured threads, linen and skirt materials, sugar, salt, fly papers were just some of their demands.

My job was to distribute lollies to the children and give the women two small cakes of scented soap while the Old Man dispensed two cigarettes to each man who purchased something. It was as if their Christmas had come early. It also revealed the true nature of poverty and serfdom.

Everybody appeared to be having a good time and while the trading was well under way amongst the adults, we got on with our own small games. I made a lolly scramble out of a handful of wrapped barley sugars left over from my time in the theatre and we must have seemed like visitors from another planet, bringing them something to alleviate their frugal existence.

On paper, they were free men but in reality they were not. They endured a medieval-style servitude because they had nowhere else to go and their masters knew it.

They were eager customers who pitted their wits against the Old Girl’s artfully loud banter. She was in her element, trader against peasant, each trying to beat the other down. As I watched, I think was beginning to

develop my own social conscience. These poor creatures needed her items badly yet could offer little apart from the meagre portions of produce they had taken all year to accumulate. I quickly understood that they would starve themselves in order to save for necessities or take on embroidery, laundry or basket weaving and other cottage industries in the little spare time their masters allowed them.

It all seemed so unfair. They would be permitted to use their cottages until they were too old to work, or perhaps the gendarmes had crippled the man of the house. Then they would be evicted and left to the harsh mercy of the elements. With few possessions, they might be helped by relatives for a while but, with the man off work, the woman was often forced into prostitution. So much for human dignity but the bordellos had an incessant appetite and demand for new stock.

The Bishop owned this particular estate and, through the goodness of the Lord's mercy, he possessed 2500 hectares of land with 800 hectares in that forest where Miska and I had practised our guerilla tactics against the rangers. The good Bishop provided his serfs with little five-metre square cob huts having a tiny grain and tool store attached and a small shed for poultry and pigs.

These unfortunate novys earned fifty *pengo* a year plus their five per cent share of the Estate grain which the overseer would apportion after lining his own pocket. Since the Bishop was supposed to be celibate, the *ius primae noctis* was delegated to his overseer along with other privileges, including calling in the gendarmes when he felt the need for a little upheaval. *Dear Jesus, where were You in all this?*

During our return journey, when I compared the situation of Gabor, renamed "Jankev ben Avraham Ovinu", I wasn't too badly off. The cart now carried a heavier and noisier load since we had aboard three hours of continuous protestations by poultry. I also realised that we get only one chance to change our fortune.

Don't believe in luck. Watch out for that chance and grab it.

Illustration 13, Image 'Bishop's palace'



The Bishop's Palace

Part Two follows

Editor's note:

A damaged computer file previously covering Gabor's life from the age of eleven to thirteen could not be recovered.

In summary, his birth mother once again came to Godollo from Budapest and, after an unpleasant interview with the Family Weiss, returned with Gabor to the city. Although he was sad to leave the Weiss household and his friends, he was pleased to be back with his mother and embark on a new chapter of his life.

He reverted to the name 'Gabor', pleased to shed the 'Jankev' which had stigmatised him as the second-class State Ward in Godollo.

Part Two

1939-1945

Chapter Five *On Forest Street*

*'Poor I am from childhood
From a poor and humble family.'*
-Francois Villon, *'Le Testament'*, 1461

Having claimed me from the Family Weiss, Mother boarded a tram with a beamused Gabor/Jankev in tow. Our ride was no more than a kilometre and we stepped down opposite the largest department store in Budapest on the Boulevard Rakoczy. Then we turned into a small, treeless lane named 'Lower Forest Street'. A short distance brought us to No. 6, where a solid, arched wooden opening between two shop doors led into a narrow, oblong courtyard separating a row of six miserable apartments on each side. At the far end, there was a workshop which built horse-drawn carriages. The owner lived above this reminder of an earlier age and, behind this, loomed another three-storey building with further rows of apartments.

Each of these units contained a tiny bedroom and a poky little kitchen. On the wall outside on each level, there was a single sink with a cold water tap. Under the staircase, you found the smelly communal toilet cubicles for the upper storeys. It was medieval, with an oppressive atmosphere to match. The architect had obviously considered that human beings needed little more than large dog kennels and spartan plumbing.

My new home was situated on the ground floor. Blessed with a 4 x 2.5 metre living space, it was lit by a dim bulb hanging from a wire out of the ceiling. Our personal water tap stuck up on its pipe between two struggling elm trees in the courtyard, directly opposite the row of filthy, ground-floor communal toilets. Fresh from my childhood days in the sweet-smelling, open countryside, I surveyed this horror with dismay.

There was hardly enough room to stand side by side without hitting or kicking something. Had we been allowed the privilege of a cat, there would have been no place to swing it.

Mother had furnished this oubliette with an iron stove, a tiny wardrobe and, most importantly, a treadle sewing machine. Her bed was along the whitewashed brick wall at the far end while, on the ground between the wardrobe and the stove, was my straw-filled sack which stayed on her bed in the daytime. This was truly a place for everything, with everything in its place.

She was inventive and I could see her spirit was unbroken as she explained the situation. Her sewing machine was her only means of making a living. Uncle Paul, her partner, helped her to sell her exquisitely-embroidered girls' dresses in the shops. It was always hard to break into this business and, in 1939, it was even more difficult because of harsh local government restrictions.

The 19th century English poet Thomas Hood in 'The Song of the Shirt' wrote:

*'plying her needle and thread,
stitch! stitch! stitch!
in poverty, hunger and dirt.'*

He could have been describing Mother. I was pleased to be able to help her, cooking under her supervision and doing various chores while she sewed to earn our daily bread.

The Almighty wasn't giving away manna for nothing.

There was a fairly large park between Rakoczy Boulevard and the gypsy section of Joseph Town, the working-class district where I had been raised until taken to the *menhely*. She showed me the park with its slide, swings and other equipment. It was rectangular with trees, shrubs and footpaths weaving through the greenery. Above the trees at its western edge, I could see the Town Hall. It was huge and contained an enormous 80x30-metre stage. The auditorium, which could seat 1800, had three staircases and spacious balconies. Later, its huge basement was to give me refuge when I most needed it. In 1956, it was to have a particularly important place in Hungarian history.

There were smaller playgrounds inside a kilometre radius, mostly named after dead State Ministers. The closest one was called *Tisza Kalman* after our second largest river. Within a short time, I had visited all the parks and was bored with loafing about. It was good to go shopping for Mother and I would visit a store opposite the No. 6 entrance owned by two popular Jewish brothers, pronounced the best in Joseph Town.

One day they asked me if I wanted a job as a delivery boy. Mother gave me her blessing and I began work. The wages were small and beefed up with tips from customers but the brothers gave me food to take home. It was a small help and went some way to ease our penury. Delivering groceries also gave me knowledge of the area and provided insights for bettering my situation. At fourteen, I was *not* going to work all my life for a pittance.

Reconnaissance

Alongside the Forest Street entrance to Rakoczy Boulevard there was a large public bar. On the south side, stood the 'Hungarian Fashion Hall', a dairy and the establishment selling expensive, hand-crafted horse-drawn carriages. Next came a four-storey apartment block with a second tavern in front which always did a roaring trade. Further down, were two long, single-storey cottages emitting a peculiar odour. From these, ladies emerged at intervals, promenading with hands on hips, then re-entered but not alone.

Tall apartment buildings on Forest Street were fronted by a margarine factory, then further apartments, shops and taverns. Significant was a large, sinister building which, from street level, seemed to be a laboratory as well as another secretive place with a forbidding, grey stone wall and

high iron gate. It was a high-security lunatic asylum. This was my world, crowded with people living in mean conditions as if it had been left behind from another century.

The city of Pest was ambitious, swift-growing and used space thriftily, but the public utilities were primitive. Apart from the main thoroughfares, the narrow streets permitted only horse-drawn or foot traffic.

In 1939, the telephone was still a new invention to many Budapest folk. Few knew how to use it and, several years later, I was given a good hiding by my employer, a handsome but spoiled stinker named Csango Endre who made fun of me in the presence of his saleswomen. He used to take ladies from the posh Moulin Rouge Club for a spin to his expensively-furnished lair in Elizabeth Boulevard. The first time he gave me the telephone, I didn't know what hit me when a voice came through the receiver. The audience burst into laughter and my ignorance was rewarded with a generous thumping.

A sadist, he frequently showed off. Mother finally became fed up with my bruises on my body and my apprenticeship there was ended.

Pest was in transition from its feudal state to a form of pre-capitalistic growth. Progress was possible. Nevertheless, the good times, despite my personal misfortunes, were not to last.

Milk boy

My favourite hang-out was the Almasy Square playground and bordered by shops, a library and a dairy selling cold milk and cocoa. The lady owner wanted a milk delivery boy, the cleanliness and smell appealed.

"I've got a part-time job," I said, "but if there's better pay and working conditions I'll change."

The lady went to a door leading to her living quarters.

"Mum!" she yelled, "come here!" An elderly woman shuffled out, inspected me and I felt they were keen to take me on.

I gave the grocery two weeks' notice, causing consternation since I was a great help. However, their mark-up was too small and they realised they couldn't afford me full-time. I was sorry to leave. They were good employers, despite the rats, and were to remain good friends until the Arrow Cross thugs took them away.

My new job took me into a different area and this meant learning new names as well as delivery times. I had to rise at five a.m. to be in the shop thirty minutes later. Milk for *le petit dejeuner* is fine but the milkman needs to be in bed early. The fifty-litre cans would arrive from the pasteurising plant, heavy-scented with the smell of cream. The brisk morning air was alive with the lingering aroma of fresh-baked bread and horseshoes, buns and small cakes. For a youngster from the slums, this was the place to be.

After packing customer orders in brown paper bags with names scrawled on one side, I had deliver them to the porch door, fresh for breakfast. My boss gave me a rough canvas pouch divided into sections to hang around my neck with six bottles on each side. I also carried a large basket with breads and cakes - the very picture of a delivery boy whom Vermeer or Velasquez would have captured on canvas.

It was necessary to stagger the delivery times. Workers had to have their meals at the door by seven in the morning. Later risers received theirs after that. This required careful planning to avoid climbing the same stairs twice and I could see why the other milk boys had fallen by the wayside. It was a heavy task carrying that weight up five or six flights of steps. Loaded with twelve bottles and a bread basket, I felt I was catering for the Last Supper. Mind you, I occasionally pictured myself as a Hebrew slave humping mare's milk into Nebuchadrezzar's court.

My employers were highly satisfied. At the end of each day, they loaded me with unsold food that could have fed several workers' families. This echoed my earlier years with the Bulgarian gardeners at Godollo.

Hard work did receive due recognition.

The money was also better since the more affluent customers often left tips when they paid their bill. Over the months, I came to know my spinster employer quite well. Bori, short for Boriska, was a big woman and aged about 35. She lived with her mother and they had taken me straight on and treated me as if I were a son. I liked them too.

It seemed that my time with the Dorogis in Godollo was repeating itself. Bori and her mother would give me things behind each other's back.

"Don't tell Bori" or "Don't let Mum know." They hugged and kissed me on arrival and again at the end of each day.

Not long after my fourteenth birthday, the rainy autumn days rolled in under a grey, cheerless sky. Water soaked my shoes, rain dribbled down from my matted hair. Although my bed wasn't up to much, I felt no inclination to leave it. No matter. Duty calls. Furthermore, Bori had surprised me with a second-hand raincoat and galoshes to keep my feet dry. Now there was nothing to stop me from leaping across large puddles like a demented goat with a basket.

Winter came early in 1939. The snow was so thick that trams and buses were scarcely visible among the mass of white hills on the pavements. Some of the unemployed enrolled at the Municipal Office as a snow-shovellers along shop frontages and in places where the tram plough could not reach. Some made good money in roof clearing. It was dangerous on a slippery surface but, with luck, a chap might fall on the snow he had pushed off a few minutes earlier.

For 'Gabor the Milk Boy' with twelve bottles of frozen milk around his neck, it was no less dangerous. Just one knock could have splintered the glass inside my bag. The road surface was not so bad but the stairways iced-up overnight. Some were salted to melt off the hazard but most were not. Without a load, you could haul yourself along the handrails but I had only one hand free.

Frequently, I would slip and fall gracelessly on the landing below. In the best traditions of the Pony Express, I held my milk bag tightly to my chest although the contents of the basket would scatter like markers on a paper trail. No doubt the warm folk inside their apartments were saying, "There's Gabor with the milk and flat bread. What does he think he's doing!"

After a while, I learned to tip-toe delicately and never broke a bottle. However, I often revealed rainbow-coloured bruises.

Christmas came. My customers and employers showed their gratitude with warm socks and head covers, knitted gloves and other useful things. It was good to see that people were still friendly. The spirit of the season ruled the soul even though the German war was fizzing on the borders of Hungary.

In Elizabeth Town, no one asked about your religion in order to restrict your employment. If you were willing to work honestly, you had a job. If not, it was your fault.

I spent a glorious year at the milk shop. Dairies [milk shops] were owned by a large company and managed by spinsters like Bori on low pay but with lodgings supplied. It was no secret that the milk in the cans was baptised with water, as was the cream at the top with flour. 'Stretching' was a small way for them to reimburse themselves.

Errant father

I worked on the milk round through the 1940 winter and learned which apartments had back entrances onto other streets. It was handy for short-cuts. How much handy, I found out a few years later.

The Almighty moves in mysterious ways.

One afternoon around four pm, I was in Forest Street with a load for Mother when a man stopped me.

"Hullo, my son," he said. "How are you getting on?" Conscious of my social standing as a State Ward-cum-Abraham's bastard child, I thought nothing of his patronising tone.

"I'm well, thank you," and tried to pass by.

"Not so fast, boy. I want to talk to you," he persisted. I told him to leave me alone.

"Believe me," he said, "it's hard for me to catch you on the street. I'm your father but I have no other way of seeing you. Your mother won't let me near her, or you."

Sceptical, I let him talk.

“I accept that I’ve made mistakes. It wasn’t right what happened but I couldn’t find a solution. I loved your mother and still do. That’s over now. I can’t blame her but I want to see you occasionally. You are my son. Please forgive me.”

This man was crying.

Forgive them that trespass against us is central to the Christian faith. I regretted meeting him in such a way.

“You have an aunt only a few hundred metres away,” he continued and asked me to visit her. “She will be thrilled to see you.”

We parted without any embrace but it gave me much to consider.

At home, I told Mother.

“That was your father all right!” she burst out indignantly. “That good-for-nothing leech must have watched you for some time. He knows he is not welcome.”

Uncle Paul and Mother discussed my future during one of my absences. They appreciated my work at the milk shop but they knew that without a trade, I would be nothing. Somehow, while the German Third Reich was turning Europe into an armed fortress, they arranged an apprenticeship with a master bookbinder. I left Bori and her mother with a heavy heart. We had been a good team and they were sorry to see me go.

The small bindery was set up in a basement below an apartment block. It was rather dark but the boss was a good chap. I liked him and the job but Mother could see that subterranean life was bad for my health. I next went to a bicycle repair shop amongst all the grease and dirt. However, evolution had designated me as a clean teenager and I soon said goodbye to being a mechanic.

That led me to a bespoke tailor’s attic. At this stage, I was still helping Mother with her silk embroidery, so sartorial needlework was not beyond me. This new line of employment suited me as we had a high-class clientele whose suits required repairs or ironing. They also tipped charming young Gabor very well.

The narrow confines of adolescence rarely allow you the vision of the larger world. Hungary occupied Ruthenia, signed an agreement with Germany and Yugoslavia, declared war on Russia and became an enemy of Britain and the United States while I was busy binding books, cleaning bikes and sniffing the perfumed ambience of *haute couture*. Being at war came home more readily a few months later when the Russians dropped bombs on Budapest in September 1942. Even so, my little world was the tailor’s shop.

It was located in a wealthy, high-class district and Gabor, the boy from Elizabeth Town, seemed to be doing very well. Our costumes were expensive and so were the people who wore them. Yet most of them lived a hand-to-mouth existence like Mother and me. With one difference. Our bodies dripped no diamonds or pearls.

Judges, lawyers, doctors, prominent officials, well-heeled business people, high-ranking army officers all lived in the area and patronised our establishment. It was also well-known that their wives earned ‘pin money’ to make up salary shortfalls. Good-looking, youngish women cashed in on their elegance in the time-honoured fashion at a special academy called ‘Maison Frida’ in the posh heartland.

Top people, gentry and big money-spinners, including Regent Horthy and his sons, were among the patrons. Horthy apparently took his boy there to graduate in aspects of *amour* far removed from that practised by the birds and bees. So did others.

Sophisticated husbands refrained from inquiring about the source of such extra income and, with some amusement, we learned of one particular occasion. Jaded at home, a client had chosen a rejuvenating change at Madam Frida’s only to find his *belle du jour* wife waiting there, but not for him. Nevertheless, such discoveries seldom led to scandal. Perhaps a small hurricane in a teacup and a cold bed for months but that’s the risk you took.

I discovered the un-wisdom of calling at certain apartments before midday for payments which might be owing. I was fifteen when I entered a room to find a lady *en repose* who had no ready cash.

Would I like to conduct the transaction in another way? Bemused and still largely ignorant, I retreated blushing and with an I.O.U.

Paying clients usually tipped well so that I could supplement my frugal, homemade lunch with fresh small goods and even butter for my bread. I gave Mother my tailor-shop earnings which were much less than the milk round, and her own income fluctuated according to the whims of her buyers. It was one long hard slog to keep going, and time was against us.

Going solo

Mother came home after a visit to my sister Magda, now fourteen and unwelcome at the Polyak's since she no longer qualified for the State children's allowance.

So much for Christian charity.

Our small dogbox had to accommodate another soul and Magda slept at the foot of Mother's bed. Almost at the same time, my grandfather was turned out from his lodgings without money or a place to go. He found a refuge with us and managed to sleep like a log on the ground at my feet.

There is a story about a poor Jew with a wife and four children who asked the Rabbi what to do as his small room was so crowded.

"I can't put them in the nanny goat's shack," he complained. "I'm at my wit's end." The Rabbi scratched his beard for a while then announced, "Put your goat in the room. That will help."

"*Shma Yisrael*," the devout man swung his head in disbelief but did as he was told. Soon, he returned to the Rabbi.

"The situation is intolerable. What shall I do?"

"Has it not improved?" the Rabbi enquired. "Then put the goat out to see the difference." The poor fellow turned up next day.

"Is it better now?" asked the Rabbi.

"It's heaven," glowed the man.

For us at No. 6 Forest Street the situation was similar.

Each apartment in our block was supervised by a *haz mester* who collected the rent, kept order and let you in after 10 pm for a small fee. It was no easy job to be on-call night and day throughout the year. A semi-literate couple were usually hired by the block owner for low wages and poor accommodation. In this way, they became the rulers who established the tone of each block. They would hire a janitor to clean and collect rubbish from the box outside each door. A good *haz mester* saw to the well-being of the tenants. A bad one didn't.

We had a Swabian, Mrs Kelemen, plus her husband who was seldom seen. "The Missus" made up for this, getting in everybody's hair with her voice ringing sharply through the whole block, commanding everyone in sight. She was a gregarious leech and it puzzled me that she had patience with Mother and all of us living in that poky little hole, voicing no objection as she did in other cases.

One Saturday afternoon, we had two 'lady' visitors dressed in black and looking like Disney-cartoon witches. Standing in the doorway, they introduced themselves loudly as coming from the local Lutheran parish to collect 'Church Taxes'. Mother, the main breadwinner, stood up from her needlework in disbelief.

"We've never asked anything from you. We've not visited your church or any other. What you are asking is beyond my means."

The spokeswoman broadcast to the block her unsavoury opinion of us.

Blessed are the merciful, goes the Sermon on the Mount and, while Mother was arguing, the other beast sneaked into our room and started to fill pillow cases with our belongings. She quickly had the room almost bare.

Just before she took off, Grandfather wrapped his arms around her in a bear hug. I heard the scream and the clanking as she dropped our possessions and was outside in a flash, holding her arm in pain and in tears. Grandfather then grabbed the klaxon-voiced harridan by the scruff of the neck and lifted her off the ground, glaring.

“Look,” he said quietly. “I can give you ‘Church Tax’ of my kind. Tell your minister to come and collect the sort I can pay.”

She understood. When Grandfather let her down she tugged her dress together and like a tail-down dog, quickly disappeared. We never had another visit. This had been a free circus for the whole block and an example of Church intimidation of the poor which had been going on for centuries.

About this time, too, Mother and Uncle Paul discussed my future as a tailor. She disapproved.

“My son is not going to hunch over garments all his life. I’ve had enough of tailoring in this family.”

She finally found me a place in the leather-worker’s shop managed by the previously mentioned swine, Csango Endre. I was expected to create a mirror sparkle on his footwear. I also carried out little repair jobs but instead of receiving thanks, I gained beatings but Mother eventually took me away, actually sad to leave. I had enjoyed working with leather and was now an unemployed sixteen-year-old. Eventually I found a tiny place where the polio-crippled owner was not only the best in the business but also willing to take me on as an apprentice.

His workshop, toilet and store was dingy and sunless. Under a single light bulb, a machinist worked alongside the owner and I had to fit in where I could. Even so, the place smelt good from the tanned skins and the glues they used to make six top-class handbags each week.

Aladar *fonok*, my new boss, was barely a metre tall but he had a strong upper body which dragged his lifeless legs painfully around on crutches. He also charmed the fair sex with ease. For some reason, they were willing to overlook his handicap and came to him like honey bees. He was a master craftsman in more ways than one, with equipment and skills to match. There are women who like kinky affairs and Aladar could often exorcise their *ennui*.

To me, he was a pitiful sight on the street with well-dressed, good-looking women by his side like tame poodles. His lodgings were four hundred metres away and, amazingly, on occasion he would slither and slide there three times a day. His hidden attributes seemed to attract a wealthy, high-class clientele seeking leather products.

We had to make up for the lost time because of his philandering. When he picked up a decent-sized order with a specific delivery date we slogged from 8 am Saturday until 1 pm Sunday with no rest but food and plenty of coffee to keep us awake. Ali was a lousy payer and worked us like slaves. For everything I had done for him over three years, he should have paid me proper wages from the first year and not an apprentice’s crumbs. Then, when my time was complete, he didn’t want to pay me any better although I had scored high marks in the trade examination. I’d also done my practical work under the eye of assessors who were top craftsman, receiving accolades and the promise of a gold diploma.

New laws enacted by the Hungarian Parliament made life difficult for young fellows with Jewish ancestry and prevented the diploma from being delivered. Bitter about this, and his refusal to pay me properly, gave me no choice but to leave. I had good papers and a reputation and I was confident enough to obtain a well-paid job. Without thinking twice, I called in on one of the best places on Museum Boulevard close to the National Museum. There was no need to go further. They took me on as foreman in a small workshop.

I was now eighteen, with six people under me and fabulous pay. It was 1943 and although poorly-advised Hungarian soldier boys were bogged down alongside undernourished Germans at Stalingrad, I had become a master craftsman, teaching a girl and a boy the intricacies of the trade. In addition, the other workers depended on my designs and other skills.

Back home however, there had been changes at No.6 Forest Street. My brother Joseph had reached the age where the Old Girl at Godollo could no longer keep him and he had joined Magda. Anna, my youngest sister was also to arrive. Consequently, we would have three females and three males attempting to live in our tiny room. To say the Almighty had sent these things to try us was no comfort either.

Magda obtained an apprenticeship in a textile factory and Joseph joined a well-known artist to help him paint cinema and theatre billboards. Mother’s dressmaking was doing well since more and more

orders were coming in. She was able to employ part-timers who sat outside in warm weather to embroider fine stitching work while she treadled away on her sewing machine inside and Uncle Paul marketed their products. However, even small Hungarians take up space. I could now support myself and, with no idea how I would manage, I decided to move out.

The shack

I subsequently found myself with three other men in an even smaller room curtained off with sacking in the back of a kitchen. This was a dingy downstairs *haz mester's* shack in Klauzal Street, sunless, dark and smelly. Between our double bunks, a small low table and tallboy gave us just enough room to slide our feet sideways to get in and out. We had permission to use the stove to boil water for washing or cooking and, as usual, there was an outside water tap. The shack's only light filtered through from a small bulb in the kitchen.

That a den like this was considered appropriate for the working classes showed little Christian charity. Charles Dickens could have written a sad story about it and Mother's room seemed a palace by comparison. Our *haz mester* was the boss and was busy taking money from lodgers and anybody else. This meant that the street door bell was going all night and we four were obliged to help by letting people into the block. The small fee for such a service was always taken from us.

My fellow boarders were simple peasant lads prepared to put up with the situation and this benefited me as a 'townie'. Their rural relatives would send regular food parcels and, at meal times, they always shared these if I was present. It became a sort of *quid pro quo*. In return, I introduced them to new and unfamiliar things. If one of them wanted to go out smartly-dressed, I would lend him my outfit.

One chap in his thirties worked as a bricklayer for a construction firm which sent him out to various places on contracts. He was quietly vigorous and possessed a sense of humour similar to mine. On one occasion, I found him sullen, lame and listless which was unusual for such a well-muscled man.

"You're off colour," I said for fun. "What's the matter? Is some girl sucking the life out of you?"

"You've hit the nail right on its head," he replied with a sigh. "I'm worn out."

"Go on," I encouraged.

"My boss got this contract to renovate a convent. I've been doing the bricklaying and plastering. Last week the head nun stopped by me while I was working inside and invited me for tea and cake. She was kind and quite good-looking in her forties. We chatted for a while and I left to go back to work. This happened a few times and I started to like her as a person. Nothing else, you understand. She was a nun and you don't initiate hanky-panky."

"Then she showed me around the cloisters and rooms inside the nuns' quarters. The largest one was hers and, after we entered, she locked the door. Next thing, she was all over me kissing, cuddling and grabbing my John Thomas. She was in her long nun's habit and I was in working gear but we got around to it smartly. Over the next few days, I visited her several times. She sent her novices with cooked food for me but then I found I was doing daily duty with her."

Not an unpleasant predicament.

"If I object, she can blackmail me and I lose my job. No one is going to believe I was seduced by a nun. What can I do?"

"Ask your boss to transfer you to another job," I replied. "Say you've got a crook back and can't do the plastering up and down a ladder. You've done the brickwork well so it's likely he'll not want to lose you."

So it turned out. He went off to another part of the city out of reach of his paramour. Privately, I wondered if his Mother Superior might not have to do some explaining about parthenogenesis.

Yet this was a minor issue in comparison with what was going on throughout Europe. The Nazi and Italian Fascist regimes had turned the Continent into a battleground. Poor Hungary was getting its nuts squeezed in the German-Russian confrontation across the border in the Ukraine. Inside our country, right-wing politicians were attacking minorities, workers and the Jews. The country had been put steadily onto a war footing as an ally of Germany but we were at Hitler's mercy.

Prime Minister Graf Teleki, for all his aristocratic background, had tried to stem the tide. He had refused to sign the German document that would throw his beloved nation on the fire. Then he aristocratically shot himself. Unfortunately, his successor was no such man of honour and the pit of persecution rapidly opened its deadly jaws.

Russian raiders

The sound of Russian planes overhead and their deadly cargoes brought me into a war not of my making on 5 April 1943. Young fellows like me and older men, conscripted into the Auxiliary Fire Brigade, were suddenly busy pulling people from bombed-out houses. Some were still alive but horribly injured. We had to learn First Aid although we were actually there to fight fires.

For two weeks we had evening lectures and two nights with the Fire Brigade. After that, I was issued with a small, steel Red Cross box to be carried on my left side with a steel helmet on the other. Eventually I was given gumboots and a storm-coat with an armband with a fifty-millimetre metal disk in black letters over a red ground which read 'TUO'- fireman.

I had a Red Cross armband as well but didn't wear it since the First Aid kit announced I was more than just a fireman. We seemed to be living in a world of armbands. They had become badges of personal prestige and membership. Sadly, the anti-minority laws enacted by the Hungarian Parliament were similar to those in Nazi Germany and there were many Hungarians willing to enforce 'The Regulations' by betraying those who could have avoided punishment.

I should also have worn a white armband since Gabor/Jankev was considered a half-caste but the incomprehensible daily issue of new laws was just too much. Nevertheless, we people of Pest were a defiant breed and found ways to make a joke out of a bad situation. The time was ripe to lampoon burning political issues.

There was a small theatre called the 'Podium Cabaret' which specialised in satire and was run by its director and compère, the talented Bekeffy Laszlo. He looked like Mickey Mouse with large ears sticking out from his head but he was tall, lean and revealed a superior intellect.

On one occasion, Bekeffy came out to introduce the next act and stood stage left holding the edge of the wing curtain partly across his body with his left hand (which was his trademark). While he delivered his monologue, the empty stage behind him filled with two workmen who set up a ladder. One carried a large portrait of Hitler which he leaned against a flat for the audience to see while his mate stood ready to climb the ladder with a hammer and a nail. Bekeffy half-turned towards them.

"What are you doing?" he demanded. They pointed to the portrait.

"We want to hang this," they replied.

"Now? He should have been hanged a long time ago!" The audience howled with laughter.

He would entertain with risky jokes.

"A poor Jew has been brought in to a high-ranking S.S. party. He stands trembles and sweats between his tormentors. An Oberfuehrer approaches, a monocle shining menacingly.

"Jew!" he barks. "Your life will be spared if you can tell who has a glass eye amongst those present." The tearful man looks around as the faces focus on him like a bunch of hungry hounds. Then he points out an Unterleutnant sporting a glass left eye.

"Ja, you are correct. How do you know?"

"Simple," says the Jew. "In this room, that's the only one to look kindly upon me."

Jokes like this and worse got Bekeffy a token jail sentence but, after his release, Pest could see that his spirit remained unbroken. Unfortunately, there were few other heroes of his calibre.

Despite the air raids, Pest citizens would visit theatres or movie houses and, during the intervals, hurry into flimsy shelters constructed in the cellar of every house and public building. As a fireman, I became accustomed to pulling bodies out of these. The Russian multi-chained bombs had no mercy. The worst were the delayed-fuse ones which could penetrate fifty metres below ground, to kill or maim hundreds.

On Saturdays and Sundays, if not on fire duty, I would go to the Varosliget People's Park. There were large restaurants where bands and orchestras would play to the picnicking crowds. Some of today's famous conductors began their careers there, selecting quality programmes and explaining what each passage was about before the score was played. This most satisfying for ordinary folks like me.

A workmate called Otto was a devil with the ladies. In fact, Mother, years older than he, confessed that even she could have fallen for his wiles. Accompanied by his new girlfriend, he joined me for a jaunt in the Park one Sunday. We were looking forward to a good time on a sunny day. A little before eleven a.m. a rain of bombs began falling and not on the Eastern Railway shunting yards and station. Bodies were flung like broken matchsticks into the trees. People screamed and ran for cover beneath the splintered branches and, within ten minutes, the scene resembled Dante's *Inferno*. There were bomb craters and smouldering houses within a five-kilometre radius.

The three of us had sheltered under a large tree. Around us lay the dead and injured. I had not brought my First Aid kit and could offer little help. Otto was retching all over the place while his girlfriend had soiled herself. I was calm enough, being used to such scenes but it was sad to see people fleeing to their homes and the underground shelters.

They were the lucky ones. The next day I asked Otto about his prey. She was good-looking and I wouldn't have minded calling her my girlfriend.

"I wanted to screw her," said my gallant buddy, "but having seen the state of her knickers, I lost all desire."

Ruskies, see what you've done! A chap can't even fornicate without your intrusion!

Request concerts with German artists were in vogue in the Town Hall. It was part of the softening-up for what was to come. By contrast, Pest and Buda's *vigado* or music halls presented wonderful variety and music programmes featuring Franz Liszt, jazz or gypsy music and opera or operetta. They were always fully booked as if there was a cultural resistance to the mad Nazis or cruel Russians and the daily fear in which we lived. I went to concerts as often as I could and, about this time, I visited my father's sister, Janka Ante, in her fourth-floor corner apartment on Rose Street.

I took her to my heart the first moment we met. She was to be a darling for ever.

At her place, I was to learn a great deal of music because she had good phonograph recordings. She would also let me practice on her grand piano. I was only a starter but hammered false notes from time to time. Janka Ante would lie on her chaise longue and I hoped her snores would drown out my mistakes. However, she was instantly awake telling me what I should have done and how to play certain passages. Mother did not like her and made unfair, derogatory remarks. On the other hand, Janka Ante had plenty of Jewish goodwill towards Mother, in whom I could recognise jealousy and an unfortunate Gentile pettiness.

La Maison Frida

We had to get used to daily changes and adapt quickly. My country was at war *on the wrong side again* and we suffered rationing of all sorts from clothing to footwear. Germany was pressuring Hungary to provide basic commodities on credit, to be paid for after 'the total Victory has been achieved.' This unsubtle form of brigandage took some Hungarians in. Fortunately, the agricultural authorities and others falsified their documents about the amount of food harvested.

It meant that the Black Market flourished since everything was available at a price. The leather trade boomed and my income was good. I could afford to eat in the classy restaurant opposite the National Museum as well one on Magyar Street in the block where I worked. The cake shop beside us did well since I paid bonuses to my staff in the cakes and confections. As always, money talks. Even during the worst food shortages, restaurants treated me well since I tipped the waiters handsomely and was an honoured customer.

Only a short distance from the Magyar Street restaurant there was a baroque square with lovely cottages and an atmosphere of tenderness and tranquility. I was too naive to know what lay behind this

façade and was too busy to wonder why the small park I could see from my workshop window was different to others. Then, in a casual conversation with Janka Ante, she suggested with a cheeky wink that I take a closer look.

One evening after work, I sat on one of the white-painted benches to watch the expensive automobiles and posh fiacres with drawn curtains. An elegantly-dressed man arrived and then disappeared through a low-arched, Moorish-style wooden door. Within a short time, several more followed while others emerged with glowing faces and were driven away.

I told Janka Ante. She listened with a beaming smile and chuckles.

“Well,” she began, “you will never be allowed in there. It is for rich men. Ladies entertain them for pin money. It’s like a harem but with a difference. They drink alcohol. The ladies are well-groomed and coiffured and perhaps more intelligent.”

How did Janka Ante know this?

“Their faces are covered with a fine-meshed veil or mask and they are scantily dressed. It’s an expensive place and wealthy mothers take their sons to learn about love. Or jaded old men who like a little flutter and tickle.”

“What do they really do?” I half knew the answer.

“Wait a minute,” she said and vanished into her bedroom to return with an etching. There is nothing new in this today since one can buy thousands of these pornographic things but her etching was different, a satirical masterpiece.

The artist had drawn a fat woman on her back with a flimsy slip pushed up around her waist. In her grasp she had a lean young teenager’s pecker between her legs. Her face was beaming with delight but the boy, his trousers half off, looked desperate and was trying to escape from her embrace. The accuracy of detail was masterly and the boy’s fear projected itself right off the page.

“That’s what they do in there,” Janka Ante said. “You can keep it.” I was embarrassed, then I started to laugh and she joined in.

“That place is called La Maison Frida,” she giggled.

Illustration 14, Image ‘Maison Frida’



In between my fireman's duty and work, I took piano lessons from an old man who was the 'cellist in the Operetta orchestra. He gave me free instruction for old times' sake because he was a bachelor and he liked having young talent around. One afternoon I went to see him and found the place had been bombed. He had died in the ruin along with his instruments.

I mourn him still for his passing. I'd lost not only a music teacher but I could no longer learn. I could never afford to buy my own piano or pay for the tutoring. Instead, I bought a classical guitar to store in the dogbox where I lived, and it was easy to carry.

After learning a few chords from a mandolin player and other performers, I joined a jazz band. It was a good way for an eighteen-year old to have fun as well as earn a few *pengo*. On one of our outings, the band played in a hall and, since they were fun-loving Bohemian boys, I showed them Janka Ante's etching during a meal break. They were impressed.

Around five in the morning we finished the gig and parted with our pay. I was tired when I came off the tram at the Rottenbiller and Worker Street corner before going to Mother's place and needed a short rest.

It was dark. The few street lamps struggled to provide light and a woman accosted me.

"Hullo, my Pubby, it's cold out here, isn't it?" I agreed and kept walking but she wanted to comfort me further.

"You're a musician. I'll give you a good flick and you'll like it."

I didn't have a clue what she was meant but she was adamant. She was a well-dressed, well-stacked 35 or so and, after she said that she had a warm room and would give me this flick for a *pengo*, I gave in.

She was right. The room was inviting.

"I'm Doctor Yucy," she explained although there was no white coat or stethoscope. In fact, her coat was black and had come off quickly. Beneath, she wore a black suspender belt and stockings and she half turned away from me to unhook her brassiere. Suddenly her magnificent boobs drooped with the nipples pointing towards her toes.

"Come on, my Pubby. What are you waiting for? Don't waste my time."

I was shy and awkward and by the time I had dragged off my trousers she was on the divan minus her knickers. What a shock! The romantically dim light revealed between her legs a black mat thick enough for a pillow. Between what young fellows like me termed 'the sight' and her ghastly bosom, I suddenly lost all interest.

The mystery of women unveiled. A Peter Paul Rubens, she wasn't.

"What's the matter, Pubby? Shall I help it along?" and she went to work, trying all sorts of interesting tricks. None helped.

"So, you are a virgin. It looks like you'll stay that way."

We dressed and I grabbed my guitar. Before we parted she asked me for a kiss so I pasted a quick peck on her cheek for luck and took off. I suppose a pure boy was a rarity. This was my first attempt at love-making but I confess I was disappointed. Somewhere in that room, *amour* had a good laugh on my account.

I did not touch another woman for a whole year after that, afraid of failure. Nor did I wish to see the exposed female form. Women, when dressed and made up, are mysterious and ravishing yet this is merely a male illusion and the ladies certainly maintain the fantasy. After all, it's the biggest business in the world. Fortunately, I had not lost my interest despite my initial let down.

My 'brother' Joseph

The boys in our shack were timid fellows but good friends and one became a brother to me - probably more so than my real one. Joseph Mandics came from a tiny peasant village of Pacsa in the southwest corner of the country, very near the Hungarian oil wells. He had a labouring job on a Pest building site. This physical work suited him and being a bright fellow, he learned quickly later becoming a well-known builder. He knew of my predicament as a half-Christian, half-Jew and the way the government was putting on the pressure to satisfy German anti-Semitic demands.

"Look, Gabor," he said one day, "I'll give you my papers and you can get a licence from the police. Say you're from my town and want to settle here to find a job."

The problem was that I did not look like a freshly-arrived peasant lad while my speech was nothing like the Zala district's heavy accent. I had to learn his dialect and mannerisms quickly. Nevertheless, I did obtain those precious documents and became on paper, '*Mandics Joseph*' including his mother's name and all the other particulars.

Some District Police were lenient over issuing identity papers, asking no questions but quietly taking the money after a few formal questions. The matter was quickly settled and you were given the right to settle in Budapest. There were so many refugees and folk who had been bombed out, or deserters from

the Army and from the Eastern Front, that it was better to let them get on with their lives since they were the least likely to make trouble.

This was to my advantage. Interestingly too, there were many Jews who had themselves baptised into one or other of the Christian faiths. Sadly, ministers took their money and issued their papers but, behind the scenes, endorsed the inhuman policies to make more money. Had Jesus walked through Hungary, He might have thrown such scoundrels out of the Temple as well!

Since there were now two Mandics living in the same place it was only right to go about as brothers. We would stroll down to my favourite dancing school on Sunday afternoon at Kincses (the Jeweller) on Wesselenyi Street where I would help the band by playing the drums when their regular chap was engaged elsewhere or too drunk to turn up. This entitled me to free entrance and from two until six we had plenty of fun with the girls and the dancing.

One Sunday, we heading home after the dance when, on the corner of Rose Street, I was surrounded by four armed men in Arrow Cross uniform.

“Identify yourself!” demanded one. I gave him my papers. He looked them over and then glanced at Joseph who was an interested spectator.

“Who is this?” he snapped.

“My nephew,” I replied.

“Come here!” He spat out the order. Suddenly I felt that both of us could be shot since this was the usual thing.

“Show your papers!” he commanded. Joseph handed them over meekly.

“Why are you both Mandics Joseph?” There was death in his tone.

Quick thinking.

“He is my mother’s brother’s son. *He is my nephew,*” I replied with an irritation I did not feel.

“As you are aware, it is an old custom to give someone another family member’s name.”

Confused and dull-witted, he returned Joseph’s papers, saluted contemptuously and left us to wonder how much in life depends on what one says. We could have been dead on that corner.

Illustration 15, Image ‘Arrow Cross parade’



An early Arrow Cross parade in Budapest was a foretaste of what the city was destined to endure.

It was a salutary lesson and we never again walked together in public. The raids on the streets were becoming more vicious to catch Army absentees or those who had dodged work camps, and Jews. People-hunting became the rule of the day. To shoot some poor fellow was a heroic deed worthy of promotion. Human life was not worth much and, sooner or later, I felt I would pay with my own.

We lived in that vacuum of uncertainty where death was the only sure thing. What form it would take mattered little and yet I became a fearless, but not reckless, young man. I was now a rebel opposing the ridiculous new regulations in a subtle way, sure my life was a daily gamble.

Germans were a common sight in the Seventh District (Elizabeth Town). A block away from Elizabeth Boulevard, the S.S. housed a unit of about 150 fellows recruited from the Hungarian Volksbund. This place had been an apprentice school on Wesselenyi Street before being requisitioned from the local council.

Now, good-looking tall boys in black uniforms marched in tight formation through the town and sang loud German tunes. It was a big show intended to intimidate Pest and I saw Hungarians insult them, knowing well that these clowns were Swabians from south-west Germany who knew no Hungarian. If a policeman was around, he rapidly made himself scarce.

Let me salute the Hungarian firemen and railway men. They were *for* the people in the German war and again in the Revolution of 1956 - the real patriots, real humanitarians and remained so despite the danger.

On my new identity papers, I was listed as only sixteen so I was not eligible for Army service although the rank and file had been badly depleted by the Stalingrad debacle. There, the Germans had booted Hungarian troops off carts or lorries and showed no mercy when their own interests were in danger. Very few of our boys came home. Even fewer were the work-party Jews who had dug trenches in atrocious conditions and with little food. These poor fellows had only light summer clothing to fight the Russian winter. The beatings and tortures by their guards was further evidence that they were to be killed one way or the other. It was a miracle that a handful survived, returning half-crazed, walking skeletons - the shame of the Hungarian nation.

In the late spring of 1945 I saw two of these Swabian guards hanged from a lamp post in Oktogon Square on the corner of Terez Ring and Andrassy Boulevard. The improvised gallows was opposite a coffee house providing a good view from the Italian Embassy on the corner. It was a familiar scene, no doubt, to its people since the bodies of their Duce and Clara Petacci were hanged upside down.

An ignominious end.

Chapter Six

Wehrmacht

*'It was like milking the billy goat,
a dangerous undertaking.'*

-Bekeffy Laszlo, Podium Cabaret, 1944

I received in the mail one of those gifts that remind a chap of his impotence in the face of Authority. It peremptorily ordered me to appear at a specified time at the local office of the Auxiliary Service in 'Cyclops Garage'. The office was in a block behind the Elizabeth Boulevard on Kurt Street and, since I would be given further instructions there, I decided to take my lunch with me.

The warning in the letter was too strong to ignore as the office was to come under the control of the Wehrmacht. I turned up early to find others already milling around. Most were older and some wore white 'half-caste' armbands on their overcoat sleeves. We all looked fearful since the German wolves in grey uniforms had a bad reputation. No one took their words at face value.

Around seven o'clock, four uniformed soldiers approached and demanded in loud, guttural German that anyone who spoke the language of the Master Race should step forward. Several did, confident of being able to act as translators. Three were chosen and, amid the tremendous din of frightened men, the soldiers let us feel their superiority before barking out their commands.

“Fall in line!” began the rigmarole of army discipline. Being the youngest and also the shortest, I was put in the back row to become the last man on the end.

These soldiers wore a variety of rank badges and were commanded by a lean lieutenant. They were impeccably dressed in jodhpurs, which suggested quality tailoring and no problem with rationed clothing. Their medals advertised their self-importance and, after an hour or so, their captain strolled out to supervise his elegant underlings. He was tall, in his late forties and going grey but he walked as if he had a ramrod up his back as he inspected our lines. Yet, although his face was serious, it did not seem intimidating.

Standing some five metres away, he faced the front rank and his manner changed. Like a teacher, he spoke a coolly academic way reassuring us through an interpreter that,

“There is no reason to be afraid. If you behave, there will be no trouble.”

The building was to be a store for car parts as well as servicing and garaging the vehicles of officers residing in hotels in Elizabeth Town.

We were now in the care of the Wehrmacht and we should have to take our duties seriously. Anything missing would be seen as sabotage with appropriate penalties. Since I was the smallest and youngest, I asked for an interview with the captain. It caused a stir but my request was actually granted. The others were detailed off to work while I was escorted to his office.

I told him of my night work with the Fire Brigade and the need to earn a living during the day. Could I be excused? Apparently not. However, he issued me with a document authorising my discharge from the fire-fighting rosters in order to attend the garage two days and three nights a week. This was an unusual deal. Later in the war, I returned his kindness.

Captain Schmidt was a well-educated Berliner who had been a store manager before being pressed into military service. He was not keen on the Furrher or the direction the German war. I could see that he thought it would be lost.

The Captain and his men considered me their *kleine lieblich* - small loved one. My first job was to build shelves from lengths of slotted pre-fabricated metal for the tool and parts store. Everything had to be lined up to the last millimetre then laid out like a formal dinner table. Each item was marked carefully on the inventory and every pigeonhole had its own clearly-stated contents. The Germans knew the place could be bombed by the Russians but this was over-ruled by the merits of orderliness.

That morning, most of the thirty unwilling conscripts were bourgeois males who had been stripped of their professions by government decree and deprived of income. They lived on their wits, hoping for some change for the better. A Jewish former dentist named Szabo learned of the way I was living in my dogbox and suggested I rent a room in his home. Formerly the housemaid's quarters, it was to be a great improvement on the shack.

This meant a comfortably-furnished bedroom with a bathroom and inside toilet. No more freezing your balls in a medieval privvy. Bedding was provided and the rent was slightly more than I had paid for my square metres in the hovel.

My new home had a further advantage. This third-floor apartment at Number 7 Whistle Street was closer to my leather workshop and not far from the motor garage. Although this area was the hub of Jewish life and would later become the Ghetto, it did not bother me. A few months were to pass before I learned of the dangers of being here. There was a mass call-up of male and female Budapest Jews between the ages of 14 and 70. They were marched onto cattle trucks to labour under inhuman conditions in the copper and lead mines at Bor, the former Yugoslavia. So far, I had escaped unwelcome official attention.

Not so others.

In Hungary itself there were good people working as slaves at places like Kistarcsa, St Endre, Kazincbarcika, Ungvar, Satoralja-Ujhely Kassa, Munkacs and Beregszasz making or laying bricks with no more shelter than the shed in which they worked. I knew that Janka Ante's first son, Bela, had been murdered by the guards in such a place. The shame of it was that my fellow countrymen were so ready to outdo the Germans in their atrocities.

One Hungarian chauffeur to the German big brass was a local chap who spoke perfect German. In the middle of October 1944, while waiting for his car to be serviced, he bragged that his latest passengers had been the High Commander of Budapest, General Wesenmayer and Adolf Eichmann. He had driven them to Kistarcsa Camp and they were satisfied with what they had observed. However, Eichmann had not liked to see Hungarians in charge. Why were the S.S. not in control?

Wesenmayer thought it a great joke.

“*Langsam, meine Herr. Das Ungarn ist zere besaght,*” he chuckled. Slowly, sir. The Hungarians are more vile.

I enjoyed my new abode and could talk with the Family Szabo as well as their associates - doctors, scholars and others whose refreshing intelligence allowed me to learn what mattered in life. I looked forward to leaving the workshop and the garage each evening and listen to their conversations where there was no crudeness, only gentleness and substance.

One afternoon I reported to the garage to find three, large grey vans there. One had a completely-enclosed space without windows. It spooked me.

“*Was ist das?*” What is it? I asked Captain Schmidt.

He looked around and said, “*Das ist zere Schlecht.*” It is very bad.

These were *gazmotors*, mobile gas vans in transit. The wheeling and dealing between our government and Hitler was now in full swing. The Arrow Cross leader Szalasi Ferenc’s “putsch” against Horthy was postponed, having been cooled by German advisors Baky Laszlo, Endre Bela and Peter Hain (“the human hyena”) were in charge of the hated Gendarmerie and the civilian Arrow Cross which competed with Gestapo and S.S. in liquidating Jews and their property.

Rubber Stamping

Everything was scarce. You had to queue for hours for essentials. Ration books and correct stamps did not guarantee a supply while Russian bombing made shopping a risky business when the line stretched for half a kilometre. It was frustrating. After wasted time and heated arguments to get near the shop door, you learned the goods were sold out. Loudmouths often jumped queues with resulting fisticuffs and general mayhem. Women, pregnant or with small children, were allowed to form shorter lines, yet this could be erroneous. Pillows made good bulges while ‘borrowed’ youngsters served useful purposes.

I had already given my precious ration card to Mother, since she had three others to feed, and I managed to eat at various places without a ticket or stamp. One day I saw that a fellow in uniform was given priority and this gave me an idea. After some thought, I involved my young Fire Brigade friends, Robert and Paul. Both were eager for adventure, particularly where there were huge queues and lots of trouble.

Captain Schmidt, had once shown me some *ersatz* food, frowning over a pot of loose, grey mash with synthetic sweetener.

“I can swallow this bloody stuff only with my eyes closed,” he commented. “It is meant to be muesli but is wheat chaff and bran husks fit for animals. I may find dried berries if I’m lucky.” He lifted his spoon and let the contents dribble back into the bowl.

“I haven’t seen meat in months,” he continued. “My miserable ration is little better than what the rank-and-file gets.”

I asked him if he would excuse me for a few mornings and I would see what I could do.

With my two friends, I dressed in my fireman’s uniform with its ‘TUO’ armband and went to the butcher in Wesselenyi Street and a baker in Baros Street. Robert was in his shiny, feathered hat and Paul in his Levente garb. The shops were privately owned so I flashed my rubber-stamped I.D. card and said we were from the Social Directory Office to keep order in the queues. We also reminded them how much they needed our services.

It worked.

The rubber stamp was the key to instant or fearful obedience. Some call it *baksheesh* but we were welcomed everywhere and the result was order and understanding on both sides. We told the public how much was left in the shop and invented a system where they could show us a ticket entitling them to a preferential place in the next queue.

“Be assured. You’ll have the thing you’re after,” and they believed me.

It wasn’t immoral. Back on duty in the garage, I would distribute real bread as well as fresh meat and sugar. The Germans were delighted and awed. Nor did Mother and the Family Szabo suffer any shortages.

You help the people you know. It’s that simple.

Furthermore, I never asked Black Market prices. We did not accept bribes but paid for everything although, if food was offered in return for a service, we took it as a reimbursement. In this way we guarded our independence.

Father again

I had an amicable meeting with Father at Janka Ante’s home. He told me he was doing odd jobs in the fur trade but it was in a dingy place. He was in good spirits although his smoker’s cough was a matter of concern.

“Gabor,” he said somewhat gloomily. “Can you loan me some cash? I’m skinned and I already owe a lot to Janka Ante.”

She made his meals but she was not prepared to lend him more money. Like a good son, I shelled out ten *pengo*, a goodly sum for those times and he was suddenly happy again.

It was actually a good investment. The next week at Janka Ante’s, she gave me twenty *pengo*.

“Your father left this as repayment of his loan,” she said. I was sceptical but he had paid off his debts.

About this time, I had my first real experience with the opposite sex. In Elizabeth Town, the Seventh District was a mixture of everything: schools, hospitals, churches, a large synagogue, the best entertainments and movie theatres, public baths, the Town Hall, shops, public bars and “enlightened” places for men only. We had it all, including an S.S. barracks.

I played the drums at dance schools as well as the guitar with a band. At one of these outings I met a decent sort of Jewish girl who was engaged to a chap conscripted to a work camp. Some ten years older and a head shorter but intelligent, she worked in a small book bindery. Her high cheekbones, petite form and outgoing manner so caught my attention that I fell in love. She became my idealised female to the point where I completely forgot my revulsion at Doctor Yucy’s nudity. To me, she was my *Eger-ke*, my ‘little mouse’.

We became good friends, going to entertainments that she wouldn’t normally have been able to afford, made happy excursions to various places and picnicked together with her girlfriend in tow. I had no thoughts beyond being with her and listening to her expounding on the merits of art and literature. Alas, I was so naïve. At 28, she had more experience. I was dithering around in a romantic haze, she must have been dreaming of something more fulfilling.

Women often deny such things and emphasise they are fallen victims of vile male desires. However, she did not discourage a fraternal sort of kissing.

On New Year's Eve 1943 I took “little mouse” to the Breitner dance hall, with me smartly dressed and sporting new, hand-made shoes. We welcomed in the New Year with a small celebration made more joyful since we were not raided by the newly-established Kiss-Katona, the undisciplined version of the Hitler Youth known as the ‘Small Soldiers’. Outside, snow greeted us with a soft white mantle over trees, houses and streets. I was in high spirits, strolling along Rakoczy Boulevard. We turned the corner at Huszar Street by the Roxy Theatre with the great, lacy-textured Elizabeth Cathedral at the end.

All the house windows were blacked-out because of the air raids and the sparse traffic did not disturb the quiet crunch of our footsteps. The cathedral was in the middle of Elizabeth Park and the small verger's entrance was in shadow.

"I'm tired," she said. "Let's sit on those steps," pointing to the top of the third one. "You sit down first and I'll sit on your lap."

Wrapped in a warm overcoat, I plonked down unsuspecting on the cold stones. We smooched for a bit before she placed my hand between her legs. I went into a sort of shock. My sweetheart was human and I was embarrassed. Seeing this, she stood up and asked me to take her home. At her gate we parted with a perfunctory kiss. The next time I saw her, she was decidedly cool.

"We have to break up," she said. My pleadings fell on deaf ears but she was adamant.

"You are too young. We live in different worlds. You will find a young girl and forget me."

She meant every word. A few days later, I could see she was right. Infatuation had blinded me. Put another way, I was a boy expected to do a man's work. This affair taught me a lesson.

Never fall in love.

Bombed !

In January 1944, Captain Schmidt gave me leave from duty for two days a week to earn my living. This also meant adventuring with my two friends. We had learned that the bakery in Nepszinhaz Street had a good supply of rationed flour and was going to bake fresh bread once the 5am curfew was lifted. The previous night, the bakers made their preparations knowing there would be many queueing in the freezing cold. We agreed to turn up at eight am to keep order.

There was a crowd even before we arrived, with more joining every minute. Little wonder, since trams from the suburbs passed from both directions every thirty seconds and the aroma wafted under the passengers' noses. A number were ready to fight for a place in the queue but we stood alongside them, me at the door where the pressure was greatest, Paul in the middle and Robert at the end of the line.

Everything went smoothly at first. However, after two hours, they were restless and wondered if any bread would be left since those at the front departed with their arms full.

We went inside and learned there was enough for two more hours of sales with extra two-kilo loaves in the oven.

"No reason to be afraid."

We managed to keep the crowd within bounds as they shuffled forward. Then there was a lull while the new batches were taken from the oven.

Frozen-handed, we three had a coffee in the bakehouse chatting with the bakers. Suddenly, a tremendous blast of compressed air flung us against the brick wall. A huge flame belched out from the ovens. Half the wall collapsed. We staggered out covered in ash and coughing amongst the mixing bowls and troughs wrenched from their fittings. In the grey dust cloud, we could hardly see each other but two bakers had been slightly wounded so I helped them from my First Aid kit.

Outside on the street it was a slaughter house.

We had been bombed. British or American planes which had flown in and aimed for the corner of Rakoczy and Elizabeth Boulevards. A kilometre away, the rail terminal had been badly hit. This was the first of many daily raids. Yet you soon became blasé, accepting the inevitability of death. The prayer was, "Please God, let it be quick."

These first Lancasters, Wellingtons and Superfortresses blackened the sky and, after they finished, there was fire and smoke all over the city. Sadly, it was winter and our hoses were frozen while most of the hydrants had been bombed or had burst. There was little to do but watch buildings go up in flames.

After helping the bakers and two injured shop-girls, I sent Paul urgently for an ambulance since, in this poor district, there were few telephones and the lines to the street boxes were down. He ran a couple of kilometres before finding one already in use and ran on further. All around me, the buildings

were damaged - red snow and grey, yawning craters marking the site of a former multi-storeyed apartment block. A tram had been cut in half and the driver and most of his passengers had disappeared. Like a Goya painting, body parts hung from the tram cables or littered the street.

Strangely, around the corner in a narrow street, people were only slightly injured. Death was selective that day. I quickly ran out of gauze, iodine and cleaning fluid and sent Robert into the houses to ask for blankets and linen for tourniquets. It was minus ten degrees but I was too busy to feel the cold. Perhaps the dirt on my face and clothes acted as an insulation until, near to collapse while I helped load up our own Hungarian Army trucks with the injured for a field hospital.

The dead lay in the street for the city undertaker. Finally reaching my new home, I found the Szabo house undamaged but the bathroom had only cold water since they had run out of fuel. I splashed something over my face, changed and limped down to the Kiraly steam bathhouse about five hundred metres away on Tobacco Street. It was a lifesaver.

During the Turkish occupation, Buda and Pest were two independent towns and the Turks had built hot baths with wet and dry steam rooms at various temperatures. The Kiraly baths were popular and the cheapest in town, operating on alternate days for males and females. You entered, picked up a fresh loincloth from the pile by the door then obtained a locker key from an attendant. Emerging virtually naked into one of the many showers, you then ran the gauntlet of prying eyes. Unsolicited, there would be several wandering hands and you had to and chase off the intruders. Someone tried it on but I was exhausted and wanted to get clean. I bawled him out and he vanished in the clouds of steam.

On the Saturday morning of *Passach*, [Passover], the biggest synagogue on the corner of Tobacco Street and Weselenyi Street was attacked by hooligans lobbing grenades from the flat roof of the apartment block opposite. They had waited until the *shabbat* worshippers had come out for fresh air. I was on duty at the Cyclops Garage and learned of the atrocity some hours later at the Szabo apartment. These cowards were demonstrating their mettle and their hatred with the sort of fun that injured hundreds, including children. It was a foretaste of what was to follow. These heroes were certainly Arrow Cross but a cursory official inquiry failed to find the culprits. Anarchy was just around the corner.

Back at the bakery, the windows had been boarded over and only the roof had to be repaired. Paul, Robert and I took up our crowd-control duties again but this all cut into my spare time. Between work and more work, my few free hours let me to go to the movies or a show but one now risked life, limb and morals.

German and Italian film makers poured in high-quality artistic creations which cost me nothing to see since my brother, Joseph, was a commercial artist. He painted the billboards for the German UFA [Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft] as well as the Town Hall in the cellar of the Urania movie house and Gabor, in Joseph's paint-splashed overalls on the stairs behind the screen, had a cosy spot. If anyone came by, I would paint a few strokes on paper on the floor, in another make-believe for a purpose.

Joseph told me that when he installed posters on side billboards, I should be seen handing him the gluepot and brush. However, big cinemas ran only one feature for several weeks so that meant finding smaller theatres such as The Roxy on Rakoczy Boulevard and other working class fleapits like the Rialto and the Phoenix on the corner of Szovetseg u (Unity Street).

Until curfew there were programmes every two hours - news, cartoons and hilariously-spliced features. The ticket cost little and these places were always full. The seats never had time to cool down so that the lingering stench was soothed away with a smelly something sprayed over our heads. Certain women would find a way of getting in without paying. These smartly-dressed cookies would stand near the door with a large shawl on their shoulders and whisper, "I've got a guest pocket."

One by one, they would be escorted inside. The shawl would come off and her benefactor had the chance to recoup his investment by exploring secret places through the guest pocket in her skirt. It was probably more exciting than what played on the screen.

The Phoenix was known for its other features. The side balconies could accommodate four people and these were useful when the cost of a hotel room was prohibitive. A lusty lot were my contemporaries and, for a decent tip, low-paid ushers could be persuaded to lock the door with a 'Don't disturb' sign on the handle. A current joke was the couple caught *in flagrante delicto* and removed by ambulance, covered in a blanket, "stuck together".

Darkening days

Gyorgy Benedek, my boss at the leather workshop, was sent to a labour camp outside town. I was left under the supervision of his Gentile wife. Mother also lost her partner, Uncle Paul, for the same reason. Thousands of good people were in a similar predicament. The wearing of the yellow Star of David had become compulsory but, because of this, so many things were forbidden.

New wide-ranging edicts were created by Hungarian lawmakers determined to outdo the Germans in barbarity. This meant wearing a Star of a certain size, stitched onto the outside of your clothing.

Bugger this, I thought, and made three American sheriff-style jobs with obvious stitches but with safety pins behind. I could then whip them off or on in a second.

By now the country was in a ferment. Many Jewish retail businesses and factories had to close down. Some managed to transfer ownership to Christians while still carrying but this was illegal and punishable with awful consequences.

A leading artiste, the most-adored songstress Karady Katalin who, it was rumoured had some close encounters with the Regent's son, was arrested for hiding Jews. She was a sexy Hungarian Marlene Dietrich with a smoky voice. Taken to one of the most notorious prisons, she was badly roughed up and was housed in a dark dungeon until the spring of 1945. The same treatment was meted out to multi-talented actress Dayka Margit. There were other courageous souls of this kind but too few.

Many houses were forced to display a large Yellow Star on their doors, which made it so much easier for Eichmann and the Arrow Cross to herd Jews together and then descend on them. In a perverted piece of reasoning, it was explained that '*because Jews are allies and friends to the Americans and British, the places showing a star will not be bombed.*' As if airmen thousands of feet high could even see the ground, let alone individual houses! Strategically important buildings were surrounded by Jewish properties but we all knew it was a ruse, especially when bombs also kept falling on Yellow Star doors. Did the authorities think we were all stupid?

Propaganda vilifying the Western Powers was at its height and this gave an extra impetus to anti-Semitic outbursts to cover the inadequacies of a government losing the war. It even went so far that when some Allied bomber crews were shot down and survived, they were butchered by peasants while the Gendarmerie looked on.

Robert, Paul and I were a sort of idealistic 'Musketeer' unit and were even busier at this time. We supplied food to refugees in the synagogue at the Tobacco and Rottenbiller Street corner and the children's refuge at Queen Wilma Street-Gorkij Avenue where people huddled. In one of these insanitary dens where I smuggled in bread, an old Jewish man grabbed at my coat. He wasn't your average beggar.

"I am over eighty," he said, "and won't last long. I have a daughter with a three-year old son. Her husband is in a labour camp. Will you help them?"

He gave me an address in Hollan Street alongside the Broadway movie theatre. It was very large building in the Fifth District near the main boulevard. Around 9 a.m. I approached the apartment, dressed in my official garb. Arrow Cross thugs were all over the place but I had to carry without hesitating.

I've walked into a trap.

There were two modern Yellow Star apartment blocks alongside the Arrow Cross headquarters. On guard were two larrikins with machine guns and grenades. Both buildings were under strict control and the *haz mester* would have been ordered to lock the door and monitor every movement.

I went smiling towards the one in charge.

“You’ve got a hard job. Don’t you feel cold? At least I can walk around when I’m on duty.” This brought a hearty laugh. We shared some other hoary jokes before I revealed my mission.

“I have to escort a woman and kid from there,” I said, pointing to the correct house. “For an interview at our headquarters. It’s important. You have a key?”

“No, but I know the *haz mester*. Do you want me to talk to her?”

“Okay. It would help our cause.” He was too dumb to ask how but went to the door, rang the bell and outlined the importance of seeing the woman and child.

Oh, what a uniform and a dirty joke can achieve! The rest was *kalacs*, as they say, easy as dropping a feather. I went upstairs with the *haz mester*. She opened the door and commanded the frightened young woman to follow me. I stood there with a morose, dark face.

“Follow instructions and you will not be harmed,” I said sternly, my thespian training coming to the fore. She gathered her things quickly while I praised the officious one for her vigilance and professional conduct. In the best bullying manner, I urged the young mother to hurry up, fearing my performance could be unmasked. However, we descended in the lift with my shaking companion, grimly holding her small son by the hand.

The *haz mester* unlocked the outside door. I gave her a vigorous Arrow Cross salute, resonating “*Eljen Szalasi!*” high, harsh tones with further praise and we parted. The dumb larrikins looked on laughing at two more whose future was doomed.

At the street corner, we stopped away from prying eyes. I ripped the Yellow Star from her overcoat and explained. She nearly fainted and her subsequent reunion with her father was my reward. I hope she and her son survived.

There had been a police guard at the gate when we went back to the Tobacco Street sanctuary but he was a benevolent sort who did not refuse a loaf of new bread and fresh meat.

“These Hebrews are not allowed Gentile food,” I said, “but you and I are.”

“We are good Hungarians,” he laughed. It would have been pointless to enlighten him.

Things fall apart

My brother Joseph was a good painter as well as a horse-meat purveyor. He knew the local stables were short of fodder and, from time to time, the horses were shot instead of being left to starve. With his special large pot and sharp knife, he would cut slices off quickly. It was all in a good cause, for poor people ate the meat.

At the garage, our store of spare parts was depleted and life was miserable for Captain Schmidt and his men. Besides me, there were now only two old boys who did little more than sweep the floor and clean the shelves. I would turn up for roll call and then be excused to replenish the meagre food supplies. This was important. My leather workshop had been closed since the Edicts against Jews now applied to Christian marriage partners as well. I still had to support myself so my food trips gave me an income although I only accepted small gifts.

The Hungarian *pengo* still stood well in Europe, unlike the *deutschmark*. The German troops with their tiny pay and ever-dwindling supplies of ersatz food were looking very thin. They were no longer brash and cocky. They knew they were beaten and were just waiting for the last rites to finish them off. They had been wounded at some stage and then, after recuperating, were given light duties in a garage such as ours.

We had a corporal, Seppy Bauer, a chap of about twenty-five who had been invalided from the Donetz Front and dragged his left leg. I sat beside him on an empty bench over our coffee one lunchtime and chatted. My German was still fairly basic.

“Have you got a wife?”

“Nix,” he replied.

“How about children?”

“Nein,” and I almost believed him. He was a virile-looking but to get away with that many?

“Haben ze habt eine madchen?” wondering if he had a girlfriend.

“Nix. Frontline soldiers are not allowed to associate with any sort of girl. Our great Fuehrer, and Culture Minister Strauss, wished to keep the Germans as pure Aryans. At Donetz we had our own *freuden madchen* when we needed them. At morning *appelle*, we could request a visit once a month to a marquee we called the ‘Zelt’.

There were ten girls on duty, five in turn daily for five hours. We would line up not expecting much more than the basic wham-bang and the corporal would call us up one by one with a smirk.

“*Seppy, achtung. Stand your man to attention!*”

Not always easy when you are doped up with bromide in your coffee but we would march in to a cubicle under orders not to waste time since the quota was a minimum twenty a day. We would give the girl the token issued at morning *appelle*, bellow out “Heil Hitler” as some sort of aphrodisiac with right hand at the regulation forty-five degrees from the vertical, do our business and depart after a somewhat less tumescent “Heil Hitler.”

“Das ist eine wirtchaft? What sort of business is that?” I asked.

Seppy shrugged his shoulders.

“If she managed to service more than twenty, she was rewarded with more ersatz food. This she would exchange for cigarettes which she used to obtain real food. Some over-excited fellows would go off prematurely so she would have a bit of time for other things. Afterwards, she would give you a small towel to wipe yourself and that was that.”

Sex to order! Roughly one every fifteen minutes. Only the Germans could think of something as mechanical as that.

“Homosexual activity brought dire sequels,” Seppy continued. “Only high-ranked generals could escape without punishment. Captain Ernst Roehm, who created the Brown Shirts and supported Hitler, got what he deserved. The excuse was that the prurient fellow had compromised the virile Nazi image and had to be shot.”

I thought Seppy had finished but there was more.

“There is lots of hypocrisy about sex. Our Great Composer, Wagner, made a big opera on incestuous behaviour and yet no one officially frowned on *The Ring*.”

Seppy was more experienced than me with my vague adolescent notions so I recited my encounters with Doctor Yucy and the “little mouse”. He laughed himself to tears and the duty crew gathered share the joke.

He seemed very interested, his ankle wound having enforced a three-month celibacy. Nevertheless, no one believed my failures.

“You’re the Great Faker. You’ve made it up to entertain Seppy and he’s a real faker.”

Next thing, Seppy asked me to prove that Worker Street existed. I agreed to show him and said we’d go together so that he wouldn’t get lost in the labyrinth.

“How much did you pay?” he demanded.

I said Yucy’s fee was one *pengo* and he smiled even more. Smartly dressed in civvies, we caught a tram and finally came to where I had first alighted with my guitar. Seppy was horny and, since it was 5pm, an air raid was unlikely. The street-walkers smelled business and it was ironic that while you queued for everything else, one particular item was always available.

Seppy spoke no Hungarian so I negotiated for him, cash only and no fancy stuff. I had vivid memories of my failure with Yucy and explained this to him.

After about ten minutes Seppy disappeared inside, money up front and no freeloading. Out in the street, a good-looking bird offered me “a mighty flick” and I followed her to a room in a smelly cottage. This time I liked what was on offer. Ester was about eighteen and well-stacked. She also proved to be the sort of teacher young fellows dream about.

Although her ‘lecture’ cost two *pengo*, I got to know what men were really after. The feeling was so beautiful that I thought I heard birds singing. Or was I hallucinating? Then I came to realise her instruction had been entirely practical. Her room was heated by a cast-iron stove where a mug of water

was boiling. She pulled out a basin from beneath her bed, threw in some rust-coloured crystals then washed and dried my midriff. So far so good.

“These carbonate crystals are a disinfectant,” she explained. “You’re not going to pick up something. Neither shall I.”

Once we had finished, I had my next lesson. Without false modesty, she stood over the basin and douched herself quickly. A little later she told me to look her up any time I was in need. She had a good head for business, that one.

“You have taken my virginity,” I joked, “but I shan’t charge you for it.”

She was not impressed and started dressing for the next run.

A commercial transaction, after all.

Years later, I understood why the horrid odour persisted in places like this with such primitive sanitation. The disinfectant water was thrown into a hole in the middle of the courtyard. The contents did not always drain away, the residue often dried out and, later, decomposed in the air. Occasionally it was hosed down but not in winter.

On my way out, an old woman stretched out her hand. She was the caretaker and I guessed her only income came from the gifts as a sort of *noblesse oblige*. In her youth she had probably been one of the performers. All she could command now were the departing crumbs.

Seppy was ahead of me, waiting where we had parted.

“Vigetz ze? Alles gut?” He greeted me with some concern.

“I am no longer a boy,” I replied, “and all for a couple of *pengo*.”

My rite of passage was a great joke and for days afterwards everyone in the garage ribbed me. It also had an unfortunate consequence in that I had to control myself not to jump my landlord’s attractive daughter. Ester had wound me up and showed Samson there was more to life than hitting Philistines with a donkey’s jawbone. However, to have molested the Szabo girl would have been foolish, expensive and perhaps even deadly.

Then on 17 April 1943, something happened in Kleisham Castle. Our *Serenissime Horthy* had been summoned there by the Fuehrer and his Golden Boy, von Ribbentrop. Few could have guessed that Horthy had learned of German plans for Jews, Gypsies and other ‘undesirables’.

In Elizabeth Town, we had known that Wehrmacht had suffered a great military setback. As usual, it had been couched in euphemistic prose as ‘*a planned disengagement and orderly retreat to a more favourable position.*’

In other words, the Russians had licked them. You could feel it in the air, especially in our garage where the mood was that the expected “Victory” was off the menu. Our Hungarian soldiers attached to German forces had suffered huge losses. The Soviet breakthrough on 12 January 1943 netted them 700,000 prisoners of war, among whom were some 30,000 Jewish slaves with their own guards, and all on the way to the *gulags*.

What was worse was that only 70,000 men had been taken on the front line. The rest had been gathered from the civilian population to fill the slave labour quota demanded by the Kremlin. These brutes were always keen to collect human beings (the true meaning of ‘collectivisation’) and herded seventy at a time into cattle wagons without food or sanitation. Yet they were lucky when compared with those in the death camps who had no hope of returning home when the madness was over.

Poor Horthy received his ultimatum regarding his Hungarian Jews. He knew that whatever he might do, the Jews and the others were doomed.

“*Aus radiren!*” We rub them out! became the slogan of pop-eyed Hitler when he began a harangue.

Much worse was the reality that S.S.Sahrfuehrer Adolf Eichmann had created the special *Sonderkommando RSHA rom. No IV B 4*. The elegant, mustachioed Baky Laszlo was appointed to be the Hungarian State Secretary-in-charge-of-Police to oversee what came next. All very legal and proper. Prime Minister Stoyai brought in Endre Laszlo as Minister of the Interior as deputy to Szalasi Ferenc, the Hungarian Hitler. In all, it was a neat little package designed to ruin our grieving nation.

Since there was a shortage of manpower, thanks to the German blandishments for Hungarians to depart elsewhere, these fellows took young teenagers from Levente units and issued them with German weapons. Their mission was to catch Jews not wearing the Yellow Star and any unfortunate soldier who had gone AWOL. According to British historian McCartney, there were at least 25,000 Hungarian ‘deserters’ in Budapest.

Led by 18-year old hooligans, these heavily-armed patrols were worse than the hated Gendarmes since they were quick on the draw and considered themselves above the law. Often skirmishes would take place when different armed units wandered into each other’s territory. They were merely brutal gangs having a good time at everyone’s expense. The ordinary citizen had to take orders from Parliament, the German commanders, police, army, Levente, Arrow Cross, Gestapo, S.S. units, Wehrmacht, Sonderkommandos and a range of other barbarians. You never knew which bunch would snuff out your life. In addition, the twice-daily bombing raids gave good business to The Grim Reaper.

Paul

Until now my identity papers had saved me from unpleasant encounters and my Musketeers provided a good service. I also met their relatives. Paul’s people had been in a Swedish-protected house and Robert’s in a Swiss enclave on Pozsonyi Street. These homes had the Yellow Star but they also displayed the emblem of the protecting nation.

Outside the Consulates in the freezing cold were long queues of those hoping to obtain the ‘Shutz-Pass’. This promised exemption from deportation but was usually ignored by German and Hungarian authorities and often torn up. Most hopefuls knew this but there was always the chance that the document could help.

I used to pass the panicky crowds at the Swedish Consulate where Raoul Wallenberg and his associates were trying to foil mass genocide. He had remarkable success and today the street has been renamed in his honour. Even so, many of us wondered what the Soviets did to him in Moscow’s Lublianka prison.

Estimates indicate that between May and July 1944 some 450,000 Hungarian Jewish men, women and children were deported to Auschwitz and other camps where many died of starvation, disease or were executed. Survivors owed much to Raoul Wallenberg, Swiss Consul Carl Lutz and Scots missionary Jane Haining.
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I was flirting with danger every time I went out in my uniform. Paul, Robert and I knew that if we were still alive when the trouble was over, there would be others claiming the kudos. Nevertheless, we continued and that is how I met their parents. The boys lived elsewhere but regularly visited their folks, dressed in their official outfits. Robert’s uniform looked intimidatingly similar to the “Small Soldiers”. My shabby fireman’s garb rarely earned a second glance.

I told the boys not to visit their parents so often. This was asking for trouble. I lived at No. 7 Whistle Street with the Family Szabo and the Jewish Council headquarters was across the way at No 12. The whole area would soon become ‘The Ghetto’ and the realisation of my personal danger came about five o’clock one morning.

There was a big stir going on downstairs. Doors banging, cursing and yelling, women screaming and children crying as they were dragged from their beds on this cold winter morning. The Arrow Cross had a full raid going and, being on the third floor, I was ready in my ragged uniform and military helmet ready to bluff my way out. Fortunately, these brutes had only a torch as I emerged like a ghost.

“I’ve sent them down the back stairs with two comrades,” I said as confidently as I could. “No one left on this floor.”

The two young thugs believed me and departed. The third floor was now safe but, on the pavement, the victims waited fearfully. I still had to get away and decided to disappear.

Only one was guarding the entrance. I strode up to him and pointed to where a roll call was being taken.

"I'll go over there and check," I barked. He saluted and I moved off smartly.

This particular morning, Robert, Paul and I were on duty outside a grocery shop where sugar, flour, salt and other items were being doled out. Everything was orderly. We thought we could knock off before the air raids and carted our bulging sacks by tram, being studiously ignored by passengers trying to avoid three good-for-nothings with loot.

We made our deliveries, collected our money and went home. Paul and I had arranged to meet at 3pm in the Hirado movie theatre on Elizabeth Boulevard. It showed hourly repeats of news, cartoons and shorts and, for a small fee, you could stay as long as you liked. Since it was owned by the German UFA, it was out-of-bounds to raiders and made a good refuge. It also revealed any new developments in the war and the UFA showed the seriousness of the "planned strategic withdrawal", using 'Les Preludes' or Liszt's Rhapsodies and their own favourite Wagnerian sounds in full volume.

Tricks like this could not hide the reality of the retreat. To counter this, we were fed with pictures of V1 and V2 "doodle bug" launchings plus hints of the "wonder bomb" which would bring final victory. You had to be blind or stupid to fail to see the manipulation. Strauss, Streichert and Goebels may have thought they were masters of deception and persuasion but they didn't fool me.

Paul and I sat through an hour of this stuff and then took off. I went into the toilet, telling him I would meet him at the corner of Osvath Street, a narrow alley between Tobacco and Barcsai Streets. Five minutes later, I nipped after him but he was not there. I looked around and saw him surrounded by a Small Soldier unit. He was in trouble and his papers weren't going to save him. To avoid unwelcome attention, I strolled to a house I knew about thirty metres away to keep an eye on things. Paul was trying to explain about his papers to the leader who kept yelling and cursing.

Suddenly this bastard ordered Paul unbutton his flies and produce his pecker. I could not watch, for I knew what would happen. Two pistol shots rang out. A small cry was the last sound he made.

A sixteen-year old died on the footpath outside the Atheneum Press.

From behind a solid oak door with a square glass janitor's window I had seen it. In sudden shock, with trembling legs, it was a good half hour before I could stop crying. Eventually I went out into the dark alley and sat on the bottom step feeling sick. I had known Paul only since I had joined the Fire Brigade. He had been a serious boy who felt a responsibility towards his parents but he had not been able to avoid danger.

His death was surely my fault. He was an only son. How could I tell his parents?
A little later, a woman came down from the staircase and saw my distress.

"Is that your friend lying there?" she asked. "I called the city undertaker but they are busy and can only get him later." Her apartment window overlooked the Atheneum Press where Paul was lying in a pool of blood.

"Don't go down there," she said. "They lurk around picking up their prey as they leave the cinema. This street is their hunting ground."

She gave me a warm mug of coffee. Nearly choking on my tears, I told her of my predicament. How could I tell Paul's parents?

"Do you know the name and address?" she asked. "I can find the house in the phone book and call someone to go and tell them. That will cause less pain than you explaining in person." She was right. Paul's folks would have to accept his death as another war casualty.

"I understand," she continued. "I have lost my husband and son in this bloody war."

She warned me to be careful at the entrance to Tobacco Street and obviously did not wish to see another young man murdered.

Later, I telephoned Robert. He was shocked too. We met in uniform in front of the Elizabeth Cathedral and I insisted that we must carry on. Life had become a game of chance but I wasn't going down without a fight. The old Hungarian proverb of 'help yourself and God will assist you' is what I intended to do.

We wasted no more time and visited our suppliers to find what was on sale so we could arrange for leave with our bosses. I was sure they knew about the dangerous game we were playing yet we served their purpose and they sided with us. They “validated our duty” in what the old Romans called a *quid pro quo*.

I still lived at with the Family Szabo on the third floor, but the first and second floors were now empty. I sensed the raiders had ticked this building off their list and that lightning would not strike twice, at least not for a while.

Not long after, I met a Jewish girl, Hosana, plump as a stuffed turkey, who had been absent on the morning of the raid and had returned to find her home deserted. We got together to console each other and, like me, she considered her turn would eventually come. We decided to make the most of our freedom. On the agreed night, I arrived with food and wine. We lit candles and wound up the old gramophone.

We had our meal and danced. It was good to feel her body against mine, especially as she moved well. The candles created the proper ambience and I guess I was frothing as I managed to cajole her onto large sofa. However, she used the old trick of keeping her legs tightly together and we finally agreed to give up. That cold October night in 1944, we slept together without further attempts. It was to be our first and last time.

We parted good friends the next morning. After the war, we met again in the greengrocer’s shop where she worked and were happy to see each other, having a good laugh. How had she managed to survive since she looked typically Jewish?

Luck had been on her side.

Chapter Seven

Ambushed

‘Egy gondolat bant engemet. Agyban parnak kozt halni meg.’
[I would rather die on the battlefield than peacefully in bed on pillows.]
-Petofi Sandor, Revolutionary speech, 1848

The air was heavy with the expectation that our enforced nightmare would soon end. News from the B.B.C. spread through the grapevine. Those caught listening to this *verboden* radio station were likely to be shot. Walls sprouted ears and no one could tell which side the neighbours were on. The tragedy was that informers were everywhere.

At the Cyclops Garage, our Wehrmacht men could often be seen huddled in a corner around the tiny cast-iron pot belly stove and cursing anyone who intruded. We could guess why they were looking worried. The shelves had few items left.

I was excused to go to my duty as an auxiliary fireman, my helmet on its strap on my left arm and, on my right sleeve, the armband with the disk clipped on. My metal Red Cross First Aid box had been replenished at the fire station the day before.

The Musketeers were no more but Robert and I continued to go to the bakery. When asked about Paul, I replied that he had lost his life in an air raid and that we would carry on as usual until we could find a suitable replacement.

One fateful day before noon, the air raid siren screeched and everyone cleared off the street. Robert and I sorted out smartly who was getting what and I found a two-kilogramme loaf left over. It would

be good to surprise someone and I thought of Margaret, my machinist at the leather factory. She lived in the suburb of which our working class poet Joseph Attila could write,
*'in the perimeter of the Town where the soot settles on everything
...that is where I live'.*

Margaret and her husband eked out an existence surrounded by belching factory chimneys, noise and filth. The bread would be greatly valued. I dressed in my civilian clothes and walked town towards the 'stone-mine' suburb of Kobanya on the edge of the Eighth District. There was plenty of snow about but in the Square it had piled up into small hills. One path was clear enough to allow me to walk through to the Danko Pista Street, named after the Gypsy musician the remarkable violinist and composer. As if Fate or the Almighty were prompting me, I took this path because it saved me from having to go the long way around the edge of the playground.

Thinking of a happy meeting with Margaret, I was oblivious to danger until four Arrow Cross stepped from behind a snow hill, their weapons aimed at my belly. A burly, angry man peered into my face.

"Name!" he barked. I repeated my mantra.

"Joseph Mandics from Paca. My mother is Borbala Senes...etc....etc," the sort of litany one needed these days. I passed over my documents from the Fire Brigade and the Wehrmacht and he could see I was a First Aider. Unfortunately, my confidence seemed to make him mad. We eye-balled each other and I gave nothing away although I was near to pissing myself.

"What've you got in there?" he demanded, pointing to my newspaper-wrapped bundle.

"Bread for a friend in Kobanya." He wrenched the parcel from my hand and unwrapped it, his face purple.

"Can I have it back?"

"Yes, you can have it." What I got was a mighty hit on the head from behind and I sank to the ground in the snow, bleeding.

I woke in a hospital bed with a large turban around my head, face swollen and my upper body in plaster. The ward was crowded with numerous casualties.

"Where am I? Where's my First Aid box?" A nurse obligingly read the clipboard at the end of my bed.

"A Gypsy musician spotted your body in the snow and informed the police. The city undertakers threw you onto the back of their lorry along with the rest of the morning's collection."

I was just another stiff. No big deal. Apparently they rolled me down with the others into a mass grave but the small spark of life left in me gurgled blood up through my mouth.

"One man spotted the trickle," she continued, "and yelled out he's not dead!" They loaded brought you here to St.Rokus Hospital." *Mazeltoft!*

She was helpful.

"You've been hit on the head with something heavy and it's been split open. There's a very deep gash there. The blood froze quickly so you didn't lose too much. You've been kicked all over your face and body and have a two broken ribs on your right side. However, you're a strong boy and you'll soon heal."

External scars, maybe.

"As for your face, you won't charming any girls for a while. It also looks as though you've been cleaned out. No money in your wallet. The First Aid kit was gone and your overcoat and shoes."

I must have looked upset or angry.

"You got off lightly," she said firmly. "You could have lost your life if they'd pulled down your pants."

That was the problem being a half-Jew. I could remove the yellow star but not the other thing.

The ward was reasonably clean but crowded with all sorts of injuries and the medical staff were working in primitive conditions. Meagre medical supplies meant that operations were painful and the screaming was enough to send you insane. I managed to shut down my brain to stop reacting but it

wasn't easy. From time to time, orderlies moved about washing the place and helping the nurses. My bruised, puffy cheeks left only narrow slits but I could see one of the bucket-and-brush brigade who looked remarkably familiar.

As he passed my bed I called out "Hey, Dad!"

Father stopped to see if someone was joshing him and when he got to eye level, he recognised me and was shocked.

"What are you doing here?"

"Sightseeing." He pasted a tearful kiss on as much of my temple as the turban would allow and listened to my story. At the end, I asked what *he* was doing here.

"I'm an orderly now," he replied. "I used to work in the yard building this ward, mixing mortar and carrying bricks. Heavy work for an old fellow and such small pay. The war had finished the fur trade so all I was lucky to get this. At least I've got some money and food."

He was right. Few had paid work, me included. How was I going to support myself once I left hospital? I gave him Robert's address and Captain Schmidt's at the Cyclops Garage to let them know I had been mugged and where I had been taken. A nurse then phoned the fire brigade to explain my absence. I was grateful for visitors from both places. No one was able to give gifts but their concern gave me back my self-respect.

My father tried to comfort me and must have taken a risk to liberate certain items from unnamed sources for me. He was turning out to be a good man and seemed to be popular with the staff and the doctors. Then on the third day, I had an unexpected visitor. Father came in with a rag-tag woman whom he introduced as his partner. She smelled of freshly-peeled onions and her long dress hung on her like a beached squid with a white slip poking out in places. She gave me a horsey sort of smile with a creased-looking face that needed a good ironing.

First impressions can be deceiving.

She was one of those few devil-may-care Jewesses still around but as poor as a synagogue mouse. I had guessed earlier that Father was on the skids and now I was certain. He was not much over forty but had no future. Yet he was the only member of my family to visit so I should not grumble. The others had always been indifferent to me so I wasn't missing anything.

The nurse was right. I healed rapidly. After six days the turban was removed and only a three-centimetre wide strip was left on my partially-shaved head. By the end of February 1944, the plaster cast was cut off and I was released from the screams and odours.

Father must have been surprised to see my bed occupied by someone else and, perhaps, disappointed since our relationship had improve. My landlord, Mr Szabo, was glad to see me back and did not ask me for rent arrears. He was willing to share his meagre food supply and offered a strong mug of coffee.

The winter weather was nasty, overcast with intermittent rain turning snow into slush. Still, Even so, I decided to take a walk to see how my former boss, crippled old 'Ali' Aladar, was getting on with his handbag business. My good overcoat had been stolen but I had my fireman's rain coat plus a holey pair of shoes. It seemed that something was telling me to go out. Fate?

On the lookout for any sort of trap, I crossed a large square which once contained the Lehel market but now only saw empty trams on the rain-sodden streets. Sloshing my way to Balzac Street in a blue mood since my shoes were next to useless, I circled around a puddle and saw an oblong piece of wet yellow cardboard lying on the tarseal.

I wiped off the water to discover a completely empty piece of cardboard with a printed I.D. letterhead from the Lamp Factory in Kis-Pest. One the bottom corner was a perfect imprint of a blue-coloured official stamp while the previous owner's personal details had been washed away. The Lamp Factory, everyone knew, actually made bullets while another establishment in Kis-Pest, disguised as a chocolate factory, produced grenades.

Nevertheless, I put this 'find' in my wallet. It could be useful. Continuing on, I found that Ali's shop was an empty shell. Near the western railway terminal and shunting yards, it had not taken a direct hit from the bombers but the blasts had blown out the windows.

Settling Jews in yellow-starred houses close to strategic targets so the Allies wouldn't bomb them, being friends of the West and all that, didn't work. Bombs were going to land whether or not there was a Star of David for eagle-eyed pilots at 20,000 feet in cloud. So much for poor Ali's workshop while missing the headquarters of Dieter Wesenmeyer, the Commander of German Forces in Budapest near the Therez Boulevard terminal. This was a pity. I'd seen a lot of kommandos moving in and out of there, along with big shots such as Krumej, Eichmann and Winkelmann, jackals whose 'Night and Fog' slogan was a euphemism for the untimely deaths of millions.

Back home I took out my find and with the electric iron, plus a cloth on top, dried both sides. This was a success and even had a surface sheen which made it look like a new card. I scrawled on my own details. That night I showed it to Captain Schmidt.

"I've got a job in the lamp factory," I said, delighted that he did not see the card was dated 1942. He wasn't pleased and told me how dangerous the place was.

"You could lose your life working with volatile substances as well as being targeted by the bombers. However, the identity papers will save you from call-ups since you are in top priority war production. It was nice to know he cared. On paper, I was now a 'machinist' - an important job in the metal trade. I should have been in trouble if I had to work such a machine.

I needed to keep on the move. It helped to preserve my life. On Saturdays and Sundays, I would play the drums for a pianist at the Breitner dance school on the second floor of a building opposite the Girls' High School on Kertes Street.

Was this safe?

No. Arrow Cross raiding parties blocked the entrances and worked over everyone.

The pianist looked like a battered boxer with a crooked smile but he was a superb musician. We performed on a rostrum a metre above the dance floor and had to present our papers like the dancing couples although ours were scrutinised less thoroughly. On one occasion a thug stood below me and in front of my bass drum. We got to chatting about his arduous work.

"Getting harder every day to pick up someone on the run," he confided. "They're becoming more sophisticated." I agreed which he obviously appreciated and gave me a knowing smile. If only he knew.

The exceptions to these raids were the live theatres and concert halls, as if the hunters still had some grudging respect for culture. Or, more likely, they had been warned not to interfere with the big brass who might be embarrassed in such places. I had managed to get into several shows *gratis* by virtue of my fireman's uniform but I could not pull the same trick to obtain a ticket to the main concert hall, the Vigado or Happy Hall of Budapest. You had to book ahead for every programme. I had to purchase a seat for my favourites, the duo concert pianists Feher Gyorgy and Solymosi Lulu, at the 2pm performance on 19 March 1944. Two extra large Bosendorfer grand pianos faced each other and the playing style and artistry was spectacular.

That night we heard strange rumblings. Pretty soon we discovered they were the rank-and-file of General Winkelmann's S.S. units surrounding Budapest with their Tiger tanks. They met no resistance. Access in and out of the city was blocked, bridges and the local radio station was under German control. All shops and public utilities were closed by order, machine gun nests suddenly sprang up on every major street corner manned by the S.S.

Checkmate. We were virtual prisoners in our own capital.

The Astoria Hotel became the Gestapo Headquarters and the Hungarian Jackal Peter Hain set up his in the Majestic Hotel in Melinda Street. In Hungarian history, 19 March 1944 marks the darkest moment of the Twentieth Century. An infamous day of treachery.

Our Regent, the Serenissime Horthy, was still the Nation's nominal leader but the 'Occupying Forces' had turned him into a figurehead, surrounded by spies and traitors.

There was now a daytime curfew which substantially reduced the number of hours we were allowed to go outside to purchase necessities. Menacing posters were stuck on walls and we were expected to wear new armbands with even more incomprehensible meanings.

There was one compensation. These things added another layer of cloth, and free too, for those suffering from the intense cold. The Waffen S.S. directed traffic and patrolled the streets, demanding I.D. papers while the Sonderkommando was run by a bunch of psychopaths with unlimited power under Adolf Eichmann's deputy, Hermann Krumey.

The Arrow Cross finally got their official headquarters at No. 60 Andrasy Street, a large grey building on the corner of Eotvos Street. This had been the District Six Police Post and was already infamous for the tortures inflicted there on socialist or communist sympathisers. Andrasy was actually a beautiful boulevard lined with elm trees on both sides and possessing a wonderful cultural and political history. No longer.

Those who passed through these gates rarely emerged again. *Vae victis*, woe to the conquered. From this day on, no one had the courage to walk past on the No. 60 side. No one promenaded among the rows of trees.

The Arrow Cross had now gained full legal status under the Secretary for the Interior, Endre Bela, and his henchman Baky Laslo.

A police state within a police state.

To assist them, the head of the Hungarian Secret Service, Interior Minister Peter Hain lent the eager support of his Jendarmes as well as the 'Small Soldiers' so that the Germans and these barbaric Hungarians could initiate a programme of wholesale liquidation of property.

Reichsfuhrer-S.S.Himmler sent along the vicious Kurt Becher to acquire the assets and estates of Jewish magnates. The huge Manfred Weiss heavy industry complex was still producing war *materiel* as was the Goldberg textile factory and many other large concerns. With the help of the S.S., these luminaries were blackmailed and, behind the scenes, our own cohorts gave unconditional support whenever the plunderers wanted it. Eichmann's efforts made sure that the cattle wagons were full when they rolled towards Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Dachau and other camps for 're-settlement', or the one-way trip to the shower rooms.

One of these transports took my father to Mauthausen. From a prisoner who, by some miracle, had managed to return, I learned that Father had been regarded as a good, robust worker in the quarry where he had been labouring. I also met his lady friend by accident on King Street in May 1945 and she told me that the German guards, for their own perverted amusement, had thrown him down the quarry's high cliff face. In later years I visited the place where his body was smashed on the huge boulders.

Father had what was regarded as typical Jewish features - the hooked nose, full lips and dark, wavy hair. He had been picked up by the S.S. who had coerced the Jewish Council with the threat of their own deaths if they failed to provide a certain number of people each day for 'collection'. *Sauve qui peut*. In such situations, you have to be honest with yourself even though the guilt remains afterwards. The sadness for Hungary was that the war effort took away so much manpower for front-line fighting while quislings were willing to pillage for their thirty pieces of silver. The Germans laughed contemptuously as they watched the scavengers fighting over every petty thing.

Thanks to the bomb

Nazi decision-makers left no doubt that Hungary was going to see bloody last-ditch stands in 1944. Coal-scuttle helmets suddenly became busy stringing special wires across the Danube river bridges. There was enough dynamite to blow the Russian tanks sky high in the sort of *Gotterdammerung* that would have had Wagner leaping about in glee.

The lads at the fire station could only watch the unfolding tragedy. Fire duty was becoming increasingly dangerous. Delayed-fuse bombs, dropped to catch people like us on the job, meant I had to give my comrades first aid. I had made a pouch for two thermos flasks to carry hot and cold water

to wash my hands and the victims' wounds as well as offer water to patients. One of my best inventions was to hitch this to my belt while on duty, along with a small towel. Under my greatcoat, I also loaded my overalls with all sorts of things. My stay at Rokus Hospital had brought me back to health and I was young and eager again.

In early April 1944, the RAF and USAAF were frequent and efficient in hitting their targets. On one sunny morning, the Pest oil refinery went up and belched out black filth. My fire brigade was called out to save workers' houses but there was little we could do when the flimsy buildings had caved in from the blast.

I spotted a large, half-buried black cylinder in the ground. A bomb, then a posse of cock-feathered Gendarmes emerged from the rubble, bayonets menacing and trigger-fingers itchy.

"Who are you!" Bloodstained, I showed my Red Cross box and brassard. The half-witted leader would not accept my *bona fides*.

"You will come with us for identification!" a sergeant commanded. Authority was more important than Humanity.

"Look," I argued. "My Commander is just around the corner. He will identify me. Besides, I've got my papers here." Out came the serendipitous I.D. which he glanced at then pocketed without reading properly. After a burst of foul expletives, he pressed his bayonet into my stomach.

"Now, move, or else!" They herded into a nearby school house with other prisoners where we had to stand facing the wall, hands above our heads and legs apart. We were body searched and our belongings removed to the floor behind us. We waited a long time, leaning with our hands high up against the wall before a grunt advised that it was appropriate to turn around. By now, my legs were very tired as I had been on the go since early morning with little food.

"You are here to be identified," said the sergeant in a cold, hushed tone.

"When I call your name, you must step forward." Then he raised his voice. "Before that, all of you will remove your trousers and pull down your underpants."

This damned fixation had with inspecting other people's bollocks would sideline me for special attention. Two were taken out and shot as deserters from the front, men who had families to support. Twelve were released, leaving two gorillas on either side of me. The sergeant looked me over slowly.

"A Jew, aren't you?" the sergeant began and then hit me across the face with his shovel-like hand. I crashed into the brick wall behind, hitting the back of my head. The gorillas hauled me to my feet. He went through my belongings.

"First Aid kit box, two flasks with water, one pair of scissors, one knife, one torch, one mirror." Then he stopped.

"How do you use these items?" I stumbled out my explanations.

"And this?" He held up my torch with its strong light.

"I search dark places for victims trapped in the rubble,"

"Do you use mirror this often?"

"Only to find out if there is life left in the victims. It shows if a small amount of moisture appears on the surface."

"You're a dirty, lying, filthy Jew!"

He indicated a period of roughing-up after which I could not stand. One of them kept prodding me with his bayonet while the other hauled me up by my hair.

My false name and I.D. papers meant I was a treacherous Jew who had been lurking around the bombed oil refinery. My instruments were suitable for signalling the overhead enemy.

This was pure Franz Kafa.

He charged me with 'treason against the Hungarian nation' and sentenced me to be shot.

"Do you acknowledge these charges?" he demanded.

"No. It is a barefaced lie..."

A rifle blow took away my breath and the gorillas dragged me by the ankles to the doorway where the two deserters already lay in their own blood. Suddenly a huge, booming blast lifted me into the air

and hurled me some metres away. Had I been shot with a powerful bullet but why was so much dust and debris floating about?

It seemed to be late afternoon. I staggered to one knee to see that the schoolhouse had collapsed. One of my executioners had a bayonet stuck right through his belly while the other lay not far away minus head and arms. Someone above had obviously given a judgement in my favour. Not my time, you see.

Nothing remained alive around me. I used my remaining strength to disappear as quickly as possible. Sunset came quickly with seeping cold. An 8pm curfew meant I had to be off the street so I crawled into a bombed-out house close to the shattered school and collapsed on a pile of bricks. Above me, Castor and Pollux, my twin stars, would keep guard over me - a Gemini and one of their good neighbours.

Next morning, I found a late snow had covered me, except for my face. Looking up through the roofless building, I could see low, velvety clouds which I should have liked to touch. Then, as I moved, I could feel bruises everywhere. My face was terribly puffy and my ribs ached. Yet I *was* alive. Not to die is to be reborn, says the French proverb. Very fitting.

Hunger pangs quickly dispelled any flirtation with Gallic philosophy. Without even a *filler* in my pocket and in hostile territory, I realised that no one would help. I hitched a ride on the rear coupling of a tram to the Town Hall where, unnoticed, I slipped into the artist's basement workshop. There were enough paint-spattered overalls and old shoes to give me a change of clothing plus a decent wash in the bathroom. Mercifully, there was also a chunk of dry bread.

Sleeping in one corner, I was wakened some time later by a powerful shake of the shoulder. My brother Joseph.

"Believe me or not," I explained. "A time-delayed bomb saved my life!" Used to my hair-raising activities, he laughed.

"You've more lives than the proverbial cat," but there were tears in his eyes.

He said he would escort me to the Urania movie theatre cellar. Under German UFA control, it was centrally-heated and he felt I could be safe there.

In our paint-spattered garb, along with pails and brushes, we took the tram, descended and approached uniformed hoodlums who ignored us. During that journey, I had seen frightened travellers displaying their yellow stars. Fear was *not* going to strike me down.

I dried myself in front of the radiator while Joseph went to the Szabo family to say that I had been shot and he would collect my belongings. They were upset but one did not involve oneself too deeply in the affairs of others. Now I needed a new home. The Town Hall and Urania Theatre could only suffice for a short time.

Cleaned up and in my painter's overall, I reported to the fire station to retrieve the *alternative* set of ID papers and money in my greatcoat pocket. They were a decent lot. No one had touched anything and the boss let me have a day or so off. Colleagues gave me a hearty slap on the back as well as new First Aid gear and, within two days the news that a bombed-out fireman needed accommodation, brought me a vacant bed. On the third floor in a Lujza Street apartment on the edge of the Eighth District, Osvath Nane was a hard-up war widow with four adult boys and a bed by the wall. I turned up promptly.

Short, tubby and over fifty, she smelled of onions but she took in the nice fireman, even offering to cook and wash my clothes. The rent was acceptable and, although place was not as good as the Szabo's place, it seemed safe.

By late afternoon all four sons had arrived home with good humour and hunger. I introduced myself without a twitching a muscle. They all wore the Arrow Cross armband and carried home their equipment! So many hand guns and grenades. They were a roaming wolf pack of the most vicious kind and their conversation was entirely about the number of victims they had mowed down daily and what loot they had taken to their headquarters.

Am I in the right place? I asked myself with a big knot in my belly.

Play my cards right and I should be in the safest haven bar Heaven.

That evening we did play card games for money and with great gusto. Every hand ended with loud applause. These fellows had no qualms about their lifestyle and, by pretending to be a keen gambler but losing often, I became popular. Every night when not on duty, we repeated the circus and the dunderheads were overjoyed to think how much they could milk me. The air raid sirens would wail frequently yet, while the rest of the building trembled in the cellar, we played on. Perhaps this laughter in the face of danger that kept us alive.

Joseph was also not far away. His boss had hired a bunker where other movie billboards could be painted and my anxious brother occasionally visited me before returning to live in his safer quarters underground.

Did I say Lujza Street was safe?

Fate or the Almighty must have seen to it that I should be on duty all one day and be so tired that I went straight to bed without a meal. I must have switched off immediately, for when I woke I was looking up at the sky. Was this a joke played on me by the Arrow Cross lads?

Sitting up in bed, I was faced with a surreal scene. Nothing remained around the bed but a small strip of floor. I lay on top of two mushroom-like columns while the rest of the house had been shorn off down to cellar level by a bomb blast. The three-storey building opposite had vanished and, on both sides of my room, there were gaping holes. Not a soul was to be seen.

The staircase was in ruins. I would have to negotiate a rickety passage then climb to reach the dangling remains of the stairs. Every move would be risky but what bloody good luck! Another attack on my life yet not a scratch.

Where to now? All my belongings had gone, except for clothing under my mattress.

Imagine me standing on my bed and dressing in the open air while on view to all and sundry. All part of *la comedie humaine*, Alexandre Dumas might have observed. Not quite so funny when you're freezing off your privates three storeys high!

The best thing was to visit Mother at Forrest Street.

"You're still alive?" she said in disbelief. Apparently Joseph had taken her to the bombed house and they had seen no one among the ruins.

"Surely you have a Guardian Angel," she remarked.

He/she/it had a pretty odd sense of humour.

It was necessary to visit the Fire Chief. He had the report on the Lujza Street house thinking I was a goner like the rest of the Osvath family.

He asked for a report on the whole affair and issued me with another First Aid box, a second-hand uniform and a steel helmet. Since one of my colleagues had been hospitalized, he let me use his bunk in the dormitory. Mind you, this meant twenty-four hour alertness plus a two-tiered bunk but we were far too tired to bother about anyone's snoring.

I confided my part-time activities to the chief, explaining that I kept order in the food queues and then distributed the 'gifts' after each day's duty.

"I'm not a black marketer," I emphasised and he gave me his blessing, promising to help if needed. Then the order came for segregation in the food queues. Anyone with yellow star was likely to be thrown out of the line with curses and taunts. They might be lucky to join a special queue but when ten Gentiles to two Israelites were being served, it was a long wait with no guarantees. Sadly, this alternative line dwindled quickly as fewer Jews were permitted to live in the area.

My army helmet gave me a certain authority and Robert, with his commanding presence, kept good order with me. Roaming Kiss-Katona boys and Arrow Cross thugs often turned up. It was politic to allow them to enter the shop ahead of everyone else, which pleased them greatly. In fact, food and other shortages were causing riots in the ever-lengthening lines.

The Germans made sure that their own men were fed first, while surpluses were carted away on wagons to Germany. Our peasants had become inventive in avoiding the raiding parties and, naturally,

the propagandists made good use of this fact. It was so easy to blame greedy and unpatriotic village cousins who were depriving urban dwellers of their rightful necessities.

Numbers of Budapest workers lived in caves on the city outskirts. Sullen, hungry and in bands, they descended on the streets like jackals and soon became the mainstay of the Arrow Cross, gaining uninhibited power. The Germans stood back saying that they would deal with such barbarians later. Wisely, I let them jump the queues.

These fellows also used the Nazi salute except that “Heil Hitler!” became “Long live Szalasi!”
Not as far as I’m concerned.

The upraised hand signified we were in the excrement but I could hardly tell them that.

Emergency

Matters were getting worse. Even the Romanians had left the Axis umbrella and, with the Rusksies snarling along our borders, Hungary was in chaos. Yet the *sonderkommandos* were working flat out. A shortage of cattle trucks meant that victims now had to walk. Yellow Star houses emptied one after another and a long line of Jews were herded through the streets, leaving a trail of dead bodies behind. The weak were shot. Those whose faces displeased the monsters also received a bullet. Small children wandered the pavements enveloped in a macabre symphony of weeping, screaming and gunshots.

One morning, Mother arrived out of breath at the Fire Station, having run at least a kilometre. She was badly shaken and, after a glass of water, she told me Joseph was in trouble.

“His boss has lost the lease to the bunker,” she said, eyes bulging fearfully.

“He has shifted to his studio on Paulay Ede Street.”

This was opposite the Opera House and a yellow star had been painted on it to persuade the Allied bombers not to demolish it. Of course, many Gentiles gathered there to avoid the bombs and my stupid brother had shifted in to paint for his boss. It was also a target for the anti-Semite re-settlement gangs who were clearing out all the nearby houses. I had to get him out before Mother lost her sanity.

As the Fire Chief gave me the day off, I dressed in my ragged uniform and steel helmet, steadied my nerves and strode towards Andrassy Boulevard. Reaching a heavy closed door, I eventually persuaded a fat female *haz mester* to open it after incessant bell ringing. I thrust my ID card in her face.

“I am from Commander Hain and must escort Joseph Boros. We know he has his studio here.” My tone was cold and severe. “You must take me to his room immediately. The matter is urgent. Understand?” She asked no questions.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she said tearfully. “I’ve always given good service. Commander Hain can rest assured I shall do everything to help him.”

She led the way to Joseph’s third floor studio and I kept up the pretence with heavy blows on his door. He opened it quickly but before he could register surprise I winked at him and spat out some expletives that would have stopped a bull in its tracks. He was smart enough to get the message.

“Leave your gear!” I commanded. “You won’t need it where you’re going. Walk ahead of me. There’s no point in trying to escape. Every unit has your picture.”

The frightened woman looked ready to faint.

“Such a nice boy,” she said timidly. “He deserves better.”

“We’ll find out just how nice he really is,” I said menacingly.

Joseph was doing well too. His head hung down on his chest as we walked to the street door. The woman unlocked it, obviously glad to see the back of me and I saluted her.

Once we reached Andrassy Boulevard, we began to laugh at my courage and her fright. It seemed that our *grande charade* was over for the day, but not so. We crossed into a small street where I used to buy leather. In front of us, a kilometre-long queue blocked our way to Elizabeth Street. Eight deep, a procession of old men, women and children, all newly-evicted Jews, shuffled to their doom, helped along with generous applications of the rifle butt by their escorts.

Joseph and I stood there for a few minutes but even that was unwise. When the next armed thug was near enough, I asked him to part the line to let us through. Tapping my helmet, I said, “We have to

go on duty.” With curses and bayonet, he parted the way. I saluted elegantly, he beamed in return and I eventually piloted Joseph safely to Mother, who could hardly believe our tale.

However, she had a problem. Where to put Joseph? He was quite naive in some ways and should not really be left to his own devices. He would have to occupy a few square feet on the floor of the dog box.

After circumstances forced the dissolution of my jazz band, I had placed my guitar on two jam jars on top of Mother’s wardrobe.

“As long as this stays perched up there,” I said to the rest of the family, “we are going to survive.”

Prophetic words.

A major part of the building had been bombed, mortar fire blew the roof off our single-storey home but the guitar was to stay put until the Russians borrowed it at the point of a gun. It seemed that, at least in the German war, we were to remain together. Joseph’s presence must have strained Mother’s patience and resources to the limit but he was in loving hands.

Back at the fire station, I discovered the Chief had ordered one of his older men in full uniform to accompany Robert and me when we went on our crowd control duty. This made us so much more respectable. I also began to notice that certain elderly policemen were to be seen patrolling other queues. Was it coincidence or had our initiative been copied?

Russians

As the Eastern Front was pushed steadily nearer, Russian long-range guns pounded Budapest incessantly. Red-starred dive bombers with cannon on their wings roared overhead and sprayed everything that moved. Under such constant wear and tear, our fire-fighting equipment was almost useless. The canvas hoses leaked, spare parts were unobtainable and the hydrants were either blasted out of the ground or unable to retain the worn couplings when the water pressure came on. As a result, our brigade was assigned duties such as clearing rubble and searching for bodies.

In wartime, death comes quickly. I roamed the streets on my own to give First Aid to whoever I could reach. On Andrassy Boulevard, I saw a middle-aged couple walking past the Opera House. Suddenly a dive bomber opened fire. The man had the left side of his face torn off. His wife tried to stem the flow of blood and kept repeating, “Please don’t leave me.” He was still on his feet and talking to her when I got to him. Then, within five seconds, he slumped to the ground. I could do nothing for him or his widow but I said I would call an ambulance.

My former girlfriend, ‘the little mouse’, lived in a five-storey apartment building beside the movie theatre on Nagymezo Street. Dressed in my uniform and steel helmet, I thought I would see if she needed anything. Eventually I found her among a number of people sheltering in the cellar. Not much older, yet wiser than last time, I enjoyed a happy but brief reunion. Then the courtyard was bombed, the entrance to the air raid shelter partially blocked and the staircase collapsed.

I scrambled out, looking for survivors. In the first ground-floor apartment I discovered Captain Schmidt, the Cyklops Garage Commandant, in civilian clothing and in hiding. A shrapnel wound in his head bled profusely. I managed to wrap it with strips from his shirt and iodine. I left him with some aspirin as a pain-killer but, before I departed, he asked me for a piece of bread. I was happy to oblige and said I would return later.

In the ruined room next to his, there were two middle-aged spinsters and their mother. This was much more difficult. Covered in ash and dust, each had limbs missing and were in hysterical shock. Their mother lay dully dying beneath the small, overturned iron stove, her arms and legs blown off and embers from the fire smouldering on what remained of her dress. I left to try to find help and managed to stop an army truck but they would do nothing. Since the Marko Street Ambulance Brigade headquarters was only two kilometres away, they advised me to grab the first vehicle that came in.

Some while later, I directed one towards these casualties. There was a doctor aboard with enough gear to offer some assistance but finding a hospital with spare beds was a problem. When we arrived, the mother had expired and her two daughters were sitting in the ashes alongside, still in a state of

shock. This sort of gut-wrenching scene does not easily leave one's mind, even after fifty years. I went back with bread and a jar of plum jam for my girlfriend and Captain Schmidt, a small lifesaver for them both. At least these two I had been able to help - one a Jewess, the other no longer an enemy but a victim.

During one of my excursions to the same cellar I was introduced to the brother of a duke who lodged in a tiny cubicle used to store coal. He was so emaciated he could hardly talk and others begged me to bring some food to him. It seemed I was now treasured by those who would otherwise have wanted a Jew-boy dead.

Ironic.



In modern European history, 15 October 1944 remains one of the dirtiest dates in the Twentieth Century.

Serenissime Horthy's attempt to get out of the war was blocked by Allied supreme commanders who gave *carte blanche* first to the Germans and then the Russians. Poor Horthy would lose his remaining son at Mauthausen and he would become a hostage himself. Everything fell either into German hands or to our own ruffians.

Horthy's declaration of an Armistice was read out over Radio Kossuth on 15 October at 1 pm. Then two Arrow Cross men, Omelka and Deak, smashed in the heavy station door with a hand grenade and took over. The guard and the broadcasters escaped but the transmitter at Lakihegy near the town of Tokol fell into enemy hands at 4 pm and, in between times, military marches thumped out through the air waves.

At 4.15 pm, the first propaganda message came from the Szalasi crowd. The Atheneum Press (the national press) was seized by General von den Bach, some 18,000 automatic weapons were distributed to the Arrow Cross by General Berregffy while others such as Kovacs and Vajna initiated house-to-house searches and arrests. A carefully-orchestrated anarchy was allowed to break loose.

At last, and under duress, Horthy gave in. The Germans had promised that his son Nicky would be released if their wishes were granted but the boy was shot on a small mound outside the Mauthausen camp.

History books may defend the Hungarian Nazis or condemn Hungarian collaboration.

If you were there at the time, you knew differently.

At 6 am on 16 October Horthy assented. At 9.30 pm the following day we heard Szalasi proclaim Horthy as a shameless traitor to Hungary as well as a hireling of the Jews and the Western Powers. We were informed that he had been taken into custody at 5.58 a.m. by Wesenmayer, the S.S. Commander in Budapest. Then, two minutes later, Obersturmführer Otto Skorzeny (who had captured Horthy's son) arrived with Tiger tanks and closed off access to the Castle. It had been planned in fine detail to subjugate all those who objected to the Nazi occupation.

Hitler's request for Budapest to form his last bastion against the Russians had been fulfilled. He knew that many Hungarian collaborators actually believed in his wonder weapon which would turn the war his way.

Meanwhile the circus continued within the new Right Wing Unity Government who took the oath to Szalasi as 'Leader of the Nation' on 4 November. Foreigners' safe-conduct papers were declared invalid, passports were confiscated and a particular name came to the forefront with the Jewish 'policy'. Vajna Endre, along with Baky Laszlo, was to create the Budapest 'ghetto programme' by enclosing 70,000 in the Elizabeth District with 33,000 dispersed in yellow-star buildings throughout Budapest. Lack of transport meant that several thousand would be butchered but that was of little consequence.

Then came the crack-brained scheme of Generals Pfeiffer and Wildenbruch to blow up the ghetto in the sort of conflagration you could see in a Hieronymous Bosch painting. They gave orders to wire the areas with dynamite but wiser heads saw that the risk was too great since there were so many cellars

and underground dwellings. The explosions would create a catastrophic chain of collapse and Budapest was likely to go down like a house of cards.

So much for Hitler's 'Fortress City in the East'.

The plan was subsequently changed to one of denying the occupants access to food. On 10 December 1944, the Arrow Cross moved in to guard the entrances to the walled-in ghetto where over 100,000 were now forced into living quarters designed for a twentieth that number.

This was the shame of Budapest. Often four people slept in a bed. Nearly three hundred bodies crammed into apartments meant for fifteen. It was little wonder that, in the four months up to April 1945, some 26,000 had died and were buried within the walls of what was our version of Dante's Inferno.

Nor were we oblivious to this in the Fire Station half a kilometre away, enduring 'visits' from all sorts of thugs. However, being in uniform, we were not molested although we had to line up several times to be looked over for anything in the shape of a hooked nose. There were none and our papers were above suspicion. It was just as well that Gabor was not commanded to lower his pants!

The new administration seemed well-satisfied with its 'cleansing', having assigned the Gendarmerie to concentrate on deportations and allowing a free hand to the roaming bands of Arrow Cross.

But I was grieving. The news had come on 4 November via an unhappy fireman that Robert had been taken along with many others. He had been shot and thrown into the Danube River. I was now the last remaining Musketeer and this hit me very hard.

*** OBITUARY FOR ROBERT ***

Ever since I learned of the murder of my best friend and comrade-in-arms, I have lived in turmoil. I had lost part of myself, someone who was courageous and adventurous, a bohemian and intellectual with a lot to offer. His short life enriched all those who had known him.

My companion in the fire brigade, he had worked to save what he could from the destruction, including lives and folk in shock and disbelief. One of our mates had seen him carried off by gangsters from his parents' home in the Pozsonyi Street 'safe house' to the river bank and had heard the shots. All who were with him floated down to some unknown destination and the so-called 'Blue Danube' changed from grey to red.

Did you know that those guns had been blessed by clergy?
Oh, yes, they were and the Franciscan Mass which ended with the *Te Deum* was to thank God for assistance in wasting away the Jews.

Within our so-called religious nation
few were shocked by the coercions of the Arrow Cross.
To the faithful it was business as usual.

Robert,
you saved the lives of others and lost yours.
Among many nameless
martyrs, you are one. There is no statue to remember you. As the last of the Three Musketeers, I have vowed to keep your memory alive. I have fulfilled this intention because one of my sons carries your name as a tribute to a hero.

In a way your life has not been wasted
and, through this form of remembrance,
I salute you.
I realise that life must go on and I am comforted
by Francois Villon's lines

in *Testament*:
'a mournful man, do not grieve so much
nor show such sorrow.'

Illustration 15A, Arrow Cross plaque



Many of these victims had been Jews or ‘undesirables’ who had been shot on the edge of the river bank, then fell backwards to drown in the swift waters.

I was assigned to do maintenance on what was left of our depleted fire-fighting equipment. I’m sure the Fire Chief knew I had a false identity and he was not letting me out of his sight. Within our station perimeter I was allowed out to just a few shop queue supervisions accompanied by two older professional firemen in full uniform. I certainly felt more secure and I noticed that shops now had similar guards to ours.

On the Eastern front the fighting was very one-sided. German forces kept themselves ‘tactically disengaged’ with the enemy yet, since the Roumanians had joined the Russians, the cyrillic was on the wall for the Wehrmacht and its only ally. This much was obvious from the way the Russian conquerors as well as the Nazi hordes were carting away everything movable.

The Russians had already occupied part of Hungary and, in Debrecen to the east of Budapest in the great steppe-lands, these invaders stitched together a Hungarian Provisional Government. There were bitter tank skirmishes between the two great rivers Danube and Tisza while, on the Plain of Hungary, there were heavy losses on both sides. Yet the maniac Germans still talked about the coming ‘Victory’ with their ‘wonder weapon’.

Our earlier and forbidden BBC radio broadcasts down in our bomb shelters informed us that in the Ruhr Valley the RAF had bounced a bomb which turned German hopes into pipe dreams. However, this had not stopped them from blowing up our wonderful Danube bridges, the long earthquake rumbles cutting Pest off from Buda and the western part of Hungary. Yet, there was method in their madness. They left untouched one railway bridge on the Buda side in order to carry off their loot to the Fatherland.

Russian long-range gunners were around Monor town some 24 kilometres from Budapest. You can duck away easily enough from the drone of a noisy aeroplane but it’s much harder to avoid whistling shells and their dreadful shrapnel. Once you hear the whine, you are okay. It’s gone past you. It’s the ones you don’t hear. You listen for the first fall of shot, knowing that the second would tell you roughly where the guns were. I soon became accustomed to walking on the opposite side of the street and diving for cover when the Russian stuff flew about. It was quite a game but you got used to it. As Jewish saying goes “there are two possibilities: you live or you die.” I chose to live but the days of human suffering seemed never-ending. Even a miserable minute could seem a long time.

We became hardened to it, going through the motions while close to mental and physical collapse.

Illustration 16, Image ‘in uniform’



The wearing of some sort of uniform was essential for surviving Arrow Cross and Kiss-Katona raids and searches. Not that it always worked for Gabor Bain.

Under Siege

By December 1944 the Soviets had occupied most of Hungary and were on the outskirts of Budapest. The remaining German Army units and our own traitors felt it necessary to fight from house to house. Most notable was the resolve of the Gendarmerie who shot the Soviet parliamentarians at the city boundary as they came to negotiate the terms of surrender. Internationally, that was seen as jolly unsporting and a dastardly breaking of the Geneva Convention.

We had our own Stalingrad.

Multi-barrelled Katyushas bombarded the city non-stop with rockets while the long-range guns and planes rested. I happened to be at home with two loaves of bread when a mortar bomb took part of our roof off but no one was injured and the guitar stayed where I'd put it. However it was winter and we had to repair the damage quickly. With some help, I borrowed tiles from another ruin and, in a few hours, had the roof back in service again.

This was close to Christmas 1944 and Mother wanted me around. Our apartment block was full of Arrow Cross thugs and informers. It puzzled me why Joseph and I had not been taken but I assumed that our earlier altercation with the two women collecting church taxes had something to do with it. Our row had been the subject of discussion for months revealing a sort of "good on you" sympathy for our stand against the Church. That particular circus had not been forgotten and I guess that other predators left us alone since we appeared to be good, waspish Gentiles.

In a way, we were lucky to live in such a 'sheltered' spot although in the mouth of the tiger. Folk like me were even more on the razor's edge. On 19 December at the fireman's morning parade, the Fire Chief read out a paper from his Headquarters.

"We've been told the unit will be dispersed," he said. "We do not know how our being in uniform will be viewed by the Occupying Power. We should remain close by our homes and be ready for service as circumstances permit." That day, we departed in sombre mood, leaving behind equipment, furniture and personal gear as if we might actually return.

And yet, it was a wise decision. It protected those men worth taking on again after the tragedy ended.

My 1944 Christmas Eve was a quiet affair. We ate a modest hot meal beneath the meagre light of a smoky, smelly kerosene lamp since the electricity had been cut off days earlier. Mother had only a small, cast-iron stove which stuttered along on wet wood. The stuff was sold by the kilogramme from a cellar opposite us but the bastard merchant kept the water hose on it to increase the weight. We had borrowed kindling from wrecked houses and, after numerous attempts, managed to get the fire going.

In the distance, a few boomers went off but here, in the city, we were left to celebrate without much intrusion. If we had dreamed of a White Christmas, we certainly had one and even the ruined buildings looked romantic and picturesque. We were five people crammed into a small space with little to eat and few possessions. Yet, somehow, we were still alive although basic food supplies had run very low. The shops did not open for business and the once-beautiful snow became dirtier as Christmas Day wore on.

We could not be cooped up for a whole day. It would have been good if the women wanted to play cards or games but they were not into manly things. I joined the boys out on Lujza Street and kept losing but it was hilarious fun. They were real rascals - the sort that rulers and dictators need.

Officially, since I had boarded in the Lujza Street apartment block, I was permitted to search for my belongings and not be arrested as a looter. There were sacks of potatoes and flour stored in the cellar and, risking the barrage of gunfire, Joseph and I set out to see what could be salvaged. In the dim light, we found the flour was tainted but I thought Mother could make something out of it so we filled our shoulder bags with this and potatoes. We made two further trips, enough food to last us for a month. Mother had some lard while Joseph brought horse meat from the brewery stable nearby. Then we waited to be liberated by forces unknown.

The brave Arrow Cross boys had vanished from our building and it lost its oppressive, scary character. Mrs Keleman, the *haz mester*, was also lying low. Seldom would she be seen standing arms akimbo in the courtyard and castigating someone for a minor infringement. Outside, the power lines were down in the streets and boulevards, their poles broken and a short distance away, in the square, the blind eyes of burned-out trams stared at you. My heart sank at the sight of the crazy jumble of wrecked vehicles covered in dirt, rubble and severed cables. This was my beloved city, now a smoking ruin. Doomsday had arrived.

Some time earlier we had been generously informed by Herr Himmler that, *“Eastern Europe will become a German colony populated by German settlers, Slavic peoples and other slaves.”*

It now seemed that his plan to have Hungary tailored to fit the needs of the Master Race was shot to pieces. And, what of the Hungarian dream given voice in the Manifesto of our own great patriotic poet Petofi?

In English, *‘The Hungarian name will be virtuous again as it was in the past...What was tarnished by past centuries, we shall expunge.*

We swear to the Almighty that we shall never become slaves again.’

Sadly, those soldiers who were ready to liberate us were of the same people who, in 1848, had defeated us and taken us for further slavery. However, they were not exactly the same. They were Proletarians like us whose aim was to break the chains shackling us to the Feudal-Capitalistic system. Ah, what a glorious Moral Deed and no strings attached! Many Hungarians looked forward to meeting such brave harbingers of freedom.

Liberation

Occasionally we peered from behind the heavy front door and saw the scars of passing bullets, plus smoke and litter on the street. On 13 February 1945, it was confirmed that Pest had been cleared of all traces of our former Axis partner. Unfortunately, after fifty days of continuous bombardment and vicious hand-to-hand fighting, our city had suffered more damage than Stalingrad.

Here and there, fighting continued. When I ventured out to visit the fire station, I met our first Russian liberator near the corner of Tobacco Street. Under a floppy fur hat with a red star, he was stocky, well-padded and toted a gangster-type machine gun.

“Stoy!” he ordered, his finger nervous on the trigger. *“Da-way-chas.”* The gun barrel pointed at my left wrist

“Nem ertem,” (I don’t understand) I replied in in my own language and shrugged my shoulders. He went red in the face and let off a shot at my feet.

“*Yop-foye-moty.*” I did not know what he meant until he shoved up his left sleeve to reveal an armful of wrist watches. In better days, I had purchased a delicately-decorated silver watch and was now about to lose it. Then he went through my pockets and found the jazzband microphone. The bugger smashed it onto the concrete footpath in a torrent of Russian.

“*Spion,*” he said, firing off a few more rounds and followed this with more “yop-foye-moty.” Why did he say I was a spy?

“*Aah...Artyist yop-foye-moty horoshoe yop-foye-moty.*”

Apparently this meant it was okay.

“*Za-ku-rity,*” was the next monologue. Again I mimed incomprehension.

He wore a sort of jodphur that made him look as wide as he was long. He dipped a hand into a pocket and out came a handful of course brown stuff and he indicated that I should hold out my hand.

What could I do with it? Then a wad of Pravda newsprint surfaced. He tore off a good piece, filled it with the same stuff he had given me, rolled it into a long cheroot and lit it. It went off with a flash but he was so pleased and gave me a toothless grin as he puffed away. All the while, I wondered which way he was looking since his slitted eyes were badly crossed. No wonder his shot at my toes had gone astray.

He insisted on sharing his Pravda and its contents with me.

Better not to refuse. He’s got the gun.

His tobacco would have floored a bull. It certainly did for me. Being an uncorrupted non-smoker, I hit the ground alongside the broken microphone. When I came to, worried faces looked into mine. I felt rotten. My mouth was nauseatingly foul. I was unsteady and I realised that this was one consequence of ‘liberation’. What a start to a new game!

Later on we learned that the Russian High Command had given its troops free reign to loot, pillage and rape at gunpoint.

Vae victis, woe to the conquered.

Before they took to the road for the fighting, these fellows had been lubricated with generous amounts of hard grog. All part of the plan. You don’t mind death half so much when you are stupefied. The Russians had plenty of men so the individual was of little consequence. Those who chose to resist had the choice of the Political Commisar’s bullet or the enemy’s.

As a result, the Russian soldier made the most of a probably short life. Soon enough Hungarians learned what “*do-way*” (come on) meant before they relieved you of watches and other movable property. Perhaps it also had something to do with freeing us from Capitalism and the hassle of private ownership. Sadly, it was a one-way transaction.

We quickly learned that “*da-way barishnya*” meant “woman” and many of our Hungarian beauties became targets for gang rape. Females as young as twelve to the honourable age of eighty were hunted down. I was to see four well-dressed women in their twenties dragged into a van in Petofi Sandor Street. Several days later the van was still in the same spot. The women were wearing only their slippers and lay with a hole in the back of their heads.

With two sisters and a good-looking mother to protect, I hid them in the air raid shelter disguised as cripples. Through sheer luck they escaped detection. The Russian OGPU (secret police) had moved into No. 8 Forest Street and alongside our apartment block. They had the same unlimited power as our Gendarmerie and were feared by everyone.

They wore special armbands and I saw a high-ranking Russian officer kicked unconscious by an OGPU private over some minor misdemeanour. They knew no finesse. The big storehouses were looted and burned, and they encouraged criminals to join them in the free-for-all. Honest citizens were the enemy.

I went to see my old leather workshop on Museum Boulevard. It had been left a fire-damaged shell. Then, after I returned home, I found that our own dog-box had been emptied along with others in the

apartment block. I searched frantically for my family and learned that our “liberators” had given them three hours to move out but no hint as to where they could go.

Fortunately, Mother's quick-witted partner had located an apartment formerly occupied by a rabid Arrow Cross family which had escaped to Germany. They had run a commercial tailor's shop with the appropriate machinery on the first floor above the rascally timber merchant. The big windows no longer had glass since the siege and I managed to find enough fabric and blankets to nail to the frames.

Among the many rooms, we discovered a kitchenette with an iron stove. I hunted up coat hangers and other bits of wood to start a fire and begin a meal. We also found rolls of commercial white wrapping paper. As a leather worker, I had learned how to make glue and this came in handy. The musty flour that Mother could not use was mixed into a paste and brushed on the paper. That meant the blankets could be removed and, once the water had evaporated, the paper tightened over the window frames, providing sufficient light as well as insulation.

As a special luxury, we now had our own water tap in the kitchen. However, there was still the need to share the toilet with four other families.

We looked forward to restarting our lives under better conditions but the Russians had other ideas. They were not only out collecting wrist watches but also slaves. We swiftly discovered a new word, “*gulag*”.

For the Germans it had been “work camp”; for the Russians it was “*gulag*”. The Kremlin had demanded a slave quota to be met but, in the first batch, only a hundred and ten thousand prisoners were taken. More were collected from among those who had survived everything else. Many were butchered by the roadside after Buda was taken on 13 February 1945 and, before the last German occupation troops left Hungary at St Gothard on 4 April, many more were to die from various causes.

‘Csoborbol-vodorbe estunk’

(from bad to worse)

Food-processing factories, including the municipal bakery, had fallen into Russian hands. In an apparent show of generosity, army trucks stopped in various parts of the city to give away bread *from our own reserves*.

A couple of *davajniks* would descend from the cab to entertain with a battered piano accordion and song. Lots of stuff about Poljuska and Katyusha, obviously their favourite women, rendered in a tortured type of *castrato*. Then would come something called “Midnight in Moscow” and an amazing sort of Cossack dance.

This was the Russian version of the old Roman ploy of bread-and-circuses but it left one wondering what evil lurked behind it. Mongols, Uzbeks, Tatars, Turkmen, Kirgiz, Kazaks had arrived from their isolation behind the Ural Mountains and made the most of their visit to the West. We soon learned what that meant.

A log between two posts over a ditch formed their latrine. Our modern French water closets with a cistern and long chain confused them. They would hide stolen food in the bowl or wash fish in it and wonder why it had disappeared when they flushed. To them, the toilet was a “*zabreanyee masine*”- a stealing machine. The poor *haz mesters* also had the problem of drains blocked by great wads of whatever pages of ‘Pravda’ had not been used to roll cigarettes.

In three days of pillage and looting, these barbarians smashed in shop windows with their rifle butts and paid particular attention to the *drogeria* (chemist shops), drinking eau de cologne, spreading toothpaste on their bread and doing unheard of things with cosmetics, skin lotions and other items.

The “New Order” was turning out to be worse than the German deviousness.

In the Peace Agreement, Hungary had to pay a reparation of \$US300 million to the Soviet Union. That was on paper. Unofficially the Russians proved to be great collectors (hence the new word “collectivization”). Khrushchev in his biography was to write ‘we behaved with them worse than the

worst colonialist did with their subject people.' He should know. He was also there with the other high-flying cadres. Poor Hungary. Our small nation seems to have been a thorn in the flesh of the Germans and Russians.

Strategically important geographical position? More like well-chewed meat in a sandwich of black bread.

At the end of March 1946, I was imprisoned by the liberators in the timber merchant's wet cellar with some hundreds of others who had been scooped up on the street by a Russian patrol.

There was no sanitation or water. No place to lay my head. I thought if I could drill a hole through the musty ceiling, I could haul myself up into the wine shop and, above that, make a new home. I asked a few if they liked the idea of going to a gulag in Siberia. No one was in favour.

"We have to move fast. And quiet. Tomorrow is too late." Outside the rickety door, a guard stood on duty with a fixed bayonet.

Escape

I had become used to looking down on this cellar when the horse and cart stopped to shoot its load of firewood down the narrow chute in the wall. The door was a rusty iron, two-winged one about twenty millimetres thick. One side was hinged to a gudgeon and, from the other, protruded a heavy welded hasp.

At the end of each day, the merchant would slap on a sturdy padlock and trot off to his home on the cart. He knew how badly people needed his firewood since long queues formed as soon as the cart arrived. We paid as if he was dispensing gold not wet wood and had to put up with his crudity.

My bed was four metres above his cellar door so I knew what the lout was up to. Never sober, his expletives flew even louder when he was angry.

That March morning, after the night curfew was lifted, a tremendous explosion of invectives accompanied the arrival of the creaking cart. His premises had been burgled and the firewood stolen. Someone had jemmied the hinges right out of the wall. Oh, what a bad deed!

He must have had some mortar on hand and it was amusing to watch him trowel it into the chipped wall and replace the hinges. After this, he let down his load which rumbled into the cellar. Swigging away at his bottle so much made him a hazard near a naked flame. I enjoyed the spectacle but had no how handy this was going to be.

We were at the mercy of the Russian OGPU with the prospect of the cattle wagon in the morning. In the dark, we were hungry, thirsty and, from one corner came the foul smell of excreta. Then another stink titillated my nostrils. The bloody guard outside lit up his *mohorka* - that awful corn-chaff mixed with horse dung. This fellow was allowed to relax. We were not. Our severe discomfort made me approach some older prisoners.

"That the mortar hasn't set hard in the wall," I whispered. "The thin layer won't stand up to a sharp jolt."

It was done in a flash. The door flew outwards and a human mass flattened the guard. He yelled and fired his rifle but, in the twilight, we fled. I'm sorry for that poor bugger and his family. The OGPU showed no mercy to anyone, including their own men.

The house opposite where we had taken up residence became busy. High-ranking OGPU men such as Beria, Shukov and Bulganin inspected the place with their advisors. One request went out for an interpreter who was ordered to find a plumber quickly.

"What for?" asked the Russian-speaking Hungarian. A heavily-medalled fellow took this man to the toilet.

'Look,' he said, "this thing has to be adjusted. When I pull the chain, the water runs so fast down that I can only soap one hand. I can't get both of them washed."

Most of these fellows had made the army a career. They were given a decent uniform and boots - the sort of thing they had never owned before - and were assured of regular meals. But we had been

invaded by a horde of primitives. To them, we were rich bourgeois. What sort of future could we look forward to?

We had been sold out by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at the Yalta Conference in February 1945.

Chapter Eight

New bosses

'Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose.'

*[The more things change,
the more they remain the same]*

About fifty metres from the main thoroughfare and opposite our home was the headquarters of the *Obedinannoe Gossudrandvennoe Politikheskoe Upravleniye* - a real tongue twister for ordinary mortals - the Russian Secret Service and Police Unit, the OGPU. Outside its front entrance, two sentries mounted guard over what appeared from our window to resemble a beehive of uniformed men.

Like Chanticleer on his dunghill, the new Russian commander of Budapest, Marshal Vorishilov, proclaimed officially that since we had been liberated from the oppressive Nazi yoke it would be necessary to re-establish order. This meant that the posters pasted on the walls were now in Russian. The threats were the same.

Self-important *haz mester* distributed leaflets which commanded that 'every resident of both sexes between the ages of 15 and 65 must appear at the gate at six in the morning to take part in urgently-needed light rebuilding tasks.'

We were to be transported to and from our allotted areas. Apparently no harm would befall us and we were to bring eating implements as a modest, warm meal would be supplied. Failure to comply would, of course, bring an appropriate punishment.

A convoy of tarpaulin-covered Red Army trucks rolled up in the morning and folk rapidly realised that 'liberated citizens' were no more than slaves.

Fortunately, being a First Aid man appointed by the Municipal Council, I was excused but soon learned the truth about being shoved into a crowded truck by barbarians whose brutal expletives and *da-vay* showed no respect for the lame, sick, old or young. The guards filled their quota and the vehicle lurched away to the bombed-out St. Matyas airfield some eighteen kilometres away. So much for the prospect of light, domestic renovation duties.

This was where Skorzeny&Company had trapped Horthy's last remaining son, Nicky, before spirited him off to Mauthausen in Austria. I became familiar with the airfield when I served as a cadet pilot in the Air Force but, initially, I saw what the Russians were doing to colonise and dominate my homeland.

Frail and often crippled men, women and girls were forced to break and cart bricks or stones in buckets and baskets to fill in the holes the Russian bombers had made in the landing strips. There was no protective clothing for such rough, unpaid work. Hands bled and injuries were frequent. Around noon, a cart rolled up with bean soup and a sliver of meat hiding inside a slice of black, soya bean bread. Then it was back to work while the slave-masters screamed, polluting the air with their stinking, Pravda-wrapped *mahorka* cigars.

Prologued by “*da-vay*” and “*yop-foye-maty*”, the harangue swelled into a symphony of rude Slavic remarks. Why did the Red Army send such grotesque characters amongst us? Simple. Constant fear keeps you in a state of subservience. The Russians had centuries of experience.

Ferocious female peasant soldiers looked much like their German counterparts in their high boots and berets, with large bosoms shored up nearly to the chin. Swearing crudely as any male in high-pitched voices, they gave the impression that the Soviets were primitives. Comrade Stalin had thought to impress us with backwoods bears like Nikita Khrushchev, Mikoyan, Suslov and Shukov rather than pleasant, good-looking women such as Plesetskaya.

All able-bodied men were called in for ‘voluntary’, meaning unpaid, service.

As a member of the re-organised Red Cross, I had to remove corpses from bombed houses to avoid an epidemic. Wearing oilskin body aprons with the Red Cross emblem on the back and front, our a six-man unit marched with shovels over our shoulders to the allocated position.

Clearing the rubble was bad enough. What lay beneath was horrendous. Limbs, torsos and other body parts had to be stacked in separate piles. If we could find enough to make up five complete bodies each day, we would be released earlier.

Around noon, the Army field kitchen arrived with *bab leves* soup and black bread. Years after this daily feast, gourmets in fashionable restaurants banished them from the Budapest diet. In 1946, you knew which way the wind was blowing since we contributed to the polluted air. At least at this time, it made bearable the stench from decomposing corpses.

The Army ration kept us going in more than one way. After hours up to your neck in dirt, you watched for the truck and stormed towards it. Behind us were the bodies. You had to keep an eye on them in case they were pinched by other groups wanting an early release. We would dash back to sit on our dunghill and shovel down food with grimy hands, since we were comforted by our tetanus injections.

The Germans had not removed the town’s small steam railway engines which could run on tram tracks to pull roofless cattle wagons. Since the Russians used a wider gauge, they hadn’t re-located them further east. We had to throw the human remains into the wagons at the end of each day. The little chuggers worked day as well as night and the smell was nauseating for the nearby apartments.

On one occasion, I was assigned to a former violin maker’s small workshop in Klauzal Street where stinking cadavers had been jammed up to the ceiling. These had been the wretched inhabitants of the Ghetto. Two of us had to pull them out and hand them on to be stacked on a flat-decked push cart. This was pushed to Elizabeth Boulevard and the contents were heaved into the railway wagon. My reward was a day off work after the shop had been cleared.

It was March and the late winter nights were cold. We were lucky that the days warmed a little. Close to the violin maker’s shop, some 2500 people were buried in a playground, the victims of starvation. Half a kilometre away, the large synagogue garden had been torn up and a huge hole filled with a further 5000 corpses. Today it’s a Memorial Garden with a museum to which the Hungarian-born American actor, Tony Curtis, contributed.

At last, civil order had more or less returned. Looting had stopped but not rape. Our liberators seemed to have an insatiable urge to corner females. “*Da-vay borishnya!*” was a command feared by every Hungarian woman.

Uncle’s adventure

The Russian soldiery refused to speak Hungarian. In drab, smelly and ragged uniforms, they were unprepossessing. No wonder sophisticated Hungarian girls were eager to attract British or American soldiers, no matter what their rank.

I rather frowned on the fellows from the embassies who went fishing for crumpet waving nylon stockings, chocolates and fancily-packaged cigarettes. Even so, I was looking for what life could offer.

I played in the dance band, learned the art of mime and tap dancing and became active in the skills of chatting up. It was all very hectic but my time was not wasted.

Like most townies, my family suffered from a lack of food. Available Black Market supplies were beyond our finances but we learned of folk who went to the villages to barter. Kalman, my mother's younger brother decided to try his luck with me.

"I'm a shoemaker," he said. "I've some upper and sole leather. Your mother has thread, fabric and the clothing you kids have grown out of. We can exchange these."

Adventure. I was all for it.

We planned our first sortie, taking the local tram and hopping off at Aszod some fifteen kilometres from Godollo. Our glorified back pack consisted of a potato sack with straps made of string but we were in business at the first house. Uncle Kalman was an instant hit since he had brought his tools and repaired boots on the spot.

Illustration 17, Image 'Budapest tram'



Budapest trams displayed the latest official propaganda.

I did well with Mother's articles and, well-fed, we returned home laden with smoked small goods, chicken, lard, flour, dried fruit, cheese and fresh butter. There's nothing like Free Trade where everybody gets a good deal and to hell with the Commissars.

Uncle and I itched for more adventure and we went further from Budapest. He was interested in the local *vorozs bor* [rough red wines].

At three a.m. we turned up at the Southern Railway Station to be early enough to find seats inside the third-class carriage. Unfortunately, others had the same idea so it was optional to stand on the carriage running board, sit on the coupling or climb onto the curved roof. Dangerous, but beggars have no choice. We went up on the icy top to huddle with the rest of the freeloaders against the pre-dawn chill and wind sheer.

At dawn, we stared at broken bodies along the tracks, mangled casualties from a previous day's outing and a reminder to stay awake. The sun brought visions of smoked sausage strings, shoulders of ham and homemade cheese until I noticed open-decked Russian troop carriers racing alongside the railway line. These spelled trouble. Were we to be liberated again? Machine gun fire halted the train and it was "*Da-vay vengerko yop-foye-maty!*" and we had to dismount, our dreams blasted.

The old nightmare returned. Gunfire forced women and children back into the compartments and we realised the soldiers wanted men. Uncle's face was grey. More gunfire. As the Army truck we had been herded into moved away, the women's wailing floated behind us. Could we make a Houdini-style escape? At a deserted farmyard, the truck stopped and we were permitted to jump down to rest.

"I'll get you out of this," I told him. "Follow me. Don't argue."

Around 5pm, we received a battered metal bowl and queued for our first meal. *Bab leves* soup again but at least it had a sliver of meat. The abbatoirs were long gone, and the Germans as well as Arrow Cross had stolen our cattle and pigs. Then I remembered that our neighbours had complained of the disappearance of pet cats and dogs. I had figured they had died of starvation. What did we have here? I donated my portion to the fellow beside me.

We had to get away quickly. When a commotion broke out later in the courtyard below, I responded to “*Four men wanted for a job!*” With Uncle, I approached two soldiers who were looking at two large copper bowls with handles.

Darkness was about an hour away. Two other prisoners were dragged out and the four of us went down the road under guard past a row of small caverns dug into the side of an earth bank and used for storing wine barrels. On the other side, open, ploughed fields with a line of acacia trees beckoned. We were obviously going to carry off the poor farmers’ confiscated wine. I let our bowl down slowly, turned to the Mongol guard, mimed that my palm chafed and I had to use the other hand.

Uncle, when I knock on the rim with my knuckle, take off in different directions.

We went further until someone opened a low, beamed wooden door. Below this, rough wooden steps led to three half hogsheads and four smaller barrels. This was heady, peasant red wine and the guard relaxed.

I moved in immediately with our bowl to let him to have his share. The vintner was generous, as all Hungarian cellar owners who like to see their guests turning pink and handed over a glass. The bowl was down to three-quarters full when the Mongol put his hand over the top of his glass. Uncle and I lifted the bowl outside, then lowered it while the second guard ambled down to the cellar.

In the long shadows of dusk, I gave Uncle the signal. We zig-zagged and jumped over high, ploughed furrows. The guard’s drunken gunshots might have hit the rising moon but we were away. No doubt the wine eventually got back to the farmyard and those prisoners left behind provided the gulags with more slaves. In 1948, some walking skeletons returned to boost Communist Party propaganda in the General Election. There was a big noise about Soviet generosity in freeing them but no one asked why they had been prisoners. But for our prompt action, we might have been among them.

We returned home empty-handed after sitting dangerously on the coupling between carriages, hanging on like hawks and almost frozen to the metal. We had an adventure to relate, especially Uncle, for we had outwitted the Red Army. It taught me a lesson, too.

Don’t follow the mob.

Muddied waters

I was not yet twenty-one and needed another job. I soon found myself back in the rebuilt leather workshop, working for the widow of the owner who had died in a work camp. Benedek Edith was a kind and intelligent Gentile who paid good wages but the loss of her husband was too much and she died, broken-hearted, in her early forties.

After some six months I was out of a job again. The Peoples Care Bureau advertised for a man with high self-esteem who could read and write and was prepared to do ‘*a responsible clerical job out in the provinces.*’

I applied. Bombed and hungry Budapest was no paradise.

The job was related to the Yalta Agreement under the UNRA aegis run by our Ministry of the Interior. Veres Erno, a young medical doctor, outlined my accommodation and the work which involved checking the 1940 Hungarian Census lists provided by village and borough Elders. These had to be compared to establish who had declared themselves *Volksbund*, regardless of the language they spoke. It was an administrative position without authority and power. Later, I discovered how important it was.

The medic and I arrived at our railway station and were greeted by the village *biro* [headman] with a horse-drawn carriage to take us to our billet. This had formerly been reserved for the richest visitors and was spotless and spacious, although there was no indoor plumbing. Instead we had to make do with the usual large wash basin and an outdoor long drop. Food was ample and served as if we were royalty.

Without knowing it, I was one of the many tools the ‘Big Four’ intended to use to reorganise the population of Europe. When Horthy and Hitler met at Kleishaim Castle in 1943, Horthy wished to be rid of the Volksbund and wanted Hungarian Swabians re-settled back in Germany. Hitler had prevaricated. Now, in my new position, certain new data came into my hands which revealed how shrewd the Fuehrer had been. He knew our Swabians had provided the young men for his S.S. brigades as well as for our own army and that major posts in our parliament had been filled by Germans. This meant that in civvy street there was an unpaid fifth column.

The documents showed that many Swabians born in Hungary at the turn of the century had served as German storm-troopers. The Census papers confirmed they were 100% German-speaking Volksbund. In village after village, the same situation emerged. I was disgusted, especially when so few Hungarians were included.

However, I found two had been awarded knighthoods by Horthy for their valour in World War I and had received a parcel of land. There was even a Jew, indistinguishable from other peasants in looks and manner, who declared himself Volksbund and yet knew little German.

On my first day, I realised I had a major duty to assess the value of their houses, land, animals and personal belongings. It took time to gain experience and make approximate valuations. Even so, these people mostly lived a sterile and colourless existence so it was not difficult to make generalisations.

Those on the list were ordered to appear before us at the local school, escorted by councillors who spoke their coarse German dialect. Veres Erno took blood samples and checked them with his stethoscope, making notes on their condition and blood type.

My early scrutiny turned up odd things. Every village had around three hundred people with only five to ten surnames between them. The curse of centuries of in-breeding began to show in their feebleness while the doctor concluded that gene degeneration had occurred and syphilis was endemic. There were beautiful young girls but no males over the age of fourteen, since older teenagers had filled the ranks of Hitler’s *Jugend* brigades.

Our findings went to Budapest by runner and this resulted in the arrival of the Customs and Excise man. Within a week, all Volksbunder had to leave their possessions, except for essential items and food for three days. In steamed the railway cattle trucks to take them back into Germany. Only there, it was believed, did they belong.

A few hours later, at the border city of Sopron, the Red Cross and locals gave these Volksbunder a splendid reception before they were settled on German farms where owners had died or disappeared. They were actually a lot better off than in the wretched Hungarian villages they had left. I was to meet one of these families in the Black Forest area in 1979.

“No,” they said. “We wouldn’t return with guns but we would not mind going back for a visit.”

Hungarians returning from labour camps had a different story.

But they were not Aryans.

My government salary was meagre. I banked it immediately since we were well looked after in other ways. The women knitted many fine and wonderfully-embroidered *patchker* [woollen slippers] for me so that I gradually gave many away as gifts.

At twenty-one, and reasonably handsome, I survived various Swabian seduction and marriage attempts, especially as there were young Hungarian war widows and peasant girls in other villages. A boy from Budapest was highly valued, just as American or English servicemen were sought after in the capital.

As a government official, I went to the southwest to visit *shokats* or the places where Serbians lived among the Volksbunder. Here, they spoke good Hungarian, and their food and hospitality was superb. The fair sex was also enticing. Very chic in small red high-heeled slippers, fine-pleated short skirts, white embroidered blouses and red or blue velvet bodices, they were a young man’s dream. And dangerous.

Before our work was finished, I made friends and realised that my own mixed background was of no account when they saw me as a man of hopeful action.

I was offered a clerical job at Headquarters but, after the sojourn in the villages, decided to return to 'civilisation' before inflation destroyed my bank account. Back in Budapest, Mother had worked hard to improve the look of her place, gaining more and more commissions. Uncle Paul was busy, too, and it seemed that he might propose marriage. I was not too happy about this but it was Mother's life.

One of Uncle Kalman's visits strengthened my decision to move on. He wished to return to his birthplace and I thought to join him to travel to Roumania. From there, I should be able to venture further into other lands.

Roumanian is close to French and many spoke German but my smattering of both languages would hardly be sufficient. I had enough money for a little while but would also have to find a job. Wrapping up my best tools and qualification papers, I intended to travel via Bucharest to Constanza on the Black Sea. This city had an international shipyard and I planned to sign on a passenger liner repairing upholstery to work my passage to the U.S.A.

Roumanian rhapsody

Uncle wanted to go to Târgu-Mureş in the middle of Szekely territory and part of Roumania. We left in the Spring of 1947 but, before we departed, I went see if the Old Man and the Old Girl had survived the horror of the Ghetto.

They were there all right. Along with another Jewish family, they lived with help from the Jewish Social Organisation and gifts from American Bretheren, subsisting in the same shabby apartment below the ventilation shaft of a four-storey building.

The Old Girl, as resourceful as ever, had continued to work in the kitchen of the re-organised Jewish Council after the Ghetto had been closed and was, therefore, never short of food. The Old Man received a small wage as a *shamec* [synagogue steward] and we shared survival stories, telling me that my foster sister had died in the Bergen-Belsen crematorium. God knows what they had done to a cripple like her.

A familiar aroma wafted from a newspaper-wrapped package on the kitchen table. A true believer would condemn as sacrilege the warm, meaty chunks of fresh pork crackling.

"This is not kosher," I grinned. The Old Man nearly fell off his chair laughing.

"This was a white pig. That's all right," he chortled.

The Old Girl gave me a hefty thump on the shoulder, her eyes streaming with tears. Intelligent enough to leave the past behind, they were laughing at their previously rigid beliefs. They had returned to Godollo to trade, starting again but feeling they were free from scorn and segregation.

A couple of days later, Uncle Kalman and I boarded the train at the Eastern Railway Station. Travelling was chaotic and subject to marauding Russian Army units. One patrol leniently demanded only two hundred *pengo* each (twelve US dollars in 1947) at the customs post prior to crossing the border at Battonya [Biharugia]. In the late afternoon, we arrived at Arad, a notorious place in Hungarian history since many of our leaders had been murdered there by the Russians during the 1848 Revolution, including our hero-poet Petofi Sandor.

Signing into a small hotel, we decided after a poor breakfast that we would part, Uncle to his destination and I to stroll through the streets. I wasn't impressed. This was in a town that had lost the will to live.

Having a cheap, twenty-*filler* haircut in a seedy establishment, I learned a good deal from a Hungarian scissor-snipper. Of some 150,000 citizens, three quarters were Hungarians who tried to keep their Magyar identity in the face of increasing Roumanian political and economic assimilation. Customers came in and joined the conversation. Just before I entered the barber's, I had seen a row of

white-painted, mud-brick peasant cottages surrounded by a fence. One shack had a large Yellow Star on its rickety, narrow door but everything was overgrown with no sign of life.

“Who lived there? Where are they now?” I asked

“That was the Jewish Quarter. We’re not ashamed of what was done there.”

“How so?”

“Each week we gathered three households, took them to the abattoir, hog-tied them and impaled them on meathooks. They screamed non-stop until they kicked themselves to death. We got rid of them all.”

I was nauseated. This was medieval. Vlad Dracula had lived about two hundred kilometres to the south. The legend had either re-surfaced or never departed.

Earth should not be burdened with the likes of you.

I left quickly. I had wished to honour Arad’s Hungarian Martyrs who had fought for our nation’s freedom a century earlier but this incident left me bitter.

My next stop was in Cluj. This was a marvellous medieval town with its statues in the parks and the magnificent bronze horse carrying Matayas, Hungary’s Great King, a large cathedral, an internationally-respected university, stadium, opera and concert hall, conservatory of music and many other buildings devoted to the arts.

The hotel lacked a restaurant so I strolled to the market square to sample the local specialities: cooked ground corn called *puliska*, served with a generous topping of fried bacon and cheese curd, *szekely*-style sauerkraut and mouth-watering liver sausages, smoked *szalona* pork fat, fried beef ribs, barbecued lamb’s fry and philo pastry *retes* cottage cheese cakes. After changing Hungarian *pengo* into Roumanian *lei*, I was pleased at the exchange rate but my tight budget meant that I could stay only a few days.

Expecting pickpockets, I’d made a shoulder bag for a small-change purse but this disappeared in the crowded market. I’d also strapped a thin purse of large denomination banknotes to the inside of my thigh.

Called ‘Rapid’, the diesel train out of Cluj looked like a long, silver torpedo and cruised almost noiselessly at nearly 120 kilometres per hour. Within minutes, the countryside was flicking past. On into the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps, the train slowed occasionally to walking pace to reveal deep, snow-filled ravines and cascading waterfalls. It was a shock to see skeletons on both sides of the mountain pass.

“Who are they? I asked my fellow travellers.

“During the war,” came the reply, “before Roumania changed sides, there was furious fighting between Russian and Roumanian-German infantry. The Germans placed machine gun teams on the heights and mowed down the troops below. The killing lasted for months. In places the Russians tried wade cross rivers and were picked off.”

No wonder Israel hangs onto the Golan Heights.

The ‘Rapid’ continued on into the night. We could see hundreds of shining eyes - the dreaded mountain foxes on the prowl. There were a stops to hitch on large locomotives behind, with two pushing us up the grades at a crawl. They left us at Pitesti and we had a fast, smooth run downhill to Bucharest station with its eastern bustle and noise.

Insecure, I finally left the station to reconnoitre and was accosted by a casually-dressed young chap.

“Need help?” he asked in proper Hungarian. He seemed okay

“I need a good, cheap hotel.”

“I’m Andras,” he replied. “A dealer. Waiting for my goods to turn up in the freight. Are you staying long?”

“I might,” wondering where the money came from for his ‘dealing’.

“A boarding house is cheaper.”

On the tram into the city centre, Andras said he was renting from a woman whose tenant had left. He was a good talker and, at his lodgings, he spoke to the landlady. A stocky, tired-looking woman directed me to a cabin with a bed, tallboy and wardrobe. There was also a washbasin on a small table, two chairs, a gas stove and cooking utensils. Spartan but adequate and only ten *lei* a week. I paid two weeks' rent in advance and settled in.

The climate was warmer than Budapest, with tall palm trees skirting a large boulevard. The city looked magnificent but I had to learn Roumanian quickly. It was spring, the girls were lovely and Bucharest rivalled Paris in charm and chic, totally different to bombed-out Budapest.

Roumania had much to commend it. The war had caused little real damage. The king had been forced to abdicate, there was plenty of oil in the Ploiesti wells. Politically independent from Russia, the country was experiencing a boom and had important international contacts. However, elections for a new style of government under the Communist Party leader and state president, Gheorghiu Daiy, were the thin end of the Kremlin wedge. The downward slide was looming.

Illustration 18, Image 'Roumanian house'



The rural charm of the Roumanian countryside.

Nevertheless, life was bustling and cheerful although hands were out for baksheesh all over the place. In the movie theatres, ushers demanded a handout. On the street, I was a target for police checks and loud admonitions. It was a show of authority and a ploy for a backhander. Two *lei* turned an officer into a respectful escort who would take me to the next fellow's territory to continue the charade.

These boulevard police were milking the tourists so I avoided the main avenues. However, the side streets were narrow and, when trams came by, I had to duck into doorways or flatten against walls.

Andras took me to a private house where cheap, buffet-style, cooked meals were available on a long bench covered with a simple white cloth. The food was good and there were second helpings.

Two days before my rent ran out, I was thinking of looking for a job in Bucharest or going on to Constanza but the Almighty had already decided. As I opened the cabin door, the suitcase was missing, clothing and shoes gone and worst of all, my tools.

Andras had left that morning, having taken me for a sucker.

How could I have been so naïve?

If I kicked up a fuss, the police would search me, pinch my hidden wallet then throw me in gaol. Although I still had two day's stay left, Bucharest had turned sour. Without my tools, I could not work. What next?

Uncle Kalman was across the mountains in Târgu-Mureş and I took that route homeward. As the bus passed through Ploesti, the oil well pumps were bowing their heads like rabbinic students at prayer. We climbed into the mountains to the terminus at Sinaia then changed to a low-g geared vehicle to tackle the Predeal Pass on the road to Brasov.

What to do? Moses had his Ten Commandments. I had three 'Ps':

1. Purchase sausage and a thick bread roll.
2. Pray that the bus would make it around the narrow hairpin bends.
3. Pee, just in case.

At the top of the pass, in amongst the clouds, the bus ground to a stop at a hilltop village to take on more passengers. The sign outside a battered wooden chalet read 'Jerusalem'. A well-dressed Hungarian businessman behind me indignantly exclaimed,

"Pokolba, devil take it! I can't go anywhere without finding Jews."

Prodded by my Hebrew gene, I turned around angrily.

"You won't find any in Hell."

He said something rude and then collapsed into silence when the chap across the aisle said,

"There are no Jews here," but I was not ready to let it go. The Germans had obviously taken them to the death camps.

"Perhaps they got fed up with being killed and went to Israel." The other fellow laughed.

The bus rumbled into Brasov. Five minutes later, I was in a shabby hotel. The majority here were Hungarian and the porter understood why I had only a shoulder bag as he took me up to a room with facilities.

A shower and a decent rest.

High up in the Carpathians, the air was pure and heavy with the aroma of pine forest. I fell asleep and, after waking next morning I was confused. Where were my warmer clothes? Life looked bleak.

Out for a stroll in light shoes and shorts. The high-altitude locals in their rustic black clothing, thigh boots and hats must have thought me a crazy Italian going off for a swim. Although they spoke Hungarian, I could not understand their dialect. They were also very poor.

I had time to reflect on the con-man, Andras. He had taken me to the Strada Crutcia-Piatra [Cross Market] where scantily-clad girls looked virginal in the windows but their mimes left no doubt. One tight-skirted, thirty-something had grabbed me by the arm and, in Hungarian, offered to entertain me for two *lei*. I shooed her away.

Illustration 19, Image 'Roumanian coin'



Apparently a Roumanian two-lei coin could buy a range of services.

Another offered all the tricks.

"Just tell me how you want it."

"Gratis," I replied and we had a good laugh.

Then I was trapped by a dark, curly-headed eighteen-year old. Fleur from Cluj.

We got down to business while she told me how she worked to support her family back home. The usual sob story, yet it did ring true. She asked for two *lei* but I gave her three, having learned that such good-looking girls were not keen to indulge for little gain. At least they could dress well and live their own lives. It was pointless making moral judgements when Europe was emerging from a decade of unbridled barbarism. Andras be damned!

Brasov had been an outpost guarding Hungary's heartland from invaders for centuries. It was a charming place in the foothills and I should have liked to have longer to discover what the Szekely were really like. Alas, I could only afford a third-class railway ticket to Sibiu.

The train consisted of four carriages with two cattle wagons coupled on behind. Waiting for the engine and hearing high-pitched female voices, I leaned out the window to see that the floors of the two wagons were carpeted with straw and contained a bunch of boozing female Russian soldiers. Someone was playing 'Katyusha' on a small concertina, a name much favoured for girls and multi-barrelled rocket launchers. Short, stocky and unattractive, the women danced wildly, yelling and screaming lots of "yop-foe-maty."

The engine eventually arrived, wheezing asthmatically and stop-starting all along the line. In four hours we cover only twenty kilometres. I decided to take a nap on an unoccupied seat but it wasn't long before the hub-bub in the next compartment woke me. I stood up and then quickly sank down below seat level. The women were on the prowl, 'collecting' good-looking fellows for their nefarious purposes. I prayed for deliverance and the Almighty listened.

The war had taken a severe toll of Russian men. Those still alive with all their parts intact preferred greener pastures. As a result, these dumpy, lustful females copied their male counterparts. The bedlam issuing from the cattle wagons indicated that some were enjoying the bacchanale. However, I slipped off the train when it next slowed down.

A fair distance away, across ploughed-up Szekley land, there was a village, although I ruined my shoes to get there. It was a two-horse settlement called Homorod, poor since the Roumanians had taken everything of value, but big-hearted. They had not seen a man from Budapest before and I became an immediate celebrity, despite our differences in dialect.

Soon the entire village stood outside the house I had wandered into and my host was delighted. It evolved into a sort of fair when they brought their best food. Feeling tongue-tied and awkward, I was overwhelmed by their show of love but sorry I could offer nothing return except money. This was not accepted.

I rested there for a few days with numerous listeners hanging on my every word. How had the Homeland suffered during the war years? What was our way of life? They soaked up everything. Then I told them that Mother was a Szekely girl from Târgu-Mureş.

The whole place was at my feet. I could have stayed there for months but wisdom dictated otherwise. I had no wish to drain their meagre supplies and, one foggy morning, the village Elder drove up in his wooden carriage. Between two downcast rows of locals, I rolled away with tears in my eyes. My heart was with these wonderful people but I would never return. It is still a sad but happy memory. They were part of my blood.

Homeward Bound

After a lengthy farewell, the Elder departed, leaving me with a few passengers in the tiny waiting room at the Homorod railway station where I felt like a stranded fish. Our boredom was disturbed by a low monotonous sound from the platform. Out there were two ancient and bedraggled mountain men not unlike like Neanderthals, with hairy faces and Roumanian *botskor* [moccasins] laced halfway up their legs. About five feet tall, they ponged of the rancid mutton fat they had smeared over themselves against the alpine cold. One sang while the other danced.

It was magic. Like a bear, he moved around tapping his *botskor* on the ground. Then he whirled slowly in small leaps, swayed like a tree and gracefully waved his arms in imitation of flying birds. It

was an enthralling ten minutes of rustic ballet, unfolding a humorous story of mountain life. Singer and dancer blended perfectly and I tipped them two *lei* for the pleasure they had given me. For them, it was a mighty sum. Others tossed them a few *beni* [cents].

Our great composer, Bela Bartok, recorded on his primitive Edison machine the old folk songs and tunes of the alpine foothills as well as the Szekely land. Today, these can be heard on concert platforms world-wide, especially since other musicians have also incorporated the ancient airs into their scores. I was lucky to have experienced first-hand this cultural gem.

The sun was setting when a small locomotive wheezed towards the station but it took thirty minutes to pull in to the platform and another thirty to find the steam to depart. This meant a late arrival in Sibiu and little choice of lodgings in a town that still looked like a garrison outpost. I purchased a ticket a fast, clean express and enjoyed the pine-clad mountains along the Maros valley with their tiny farmlets on the alpine meadows.

Changing trains at Aiud, I was now in Szekely land where Mother spent her childhood and Grandfather, the Mayor, built locomotive boilers.

Târgu-Mureş

This had been a major market town last century with cottage industries and manufacturing plants. Now, it was an important Roumanian agricultural centre but stagnating since the administration was trying to 'de-Magyarise' it.

After meeting Uncle Kalman in a hotel, he explained that he had located relatives but no male members of the Turi family members remained. He introduced me to an aunt, as poor as a synagogue mouse, who lived on the edge of the town. Her tiny income came from attractive, hand-made flowers using silk thread and wire but it had left her a gaunt spinster who smelled of boiled potatoes. She had little to say and less to offer. Uncle presented other family members on market day but they were only mildly interested. My nostalgia was an illusion.

At the market, Uncle gave me a handful of white crystals.

"Once we get to that peasant woman with the basket of small legs, throw this in and see what happens."

Unaware of Galvani's frog-leg experiment, I sensed the old devil knew something. Suddenly the legs jumped out in all directions. I was threatened with lynching before I realised Uncle had fooled me with one of his youthful pranks. An amused crowd gathered but before the woman could belt me, Uncle offered four *lei*. She might have been appeased but not my knotted stomach.

Near our hotel stood a fountain shaped like a band rotunda, with an oxidised copper roof. Mother had told me that it had been out of order for a long time. A small iron railing separated pedestrians from a locked iron door in the base.

"Fifty years ago, the town was busy," Uncle explained. "An Austro-Hungarian garrison was quartered on the outskirts. Artisans and tradesmen thrived and a semi-feudal administration kept the markets alive. A generous and well-to-do watchmaker called 'Mr Ben' lived beside the church."

Apparently the bureaucrats decided to brighten the town's image with a covered fountain similar to other prosperous trading centres. Mr Ben was asked if he would contribute towards the cost. He donated much more than anyone else and the fountain told the time as well as played music, while the falling water was lit with changing colours. After the priest blessed it and the townsfolk were treated to a *son et lumiere* spectacle, Mr Ben was declared a local hero.

Meanwhile, the county was being flooded with large denomination, counterfeit *corona*. The police could not find the culprit although the suspected the watchmaker.

He had been *very* clever. Everyone who stepped on his doormat actually pressed down a hidden steel plate and created another banknote. The magistrate gave permission to search his shop, but nothing was found. Yet the money kept coming. A further warrant was obtained to search his house and a six-man posse surprised him early one morning. Two policemen stood guard at the door while

the other four turned the place upside down. Still they found nothing. Then a constable on the door step jumping up and down to keep warm, noticed it began to sink a little.

They ripped it up and discovered a precision printing machine and plates. Mr Ben was arrested tried and sentenced to death. Appeals for mercy were rejected and he was granted a final wish before being hanged in the square.

“My last request,” he apparently said, “is to be let down into the fountain to oil the cogs *and say goodbye* to my masterpiece.”

The magistrate agreed. Mr Ben was watched by three sturdy fellows amongst the machinery then led out the small iron door with the manacles back on.

At ten o'clock the next morning, as he was taken to the gallows opposite the fountain, he blew a kiss towards it. Ten minutes later, a large crowd watched him die. At the same moment, the clock stopped and the coloured water failed. It never went again.

For years, engineers tried to restart it but his secret went to the grave. All that now remained was the locked iron door and the rotunda's crumbling facade.

With our finances running low, Uncle and I decided to return to Budapest. We had a smooth journey, unhindered by men in uniform, until the north-east border of Hungary at Satu-Mare. There, four floppy-hatted Russians and a Hungarian guard gave us the opportunity to chill our happiness on coming home.

Hungarians in Roumania were the ‘Number One Enemy’ thanks to the former alliances with Austria and Germany. The 1945 Yalta Conference had virtually repeated what had happened at Trianon, but this time the Soviets were making a meal of us. We were allowed to pass but the atmosphere was unpleasant.

On our arrival in Forest Street, things had changed. Mother had married, my sister Magda had a boyfriend, Joseph was studying at a Pest art academy and my teenage sister, Anna, was being rude and temperamental.

I could not warm to Uncle Paul, now my step-father. He was a good man but aloof and I couldn't remain for long. I went to the Old Man and Old Girl in Whistle Street even though she had never been friendly with Mother. Was it because she was *shikse* or had borne many children? Was she jealous of Mother's beauty, blaming her for the misfortunes and not my wastrel father? Whatever the reason, I thought the Old Girl's wisdom would solve my problem.

They were busy at work, being home only a few days each month and I could rent two metres of smelly sofa.

They went off to their business at Godollo and I shifted in, finding the sofa lay at the foot of a cream, duvet-covered double bed in which slept Rosi, the mother of one of the Old Girl's foster sons.

“You remember the short, baby-faced woman who is Laszlo's mum?” the Old Girl had said.

“She is over forty now and works in an espresso bar. She will be asleep while you're at work.”

I subsequently discovered that Rosi was a compulsive talker but we saw little of each other since I had a well-paid job and was studying basic ballet and tap dance as well as playing the drums in the dance school band. Self-taught from listening to American big band recordings, I could improvise a waltz or foxtrot tempo with brushes or drumsticks and belt out a tango or rumba on the bongos.

Mind you, the customers were scarcely particular. They would have jived or stomped on each other's toes to ‘Auld Lang Syne’ if they could fondle each other on the crowded floor.

There was danger too. I ran the risk of being labelled an ‘Imperialist Provocateur’ who was attempting to ruin Socialist ideals with imported Western music. Fortunately, I was just a small fish but some of the big names in the Budapest jazz scene were to be persecuted to the point where they committed suicide.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1947, I virtually ignored Rosi. Then came the inevitable just before Christmas. I had just finished a tough tap dance session and fallen into bed at dusk after a bath, waking later to the sound of the door opening.

“Are you up?” came Rosi's voice.

“Not really,” I said sleepily.

“I’m sorry,” and she shuffled in her slippers and nightdress towards her bed. “Have you had a good day?” she continued. I grunted, hoping she would get the message. However, her bedside lamp was on and, as I was drifting off, she pleaded,

“I can’t get my necklace off. Could you open the catch for me?”

She tugged at it, hot and bothered, then things happened quickly. Fresh from her own bath and perfumed, her bosom looked inviting as I leaned over her neck. My legs turned to jelly, my brain was mush and Gabor was soon in bed with her, groping.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she protested but there was no cry for help. Wriggling and squealing, she stroked my hair. However, the next morning I had no idea why I was in her bed, which sexologists might find interesting. Rosi’s explanation and the subsequent arrangement suited me fine. Then I discovered there was a price to pay.

She had not had a man for a long time. She also insisted on being with me as much as possible, even when I went to play in the band. The other musicians ribbed me that I had my mother along as a guard. Rosi liked the movies but it was odd to see us hand in hand. She also annoyed me with her prattlings after love-making.

Yet it wasn’t all bad. I could see I rejuvenated her and, in return, she educated me to a wealth of things about women that no book could have revealed.

Our affair lasted several months before the Old Girl came home for business in Budapest. I was at work and Rosi was at home, playing the innocent party, and me too. Even so, the Old Girl was suspicious, indignant when she sensed our transgressions. Rosi was declared *persona non grata* and banished to the small room beside the kitchen. Not that this prevented her from grabbing me when she could.

I now had a bedroom to myself and encouraged selected visitors. Poor Rosi must have known what was going on yet she continued in the hope that I loved her and was only playing around to make her jealous.

“Women desperately want to believe this,” she had once told me, “even though it may not be true.”

By the autumn of 1948 it was all over.

I had been conscripted into the newly-created Hungarian Army and left her without tears, at least on my part. Perhaps I was her last love.

I suppose I had been like Dustin Hoffman’s character in the Hollywood movie *The Graduate* with my own ‘Mrs Robinson.’ Our fling had showed me how easy it was to fall into temptation. I’m not boasting. I had lived a hard life and circumstances dictated I should take my pleasures wherever I could find them. I don’t think I am the worse for it, only wiser. Perhaps, sadder.

I’ve done no intentional harm to my associates and gave them a love of culture as well as music. There were times when I might have entered into matrimony but I felt unprepared. At twenty-three, I was a heart-breaker. I hoped my lovers would find the right partners but I was not for them. Except as the cavalier boy with a big heart.

Chapter Nine: Military service

'In our country the lie is not just a moral category but has become a pillar of the state. In recoiling from the lie we are performing a moral act, not a political act.'
-Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 'Time Magazine', 1979

Life was getting back to normal, whatever that was, but things were still primitive in 1948-49. The government had decided that Gabor was essential to its defence requirements and had enlisted me as a gunner with a new uniform in the army barracks at Szentendre, 24 kilometres to the north-west.

After four months of running down to the Danube in the snow to perform our morning ablutions, I decided to apply for transfer to the newly-organised Air Force base at Matyasfold to the southeast of Szentendre. The Army had no emotional attachment to me and provided a ticket for the suburban train.

Gabor the Airman

After living in clean army barracks, I was in for a shock at Matyasfold. The Russians had left the place filthy. Our dormitory had no heating in winter, no hot water and no proper bunks. One slept on straw on a concrete floor and our meals were no better than pig fodder. When not on night duty, I took the train back to Budapest and managed to keep myself alive on my income from three band gigs a week.

Since our commanders were from the sadistic Old Guard, their interest was to sabotage progress as much as possible. Our ill-fitting, green uniforms appeared to have been recycled from corpses and we, the future pride of the Air Force, looked a rag-tag bunch of hopefuls.

My previous flying experience derived from scouting days when we flew a homemade plywood and canvas, two-seater aircraft from off a hill. It had been immense fun grabbing the joystick for a brief turn above the ground and it had been my dream to become a pilot.

Matyasfold was a lovely, medieval market town but not designed for soldiering and the aerodrome was nestled between private houses at the end of a long, straight tree-lined road. You could say it was the birthplace of the Hungarian Air Force since earlier training establishments such as Szolnok on the Tisza River had been bombed out of existence.

In their wisdom, the Russians had used Hungarian slave labour to create an airfield close to Budapest. In flew Russian advisors, culture groups and others determined to turn Magyar into Slav but, for us young conscripts, there was the sadness of watching our country being over-run. *Again.*

Naturally there was no pay. Instead, we were issued with cigarettes. As a non-smoker, I traded my small supply for things like toothpaste and shoe polish. Just as well. Apparently, burglars had swept up horse fodder and droppings from the 'Tattersall' racehorse stables and turned them into Black Market cigarettes using recycled butts. The stuff could knock over a hippopotamus. Another racket was diesel oil sold as cooking oil. Mother was lucky when making pancakes one day that she was not leaning over the stove as the oil erupted. Others were less fortunate. Life was cheap. Essential items to sustain it were dear. That was the tragedy of Eastern Europe.

I obtained permission to leave the barracks to play my music but it was a *quid pro quo*. I had to organise an Air Force jazz band and also conduct a class in Mathematics. Within a week we had drums, guitar, piano, accordion, saxophone, clarinet, violin and a double bass. Also in my crowd was

Baranyi Laszlo, a tallish comedian who performed great slapstick with a straight face and attacked anything that moved. He later became a television star.

Our semi-sheltered life was superior to that of the moronic drill crews before my *bete noir*, Csikota Ferenc, turned up fresh from six weeks' political commissar training at the Petofi Academy. With his First Lieutenant's gold bars still shiny, he organised our venues and pocketed the proceeds while mentioning us in despatches. A career man was Csikota, becoming within two years the Chief of Staff. He was also the type who made people disappear without trace. He had marked me down as tainted by Capitalism and my nightmare began all over again. Every morning, I would see which pile of bedding straw was empty, glad it wasn't mine.

One did not dare to ask questions about this bastard, yet I managed to obtain some information. A young, good-hearted ex-village cobbler had survived the Army tortures in the Fo street prison and told me that his father lived in Yugoslavia. Learning of this, Csikota ordered him to pull down a flag which had become entangled in an overhead wire. The poor boy was electrocuted.

Our Commander, Captain Tuba, was an old-time, swashbuckling flying devil, tough but popular. Yet even he had enough. The Russians began to make things harder by providing clapped-out aircraft and the climax came when a lumbering ex-American DC3 arrived. Nicknamed 'the Camel', bullet holes around the radio bay and Cyrillic letters suggested it had been used over Berlin.

Reconditioned motors were installed but the airframe was dicey. Captain Tuba gathered his family one night and loaded them into 'The Camel' for escape to Austria. Unfortunately, he was cornered by trucks and machine guns before take-off and sentenced for treason. He was not shot but my comedian friend, Laszlo, told me that he could scarcely move because of broken bones. His family barely survived. Eventually he found a low-paid job shovelling coal into a factory boiler in Budapest.

Gyorgy Favich was a 21-year-old born in Hungary to French parents. Little more than four feet tall, on guard duty his gun was longer than he was and his ill-fitting uniform made him look like Disney's cartoon dwarf, Dopey. I was transferred elsewhere and learned later from friends that he had become a Party confidante. In the spring of 1956 I was to see him again on St Stephen's Boulevard.

This time, he was a sergeant-major in a well-cut AVO special army service uniform. It had been one of the Communist Party ploys to promote people with obvious physical disabilities to interrogation and torture units. Favich was one of these loathsome tools and a deep disgust chilled me when thinking of the number of patriots he must have killed.

I did not engage him in conversation, having been black-listed since leaving the Air Force in 1951 for criticising the Party viciousness.

Promotion

Gabor was given the vigorous medical examination required for anyone wishing to fly. A team of medics analysed my architecture from top to bottom, including something in my brain. Apparently my abdominal peculiarity scarcely mattered as I had all my marbles. After being blindfolded, shaken, rocked and tested for balance, I was allowed to approach the aircraft itself.

Then came the theoretical stuff on airframes, principles of flying, engines, meteorology and navigation. Since they were short of tutors and found me literate, I was given a textbook and told to lecture a class of twenty airmen on the basics of finding their way without hitting mountains or landing in rivers.

Now a lance-corporal, I received extra pay in high denomination paper money which could not purchase much. Hungarians were facing such inflation that what you earned in the morning simply disappeared on necessities by the afternoon. Poor Budapest. You could go to the markets with a suitcase full of currency worth billions of *pengo*. 'Monopoly' money could have bought more than a well-printed banknote and speculators had a whale of a time until the authorities hanged a few in public.

Illustration 20, Image 'Bank note'



During the inflationary period of the late 1940s, high denomination banknotes did not buy much but they had other uses.

This sort of oppression, on the pretext of maintaining law and order because of food shortages for the working classes, soon became the wedge which set people apart. Peasants with land and food who were deemed to have falsified harvest data to make a profit were compared with the workers who had nothing.

Medium-sized landholders owning more than thirty acres were blamed as the cause of Hungary's troubles. As a result, the minority Hungarian Communist Party lured the Social Democrats into its web and then began the cleansing campaign.

The same strategy had been practised by Jesuits centuries earlier and then refined by Hitler and Stalin.

A large network of informants was planted in all walks of life. The joke went around in streets and workplaces about the Soviet hammer and sickle in the middle of a red star:

Two Hungarian men are talking.

One says to the other, "do you know what those emblems mean?"

"No."

"If we can't cut the bloody thing down we'll clobber it."

Hungary had so many camps and prisons that a stranger might think we were a bad people, yet the Communists wanted more. On coming into power, they excavated the ground near their headquarters and built a huge prison underground with connecting passages.

In 1992, we were told that numerous cells containing skeletons in were discovered.

I must have been a reasonable Instructor as I was transferred to radio communications in the spring of 1950 to teach Morse code. Promoted to staff-sergeant, I soon became a pawn in Commissar Csikota's game.

Others without experience, many of whom had been my own peasant pupils, were promoted further. I knew what he was up to and realized the danger.

During the year, he sent me to various airfields. At Tokol, some thirty kilometres from Budapest MiG jet fighters were stationed and I saw the way the Russians viewed us. Pilots and ground crews had a canteen which sold everything 'acquired' from the West. It was forbidden to Hungarians and our senior officers were dismayed when they saw Russian privates spend their *roubles* while our *pengo* were not accepted nor exchanged. These Soviets treated us like lepers and even told us what times we could use our own airfield. Woe to the conquered!

I was promoted again in charge of a company near Kaposvar in south-west Hungary. In 1950, it was a sleepy place but later gained an international reputation as a jumping-off point for UN peace-keeping forces in the Serb-Croat 'ethnic cleansing' war.

After a few weeks, I accepted a handsome young female lieutenant fresh from a six-week indoctrination course. I was three ranks below her yet she had to present her posting papers to me. Regulations required me to salute her although I could give her orders.

I smelled a Csikota rat and made sure that two men were present whenever she was in my office or out on field inspection. As the station commander, I was responsible for her welfare so, if anything untoward happened, Gabor would be interviewed in a dark cellar.

She obviously enjoyed her rank since she had commanded a few peasant cows and a dog only a few months earlier but I knew my men were also sexually active.

Indoctrination in the Marx-Engles-Lenin-Stalin nonsense was mandatory for promotion. Part of the charade was to stand and clap when certain names were mentioned during the endless harangues and lectures. After a while, you even came to believe the poison as it dripped at the edges of your soul. There was a lot of homework on who said what at any the twenty Party Congresses but, for many Hungarians, there was the question of its relevance.

What was the point of dying with honour for some Russian ideologist's pet theory? I became disaffected very quickly when the propaganda claimed that Russians had made famous discoveries which rightfully belonged to others.

Surplus Russian Army clothing flooded in and ground crews as well as airmen were ordered to dress in Soviet peasant garb: coarse shirts buttoned to the neck, baggy *pufajka* trousers and *gymnastroika* belts worn low on the hip. The traditional Hungarian 'deak' hats were replaced with awful, red-starred Russian ones. As a patriot, I was insulted, especially when a 1951 'For your eyes only' order meant that the uniform change applied to me. We were being assimilated because some bastards had signed an agreement at Warsaw. It didn't really improve my mood that Magyars had done same thing to Szekelys in the 11th century.

No one was going to force me into the uniform of the murderers of Petofi in 1848. I was on dangerous ground but I had little to look forward to. My superiors had denied me further flying training by sending me to a radar installation. They had increased my pay but not my rank and explained that they needed a well-educated leading personality amongst the ground crews. That nonsense I could swallow but not the Russian uniform.

Petitioning for my release from military service because of Mother's ill-health took six months and numerous interviews before the brass relented. Even then they had the last word. In the autumn of 1951, I went home in uniform but without a final pay settlement. Parting from my hospitable landlord at Kapsovar was hard. The rent had been moderate, my laundry was free and I had often dined with his family. I also knew I was on a black list.

Years of Struggle

During my time at the Air Force stations, I made occasional visits to my family in Budapest. Mother seemed to be happily married, her business was making headway, Uncle Paul was a shoe designer and their combined incomes made for a bright future.

My sister, Magda, introduced me to her smooth-talking plumber boyfriend, Imre, but I disliked him on sight. His high fur hat and black clothing made him look like a Russian commissar. Magda said he had been a partisan during the German war. For her sake, I believed him.

Imre became the secretary of the District Communist Youth Organisation (MADISZ) and organiser of the Soviet-Hungarian Friends Association, the first Russian cultural incursion into Hungarian civilian life. We soon saw the Bolshoi Ballet, the Moyseyev Dance Ensemble, various folk dance groups and all sorts of Red Army culture. It was obvious that the Soviets were out to prove they were more than just thugs but, underlying this, was the implication that they were our superiors. The setting up of Peter Gabor's OGPU at 60 Andrassy Boulevard left one in no doubt.

Magda, after having been surrounded by 'power' in her younger days with the Polyaks in Godollo, was enthralled by the prospect of greater authority once her man had achieved the Soviet crusade to liberate the working class from the capitalist yoke.

Unfortunately, Imre was not bright enough to see that Moscow was merely using him to further its own aims. Magda, on one occasion, had confided to me that it would be good to be part of the USSR. I thought she was joking. Cultured Hungary absorbed into Russian barbarism? Yet she was serious. Poor Magda. Like my gambling father, she had placed her bet on the wrong horse.

For a time, she worked in a textile factory before she and Imre were seconded for study in Leningrad. She went into Literature, her man into Engineering but their bursary was insufficient and,

in the university holidays, they came back home. With them came their small baby, Terike, and it was obvious they were not coping as parents. Her husband had no decent overcoat, so I gave him mine.

Sadly, in the developing political climate, Mother had to give up her business. People deemed to be bourgeois were known to disappear into 60 Andrassy Boulevard. Slogans such as '*Death to speculative business*' or '*We'll bury the Capitalist stooges*' represented the familiar message of physical obliteration.

Merely replace racial ascendancy with political economy and you could see how the hated Arrow Cross methods were being copied. You would have thought that struggling small business people would have been supported. Not so.

Mother had been forced to work for a small wage as a machinist in a nationalised clothing sweatshop. Uncle Paul had begun to graze greener pastures at his work and, when Magda and Imre went back to university, Terike remained in Mother's care. History was repeating itself. I had a lengthy tussle persuading the Old Girl that I should look after Mother. Her expression was when she said quietly,

"You've got to help but you'll be sorry. Will she ever understand what she is doing wrong?"

Uncle Paul finally deserted, leaving Mother with a minimal income and failing health. Since my younger sister Anna had vanished from home and Joseph was studying and living in the Academy of Fine Arts dormitory, I used my savings to help at home. I anticipated these would last until I found a job.

Workers had been robbed of their earnings through 'time and motion' systems and had to part with a large percentage of their wages in the compulsory purchase of 'Peace' bonds. There were no labour unions and even landowners in the rural areas had to become agricultural workers. Smooth words, then threats persuaded them to turn their traditional holdings into collective farms on the Russian model.

Instead of real currency, the 'Liberators' provided an elaborate accounting system of points and marks. This confused everyone so that individuals had no idea of what they had earned until the end of the harvest year. This was destroying the old Hungarian peasant way of life and I was aware of the endless rumbles against enforced Collectivisation. Opposition was put down mercilessly. The many thousands of good folks who vanished or languished in work camps were the evidence.

The 'Communist Paradise' killed The Arts unless they were politically correct. The few newspapers recorded the suicides of well-known musicians, conductors and actors. Hooligans were again rewarded for their misdeeds. In their medal-loaded blazers or uniforms, they looked more like bears, foxes and weasels masquerading as human beings.

Goebbels and Churchill had referred to the Soviet 'Iron Curtain' drawn across Europe. To talk about it was one thing; to live behind it was another. '*Keep the Imperialist-Capitalist out from our fledgling People's Democracy*' was drummed into believers and stooges. Those who tried to escape it were shot, mauled by dogs or imprisoned with hard labour.

Having come home to see Mother in poverty, I found it difficult to get work to support her. My mandatory curriculum vitae and personal biography showed that I had resigned from the Air Force, leaving me blacklisted as a dissident.

Once my small savings had gone, I sold off my belongings, including my beloved guitar. Not that I, nor the band had any opportunity to play professionally. It was no longer safe to present 'Imperialist Culture Jazz'.

In the spring of 1952, I was not exactly desperate but, for the sake of my small niece, Terike, I was eating a lot less and my weight went down from 68 to 54 kilograms. Fortunately, I was still in good health.

Weatherman

Several years earlier, I could have had a huge fortune but had refused the temptation. During my unofficial bread deliveries, I had taken a fancy to one of the nurses who lived in a house under the

protection of the Swiss Consulate. In the 1946 spring, I had returned to find her gone but the *hausmester's* wife had allowed Joseph and me to see the hellish air raid shelter where hundreds of Jewish children had taken cover.

We had crawled around the cellar and spotted a small newspaper-wrapped package. It was a stash of rubies, diamonds, real pearls, white and yellow gold, rings, necklaces and gold coins. Joseph immediately wanted it but I was no grave robber of an Arrow Cross victim and pushed it back into the crevice.

This was the right thing.

In 1952, with informers everywhere, if Mother had been discovered with such a treasure, we would have faced torture and death. However, I could certainly have used the money.

The Almighty played a further card. After another job rejection, I subsequently met the elegant, ageing and scholarly major who had been in charge of the Meteorology Unit at Matyasfold airfield where we had got on well. He told me he had been classified as an 'Intellectual' and was not acceptable in a People's Army of peasant or worker non-thinkers. The Commissars discharged him but his international reputation saved him from harm and he had found a scientific position as a civilian.

I explained my refusal to wear a Russian uniform. As a fellow-patriot he listened with a slight smile and obvious joy, asked leading questions and, before we parted, gave me his calling card.

Some days later, a letter invited me to visit the Institute of Meteorology, a large grey, three-storeyed stone building on the Kitaibel-Paul Street corner, in the old part of Buda City.

Director, Dr Aujevsky, an aristocratic-looking man with an international reputation, offered me a position as a radio operator and a fortnightly salary at what seemed a princely sum. He also offered an advance on my first pay. I was delighted, especially when I returned home with money in an envelope.

The radio room was large and well-lit with dozens of radio receivers bleeping in Morse code. I would record *numbers*, not words as previously. This meant setting the dials for weather stations from the North Pole to the Equator as well as ranging longitudes from west to east. Concentration was essential and we had two hours on and two off during the eight-hour shift, in order to recover. The hardest part was to make something out of the faint signals resulting from frequent atmospheric disturbances.

Provided with headphones, I had to catch the five and six number sequences as they came in. These depicted the relevant weather station, the ground and altitude wind direction, temperature, cloud cover, moisture content and so on, and were then transferred by Lampson tube to another section which created isobar lines on a four-hour weather map for the whole of Hungary.

One wrong figure and the prognosis could inflict a deluge when it should have been a sunny day. It took time to get things right but, after a while, I could give the perfect answer.

"If there's no change from now on, it will be the same."

The observers were nicknamed 'Frogs' in recognition of the ancient tradition that frogs croaked when the weather changed. We, who recorded the messages, were the 'Knockers' because of the rat-a-tat-tat sound of the Morse key. More advanced countries were using ticker-tape machines which bleeped out rapid messages. This was a problem for us and we had to be smart on the dials to gather the information. Our best operators recorded each message on a typewriter but most of us still used pencil and paper for what we heard or guessed.

It was fascinating work but stressful since everything happened so quickly. However, I was happy with my new job, the pay and the way I could help Mother and Terike. Then Magda and her husband returned from Russia.

They possessed only the single, hard-won engineering diploma. Magda had been unable to finish her degree but now had a good working knowledge of Russian. Sadly, they had nowhere to go and settled in with us.

Being surrounded by educated people at work and at home made me uncomfortable. I had received only ten years of schooling and felt inadequate. In Hungary, the officially-stamped certificate

counted for everything, regardless of ability. Many people in responsible positions were dilettantes whose parents had known the value of a bribe. This was not an option for me but I had experience after having lectured Air Force trainees. It was now important to obtain my higher education certificates, but how?

A newspaper article stated that a two-year course for a Higher School Certificate would lead to the University Entrance examination. It was at Kalocsa south of Budapest, with food and basic dormitory accommodation as well as a tiny cash grant. I told Dr Aujevsky that I wished to go to University and he agreed, farewelling me with a stamped recommendation from his Bureau.

To my joy, I was accepted and began life as a 27-year old student.

Back to school

The Jesuits had previously owned the College. It had also been the seat of the Catholic Primate Joseph Mindszenty. A land-holding Swabian who was anti-Communist, he was formerly feared in the district but no longer. Although his power base had been taken away when he was imprisoned in 1949, the lecturers were the same old guard although paid by the new regime. They were good at implanting knowledge from morning until late afternoon, giving me time only to wash, eat and sleep. Social activities were not in the curriculum.

Except for Sunday afternoons.

In this precious free time, I chatted with the locals, in the main street. The stories I heard revealed the real face of the clergy, especially the Cardinal whose notions of Christian behaviour were scarcely benign. He enforced his reactionary code of patriotic and personal interest without mercy.

On the brighter side, I went twice to a local dance where Gypsy music played. The men were in folk costume and the wide peasant skirts of the girls swirled. The *shu..shu..shu* of swishing skirts and shuffling high boots on the floor was delightful although the odour of unwashed bodies forced my somewhat early retirement.

Kalocsa supplied the world's best red pepper. The mill ground dried capsicum into powder and packaged it. When I paid a visit, the air was so redolent with the powerful scent that a single sniff sent me stumbling outside to regain my normal vision. How did the peasant women work there all day long? Apparently they never caught a cold but their taste buds suffered badly.

In my second year at the College, the class was transferred to New Pest, a suburb of Budapest. We had different lecturers who took us through the University Entrance examination syllabus. After a lengthy wait for results, I had my entry assured although I had sat the test on political matters twice, having failed to give the correct agenda of the Bolshevik Party's 18th Congress.

The University Entrance certificate was fine but the problem was how to continue my diploma studies as well as pay the fees and support myself. I had to find another job.

Fortunately, my previous blacklisting had vanished as I had disappeared during the two College years. Even so, the rejections were the same. I was either over qualified or under-educated.

Work eventually turned up in a small, electrical appliance co-operative turning bundles of coloured wire into amateur radio ham sets for export. It gave me a wage but no satisfaction. Then the Almighty stepped in again.

During a lunch break I met a colleague from the leather factory where I had once been foreman. He was a member of a co-operative and helped me to return to my old job. Naturally, the 'president' required a joining fee but graciously allowed me to pay it off in instalments.

At much the same time, I was partnering Kati, a girl in a folk dance troupe and her parents were eager to lasso me into the family. I was also a student in the High Frequency Electron Engineering Department. This required late nights on advanced mathematics and algebra as well as drawing a variety of objects, establishing the technical data and calculating the materials required.

One form of torture for an aspiring engineer after a sleepless night is having his perfect, non-smudged, ink drawing torn up and thrown in disgust at his feet by the professor.

Despite usually finishing homework at 3 am and being at my day job five hours later with lectures three times a week, I managed to find time for rehearsals with the folk dancers but the pace was nearly killing me.

Budapest's numerous mineral swimming pools provided relaxation and, while it was good to see delicious-looking girls in swimsuits, I wanted something else.

Destiny calls

Kati dispensed coffee from her huff-and-hiss percolating machine in a local bar and usually served me one of her specialties. During a lunch break, a stubby little man in khaki overalls came in. We talked and he explained he was a plumber in charge of the local underground hot water system piped to houses for heating and bathing. He also remarked that he had a nineteen-year old daughter who played Mozart, Chopin and other classical music and gave me his address.

I decided to visit this man, Alex Dobos, and his 'little girl' in the Sixth District. It was close to the Liszt Conservatory of Music as well as to the biggest of the movie theatres and hotels. His apartment was on the third floor and his wife answered the doorbell.

What did I want? I did not know so I stumbled out a description of the man in the bar.

"Oh," she said. "Alex!" she called down the hallway, "There is a young man here."

Alex led me into a large room with huge windows overlooking the quietness of Trumpet Street. I mentioned I was having trouble with my university homework and the ink lettering on my drawings. Alex and his wife obviously did not understand but they offered coffee and cake before we got down to business.

He showed me a Singer sewing machine and said he used to own a shoe shop in Kaposvar but this had been taken over.

Another anti-Capitalist heartbreak story, just like Mother's.

As I commiserated, the side door opened. Suddenly the pale, smoky room seemed filled with bright light.

The 'little girl' had casually popped in and my heart went a-flutter. This was Julika, beautiful and chic, but a schoolgirl. Yet her voice held my attention. She admitted timidly that she was having trouble with mathematics and algebra. Cavalier Gabor swiftly offered to help.

It was clear that Julika lacked the basic elements of x , y and z that send algebraists into raptures. I tried to help her, having put cosines and tangents in the too-hard basket but she was happy to chew on the Newtonian bones I gave her. We agreed to meet the following Sunday.

This brought a new direction into my life.

The leather co-op was severely frustrating. A craftsman no longer had the joy of creating a completed product. Instead, a sample handbag had to be reproduced in twenty units. These were broken down into smaller parts which would be paid for after chits had been signed. This hellish time-and-motion Bateaux system meant you were supervised by someone with a stopwatch and received a pittance.

Piecework like this destroyed a man's professional pride. In addition, the mandatory purchase of government Peace Bonds during this Korean War period meant that my tiny income was further eroded.

Marxist-Leninist economics demanded that more be produced for less outlay and we were screwed down to subsistence level. Every week there was something which required an extra effort. May Day, Liberation Day, Bolshevik Revolution Day, Party Congress Day all obliged the slaves to bend their backs again while singing the praises of the Kremlin and its lapdogs.

Even so, Gabor had to be thankful. He was employed. He was no longer on a black list and he was contributing to the emergence of the Soviet Bloc as a major world power. Un-noticed, he was becoming a Hero of the Revolution.

And there was a girl in the offing.

Chapter Ten

Revolution!

*'Az utcánkban es hazainkban ehés gyomrok harangja zengett.
Késerek es nyomor zudult rák aldasként
amíg a halált hozó balalajka penget.'*

*[On our street and within our houses
empty bellies sounded their angry pain.
All of this and more blessings
flung at us while the Russian balalaikas played.]
-Lantos Gabor, Hungarian patriot,
Budapest University, 1956*

How often has Hungary heard the word 'revolution' and patriots dead?

In the University, we were bombarded with a Russian inventiveness at odds with common sense and what we had previously been taught. Commissars strutted about the campus, turning over all sorts of stones to seek out the cynical heretics thought to be lurking beneath. A tiny minority may have actually believed the distortions of their political masters but the rest of us were either time-servers or deeply distressed. It came to the point where even the Party functionaries appeared to believe in nothing.

We all hoped for change and the break seemed to come on 4 March 1953 when the greatest curse of the 20th century handed in his hammer and sickle.

The Caucasus mountain thug, Josef Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, better known as Stalin, was dead.

If Hungarian patriots breathed a sigh of relief, there was a huge uncertainty among the *apparatchiks* and cadres. The day they carried him with great pomp and ceremony to his grave also saw intrigues surface freely.

On campus, we talked openly of the 'Russian Bastard's' departure for places unknown. Could a murdering Communist atheist enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Then the screw tightened quickly as informers and the Party's AVO military police units re-grouped. Even so, they could not stop the endless flood of jokes and tabloid caricatures that appeared on the streets.

One of these newspapers capitalised on the fairy-tale hero Ludas Matyi and his adventures with his goose partner. 'Matyi' was also the pet name of Matyas [Mathias], our Communist gnome, while 'ludas' had the alternative meaning of 'criminal'. Vendors on the boulevards would bellow out that "*Mathias is a criminal*" and the so-called Big Shots lost their prestige as folk became bolder, despite the repression.

Illustration 21, Image 'Rakosi', cropped



Matyas Rakosi

I had become an accepted weekly visitor to the Family Dobos. Under my expert tutelage, Julika was becoming more confident about her forthcoming mathematics exam and I behaved in exemplary fashion, aware of her parents' watchful eyes in the adjoining room. Julika was acceptable in every department and developing nicely, except in one area. Her recitals on the grand piano in her room almost ended our relationship.

On one occasion, she executed Mozart's *Rondo alla Turca*. In the syncopated passage where a lancer gallops, I would, as a jazz drummer, have played it *presto* or *vivace*.

"It was well played but you left out a bar," I foolishly volunteered.

"How could I leave a bar out when I followed the score?" she replied calmly, adamant that she was correct.

"No, you left out a bar," I insisted. Our disagreement escalated rapidly, two musicians determined to prove the other in error.

I sprang up and stormed put the door, banging it in a glow of righteous frustration and intending never to see her again. *Unfortunately, Julika's interpretation was also Mozart's.*

This taught me quite a lesson and, since then, I have never had the temerity to provoke such an argument. Julika's mother, probably having heard the whole contretemps through the wall, buttonholed me and pleaded with me to come back.

Wisdom dictated my return. I managed to sooth Julika with season tickets to the Opera as well as frequent movie and theatre visits. We did not actually fall in love (I was eight years older) but our shared interests made us good partners although she was not a good dancer. Or rather, I was not agile enough to prevent her from suffering sore ankles. I think she viewed me as a painful terpsichorean, to be endured but not admired.

Mother Dobos was an excellent cook and her culinary skills combatted my former leanness. How she managed, I do not know since Alex, when on a bender, seldom left his pay packet on the table. I occasionally sensed her distress but was too polite to enquire further.

All this was about to change. Christmas Night 1955 became a milestone in my life. I asked Julika's parents for their permission to enter into a formal engagement, earnestly confessing that all former vices, cohabitations and other extra-marital infidelities were now abjured. This was only too true. Julika plus work and university studies had left no time for amorous adventures. Anyway, by now I felt it appropriate to settle down.

My university exams went smoothly until I was failed by the political commissar during a session on the 15th Bolshevik Party Congress. I had to sit it again in order to gain entry into the following semester. It really amounted to just another ploy to force students to study Russian ideology and the propaganda proclaiming the uniqueness of Marxist truth.

We knew better. A hundred years of Russian wolves howling across our borders had convinced Hungarians that Soviet leadership of the world proletariat was singularly un-benign.

In the ferment in the Kremlin, Nikita Khrushchev had scrambled into power. During the post-war period of the 'Liberation', Budapest citizens had seen him in action on Queen Wilma Boulevard. His crassness and arrogance knew no boundaries. In his own clique, he was known as 'Comrade

Necelnturn' - a rough, foul-mouthed rogue but not a bad fellow! That such a man should take up the mantle left by Josef Stalin did not bode well for Hungary.

Khrushchev had already denounced Stalin and the 'cult of personality' at the 20th Party Congress in February 1953. In the following three years, life continued precarious for intellectuals, artists and craftsmen who refused to accept Russian Communist rule. By April 1956, the Hungarian Writers and Intellectuals Association held a general meeting at the Gorkij Street centre. The Petofi Circle was formed and enunciated certain demands. Nagy Imre, a writer and former Prime Minister, agreed to some points but insisted that the "spirit of the Party had to be respected."

Illustration 22, Image 'Nagy'



Nagy Imre

About July 1956, during my meal break, I was in Damjanich Street to buy milk from a dairy. Coming my way was a man wearing pince-nez above a large moustache with his hat in his hand. We students had not heard of him for some time, thinking him semi-retired since Rakosi's coup of 1955 when he had been sidelined.

Yet here he was, large as life, Nagy Imre. Soon he would become the Martyr of Hungary, the Hero of a people's revolution in the tradition of the Bastille of 14 July 1789. Nagy seemed to be jovial, perhaps because he felt that discontent with his rival would see him back in power. Sadly, the history books now record him as one who had striven against the odds and fallen.

By 6 October 1956, Ragk Laslo, the 1949 victim of Rakosi's Party intrigue, was re-buried with honours in the largest of the city cemeteries. Over 200,00 people attended but a large number of generals and other dignitaries also emerged from the woodwork. The sun reflecting from their medals was painful for our poor proletarian eyes. By accident, this charade occurred on the same day as Hungary used to mourn the martyrs executed by the Russians at Arad in 1849. *Disaster dominated the atmosphere.*

At a meeting of intellectuals and Party progressives in the Municipal Theatre, styled as the 'Congress of the Popular National Front', Nagy Imre proclaimed "all power in the hands of the workers." The National Front would be the moral and political *avant garde* supporting a new democratic government. Two thousand people rose to their feet and shouted their unqualified agreement.

We've had enough!

On 22 October, the University Polytechnic met, attracting some five thousand students, lecturers, professors and other supporters. This enthusiastic crowd voted for a special 14-point demand. This included the withdrawal of Russian troops from Hungary, free democratic elections and the end to Hungary's part in the Warsaw Pact.

Hungary was to become an independent, sovereign state once more. To emphasise the seriousness of this, a peaceful demonstration was proposed for the following day. We would march through the city to our Hero's statue.

This decision was publicised through what the Russians called *samizdat* or flyers distributed by hand in the streets, pasted on walls and poster boards and delivered to houses. Here, Julika's typing

ability had been useful until a hand-powered duplicating machine was provided. Communist Party leaders, thinking themselves secure in their well-guarded Bureau, were now openly accused of all sorts of crimes. Like the Nazis before them, they tried to divert attention by palming off their actions onto those who had died or been obliterated. They also believed the Russians would come to their rescue.

We were not fooled by this hogwash. I became an eyewitness to the 'Hungarian Revolution' - just a small, patriotic bee in a huge, angry hive - but I was proud to be part of the battle against oppression.

Work had ceased at the leather co-op, as it had everywhere else. Party functionaries were nervous, their eyes darting in all directions to forestall a whack on the head. These poor, silly beggars now realised that they were small fry and would be thrown to the wolves, their past crimes stacking up against them.

At university, my lectures were no longer about the behaviour of ions, diodes and cathodes but on the way to gain our freedom. Heated debates on matters of national interest kept audiences awake and were so unlike the boring Party seminars where reluctant students nodded, not in agreement, but in sleep.

The next afternoon, a Ministry of the Interior news bulletin was broadcast at 1.50 pm forbidding our proposed march and warning us of the consequences of civil disobedience. The Writers' Association Central Committee and the Petofi Circle made an urgent request to have the ban lifted. Their answer came in between blasts of martial music. The ban would remain.

Perhaps some Party members were able to count on their fingers, since the ban was finally lifted at 2.53 pm.

However, the marchers had already set off at 2pm as planned, heading towards Buda and the statue of 19th century Polish freedom fighter, General Bem, near the St.Margaret Bridge. The square was small but workers and shop assistants on their way home made way for the marchers to cross the bridge to the Petofi Statue in Pest. The news spread like chain lightning and soon there was huge gathering of patriots.

A young actor stood on the plinth and recited Petofi's Manifesto: *"We affirm that we shall not become slaves again."*

There were mighty roars of encouragement. Then the marchers took off again, winding through the streets, one end at the Danube promenade and the other five kilometres away at the Fine Arts Faculty Building. Radio Kossuth played Hungarian marches non-stop as they had done in 1944. It was all very exciting, for a whole city was on the move.

The failing October daylight and falling temperature did not discourage us. I arrived home footsore and tried to eat the meal Mother had prepared. The radio announced haltingly that 'Public Enemy No. 2, Comrade Gero', would speak to the nation at 8pm. This was the leader who was prepared to allow his henchmen to fire into the demonstrators if they did not disperse. I was keen to hear what he might say.

At eight on the dot, he mouthed the usual Communist platitudes before acknowledging that the Party might have made mistakes. Naturally, these would be corrected. He carried on with this rambling damage control for fifteen minutes then hit out at the marchers:

"You must have heard that they were organised by a group of Fascist riff-raff rabble. We are going to deal with the nation's traitors!"

He had just insulted the whole country. This was the match that sent the dry tinder up in flames.

On 23 October, a university delegation went to the radio studio on Brody Sandor Street, requesting that our 14-point declaration be read.

"Over my dead body," replied the staunch Party station manager.

Army and AVO reinforcements arrived, dispersing the crowds in Museum Park and the surrounding streets with gun butts and bayonets. The Army then retired, leaving the field to some 600 armed AVO units. This was a cocktail for disaster.

In the meantime, I had returned from the chaos of the university campus. After the march, no one knew what the next step would be. The intellectuals had lost control and the people had taken over. Various groups claimed leadership but even the Armed Forces seemed bewildered.

By the morning of 24 October, the Interior Minister backed up his threat. In Roosevelt Square, not far from Parliament Buildings, the AVO shot a large number of protestors. That is the way the infamous 'Black Thursday' began.

The Ambulance Brigade carted fully-laden vans to Rokus Hospital. A crowd gathered there to identify the victims, many of whom were university students and city workers. Then the Russian tanks arrived.

Our panic-stricken government had called them in to restore order. Street fighting had already begun in Corvin Alley in the Eighth District and yet, ironically, the tank crews at the hospital were unaware of this and allowed students to ride on top of their vehicles.

Decorated with the Hungarian flag, these tanks rumbled and clanked into the large square where thousands were demanding the presence of Nagy Imre. Shots rang out from the top of the Ministry of Agriculture building. A Russian soldier was hit and then a barrage of machine-gun fire followed.

Illustration 24, Image 'tank'



Despite their fierce appearance, Russian tanks could be stopped with simple Molotov cocktails.

The Russians reacted immediately and killed many of the AVO men on the Ministry building. Down below in the square, numerous patriots would live out their lives as cripples in the cause of glorious Communist humanitarianism.

I was at the leather co-op to pick up my wages and raced towards Julika's apartment. Along the way, I learned of the tragedy outside Parliament Buildings and thought to offer my services as a First Aider. Tearing up to Julika, I told her what had happened. She wanted to come, despite the danger.

The square it was now deserted but the blood-stained pavements and dangling tramlines told the story. The tanks had demolished the top of the Agriculture building. It is easy to believe Khrushchev's assertion that the Hungarian Revolution would not have occurred if thirty writers had been seized by the AVO in a night raid and shot!

In the late afternoon, Julika and I returned to her home, intensely depressed. The Russians would not forgive.

I left about 8pm, planning to walk back to Mother's place but seeing sombre citizens heading in one direction, I followed them towards the Polish and Yugoslav Embassies. At the end of the street stood the large red brick complex of the Writers' Association.

Between this and the Peoples' Park stood the huge bronze statue of Comrade Stalin. Normally, it would have been floodlit in glorious monochrome. Now, its shadowed right arm, outstretched in the

direction of the Writers' building, seemed to threaten that the creature would keep his hand on their throats, whatever they did.

In the gathering darkness, about a thousand people watched a TEFU lorry drive up to the statue, its headlights blazing. Two more lorries pulled up on either side, making a 'v' shape. A man on a ladder attached two thick, wide slings to Stalin's neck while another attacked the top of the monstrous boots with a welding torch.

Cables were passed down to the crowd and two, fifty-man teams heaved but to no avail. Stalin was not going to be moved. After much heated discussion, it was concluded that 'T'-shaped, steel reinforcing rods were holding the bloody thing on its base.

Three men clambered up with their gas torches and began to cut a hole in the back. Dangerous work as the whole thing could smash down upon the trucks. They completed the job, the trucks reversed into the statue while the cable-pullers heaved for all they were worth.

This awful Goliath swayed sideways a little. The cable came loose and the tug-o-war men collapsed on the ground but leapt to their feet in time to see Stalin crashing to the pavement. There was a colossal thud and shards of tiles sprayed all over the place.

No one gave any signal but we ran towards this symbol of oppression and mass murder. Elated, Magyars all, many Jews and Gabor half of that. We roared out our National Anthem 'God Bless the Hungarians' and I was crying with pride and happiness.

The English poet Shelley wrote of the shattered visage of the Ozymandias lying in the sand. My compatriots also had a head to revile and many thronged about the fallen Stalin to spit on him and kick him. A chap beside me gave him a well-directed stream of piss on the nose and shouted loudly "Mazeltopf!" [Good Health!] in the best Jewish tradition, to loud applause. For the first time in days, I actually laughed.

Nor was the defilement finished. The main lorry driver hitched up the cable and slowly dragged the statue towards Rakoczy Boulevard to deliver it to the feet of our National Hero. All the way along the streets there was a noisy, shameful clatter before the statue was finally dumped in front of the National Theatre on the Joseph Boulevard. As a final insult to our Russian masters, this was it! We would *never* be forgiven.

Illustration 24, Image 'Stalin down'



*

It was past midnight. I was about to return home when the news arrived of trouble at the National Radio Station. Our leaders desperately needed to read their Revolutionary Declaration to the people but the AVO had decided that it was time to shoot citizens again.

A fellow was yelling from an open-decked truck,
"We need patriots' help!"

We jostled each other into the back of the truck like young bulls charging a matador.

A large building on Brody Sandor Street ran alongside the Museum from the Museum Ring to Vas Street in the Eighth District. The truck driver went like the devil was squeezing his balls towards this, then screeched to a halt. From behind two large gates AVO men were spraying the street with gunfire. Then a truck-load of young Army cadets from the Kossuth Academy came looking for targets for their hand grenades.

Earlier rebel groups had been supplied with weapons but we had nothing but our courage as we dashed around a corner into the darkness with bullets whining over our heads. Someone sent down the first Molotov cocktail. In the eerie burning light, we sneaked across the bitumen and wrestled the killers behind the gates.

The AVO were well entrenched in their building. Shots came from the upper windows, pinning us down and one chap's arm was blown off. Another was wounded in the stomach. Some of us got inside the building and fought room by room, setting fire to the place as they went.

One can be a hero for only so long.

It was time to go. Having torn up my shirt for bandages, I crawled away on my belly then slouched home bare-chested, exhausted and chilled. Mother was frightened when a tattered Gabor turned up but asked no questions. Late the next morning, when I surfaced, she told me that the racket was still coming from the nearby boulevard. Heavy guns were pounding in the Eighth and Ninth Districts.

After breakfast, I ran towards the National Theatre to find people hacking souvenirs from the Stalin statue. Further down the Ring Boulevard by the army barracks, there were Russian T-24 tanks. One was on fire, belching thick black smoke.

Illustration 25, Image, 'tanks 2'



The first stage of the Revolution saw Russian tanks crippled but reinforcements were not far away.

The 9am radio confirmed that our heroic government had called in the Russians to restore order. However, students, intellectuals and workers as well as disillusioned Party members had been busy in other parts of Buda and Pest. Several Russian tanks were already brewed up. These Soviets were not used to our guerilla warfare. Our teenagers proved their mettle by racing up to fling Molotov cocktails under the tank tracks or down the hatches.

When fighting armoured vehicles in a city, you learn quickly that they are not impregnable. There are ways to lure a tank down a narrow street then block it with a wrecked lorry or tram. As the driver tries to reverse out, the Molotov cocktails also come hurtling down from the windows above. It's not pretty to see the tank crew afterwards, burned beyond recognition and shrunken in grotesque poses. Even Russians should come to a better end.

My attention was directed to the office behind the National Theatre where the Party printed its daily ideological claptrap in the form of the *Szabad Nep* [Free Peoples' Newspaper]. Ordinary mortals rarely understood it but, for Party members, this unattractive broadsheet was compulsory reading. On the other hand, paper was in short supply so, cut into suitably-sized strips, it served an admirable purpose.

In front of this office, a modern bookshop had been furnished in the spartan style with lots of glass so that folk could be seen reading the latest Party literature. You scored brownie points for staggering to the counter with a tome of Marx-Engels or Lenin-Stalin although you were probably going to use it to prop up a table leg in your tiny flat. For those with more eclectic tastes, there was Voltaire, Danton-Hébert and our own Hungarian geniuses.

Previously, I had seen this Castle of Ideology only from the outside since I was in mortal fear of having my Capitalist notions corrupted. Now things were different. Student representatives had turned up to chat with the Party Editor about publishing their 14-point Manifesto. He gave them the same answer as the radio station manager. He also called on Revai, the mental giant who styled himself the Party Boss.

Revai arrived in haste with a detachment of slaving AVO. They clomped inside, leaving two trigger-happy tommy-gunners to survey the growling crowd in the street. A shot from the building opposite hit one of these fellows in the arm. The other retreated behind the glass door and pulled his injured mate in with him. Suddenly the crowd began hurling bricks and cobblestones. The huge glass panels shattered, Revai sneaked out a side entrance while his goons were ordered to deal with the angry but apparently unarmed mob.

Then some guns appeared and the fight developed in earnest with several AVO making the acquaintance of Their Maker. The crowd ripped the shop to pieces and tossed the books into the street for a massive bonfire just like the earlier Nazi conflagrations. This was regrettable. Some worthy volumes and good literature also joined this *auto da fé*. Surprisingly, the printing machines escaped the destruction, a recognition of the stupidity of destroying a supply of free toilet paper.

Neon signs above many of the stores had highlighted the *Szabad Nep* but, by the end of the day, these had gone the way of most Russian banners and flags. The sign over the Communist Citadel came to a particularly apt end. It was only partially destroyed and the letter 'a' remained, to read '*a Nep*' [the People]. The gods must have been laughing to see where lay the real power. It reminded one of Lenin's dictum that 'Revolution was the Order of Chaos.'

By 28 October, our government had decided to order a cease-fire. The next day the tanks departed and the Russian troops with their camp followers boarded trains to the east. News came gleefully over the radio that they had beaten a hasty retreat over the border at Csap. Magyars erupted in ecstasy. There were victory celebrations in every town and village since these had also fought for freedom. It had been a gigantic achievement for a nation of our size against the juggernauts licking their wounds in the Ukraine.

Naturally, confusion now reigned.

Parliament had to get organised. The University did not re-commence lectures and, in the leather co-op, there was no work since a nationwide General Strike had been declared. Committees formed everywhere. Their commands were sacrosanct and those who stepped out of line were severely punished by the workers' brigades. Looters were killed and an undeclared unity developed against any criminal activity.

For a time, there seemed to be a form of Puritanism about our Revolution. I suppose the French had felt the same way a hundred and sixty-seven years earlier.

Extreme actions were also highlighted. Fortunately, personal vendettas were few but the Western tabloids flooded the market with pictures of such incidents. I was standing with Mother in a bread queue outside the 'Kozert' grocery and butchery shop on Rakoczy Boulevard. Gun and mortar fire was coming from the direction of the Party Headquarters near Tisza Kalman Square. Fortunately, nothing came our way and we purchased our bread. I gave mine to Mother dashed off to see what was happening.

Could this have been staged by the CIA to stir up sympathy for our cause? It certainly made headlines in the world press. Machine gun fire still came from inside the building and bystanders said that AVO men were shooting their prisoners in the secret tunnels. The place was soon stormed and privates as well as officers were hustled out to be hanged by the feet from trees and shot. Their

pockets were emptied, the contents thrown to the ground and their ID cards were pinned to their Russian-style shirts. These were fat cats who had no need to spend hours in the bread lines. Their public humiliation was fitting.

Colonel Kiss was not only hanged upside down but his *pufajka* trousers were pulled around his ankles to expose his genitals. This was deliberate. It was thought that if any of the present crop of bodies had the mark of damnation on them, there would be an excuse to renew attacks on the Jews. Nothing of the sort. Poor Colonel Kiss was demonstrably *goy*.

Illustration 26, Image 'Execution'



Budapest patriots vented their anger.

Before they were taken away for special interviews, Party bosses saw their belongings flying out of windows for inspection by the crowd below. Eight years of misrule was about to be repaid. Perhaps the Almighty was just, after all.

After a few days, the Budapest transport system was back in action although boarded-up shop fronts revealed the tragedies that had taken place. I rode a trolley bus to the fairground, amazed at the way the city had weathered the storm. The old, irrepressible humour was back. At the section stop in front of the Yugoslav Embassy, the conductor used to call out “this is the Republic Square.”

This time, the conductress said, “this is Boot Square.” We all laughed since all that remained of ‘Iron Man’ Stalin were his boots. Poet Shelley, would surely have enjoyed the sight of these ‘two vast and trunkless legs’!

At my leather co-op there was still no work but each of us received two kilos of meat, smoked bacon, flour, sauerkraut and other food items. These were gifts in gratitude from peasants to hungry townspeople, a great moment in our history as it demonstrated a national unity which had not existed before.

Nagy Imre became Prime Minister with Kadar Janos beside the till. They were both Kaposvar-bred, as were Julika and her family, Nagy from peasant stock and Kadar’s father an electrician and radio shop owner. They were Left-Wing politicians with a sympathy for working classes of all types. In French terms, you would probably call them moderate Jacobins and the sort of leaders Hungary now needed.

Although Moscow-trained, Nagy was a patriot who rode the knife-edge between Russian expectations and Magyar demands. However, he was returned to power by the Old Guard who thought to regain their former status.

By the time the cease-fire was proclaimed on 29 October, it was clear that he was the only one who could be trusted. Soon the telephones were busy back to the Kremlin, especially after Nagy’s new government celebrated the Declaration of Independence and planned to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact. A sinister communiqué arrived:

‘We express confidence that a Socialist country will not permit reactionary forces to shake the foundation of the people’s democratic system.’

Surprisingly, the new committees made good progress in stabilising the country but few wanted the former conspiracy between the land barons and the industrialists to return. Our sights were set on neutrality on the Swiss model. What dreamers we were!

News came from the north-east city of Miskolc that long columns of tanks and infantry were flooding in across the border from Czechoslovakia. On 1 November, Nagy called on the Russian Ambassador to Hungary, Andropov, to protest this new invasion. Andropov explained diplomatically that they were merely passing through after an army manoeuvre. There was no cause for alarm.

Over the radio at 8pm that night, Nagy repeated his earlier Declaration of Independence although he knew tank and infantry regiments were heading towards Budapest.

Things moved swiftly.

By 2 November, ominous signs appeared within the government. Kadar had disappeared from Budapest and a faint radio bulletin from Szolnok in eastern Hungary announced that a new government had been formed under "its leader Kadar Janos."

Two days later, Nagy came on the radio appealing to the world to assist the fledgling Hungarian democracy. The desperate voice stated, "*columns of Russian tanks have invaded our country. Our Democracy is in its death throes. Please help, help, help....*"

That was the last we heard of him.

Chapter Eleven

Aftermath

'Our people look favourably on oppressed nations promulgating Democracy and support their endeavours.'

- John Foster Dulles, US Secretary of State

Our freedom, the first in Hungary's modern history, had survived a hundred and fifty hours. We had to descend from our rosy clouds to cold reality. The invading 'friendly' forces let us know that our independence was a pipe dream.

Thirty-five thousand Hungarians would die in the fighting, twenty-five thousand would be taken prisoner and at least two hundred thousand would escape to the West.

It was a tidy figure, two hundred and sixty thousand within a short time and that was only on the Hungarian side. We couldn't begin to count the losses suffered by the 'liberators' and, naturally, their new regime was to shave off more patriots: two thousand executed, fifteen thousand sentenced to long prison terms with hard labour. Who knows how many just disappeared?

Since the tragedy of 1956, a number of underground bunkers have been opened to reveal slaughter similar to the Pol-Pot genocides in Kampuchea, although on a smaller scale.

How far did the West encourage Hungarian patriots to withstand Russian domination? Did the CIA fund 'Radio Free Europe' and 'The Voice of America' to reinforce the message of US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on his visit to Europe? In his speeches, he suggested that the USA liked to see oppressed nations promulgate Democracy:

"Our people look favourably on such and support their endeavours.

This was fine when the Soviet enemy was thousands of miles away and struggling democracies could become a buffer against Communist aggression. Not so good when you were surrounded by it.

In June 1944 at Teheran, Churchill and Roosevelt had made a deal concerning England and Russia's involvement in the Balkans. In October that year, Churchill and Eden visited Moscow to confirm that Russia would control up to eighty per cent of political, economic and other affairs in Bulgaria, Hungary and Roumania. A neat deal, whereby Hungary was sewn up properly and the blunder of 1919 at Trianon was to be repeated.

Poor Nagy Imre's radio message to the world had fallen on deaf ears. United Nations Secretary-General Hammarskjold did nothing and Britain hogged the limelight over the affair with Nasser and the Egyptian closing of the Suez Canal. Nagy and his few supporters gained temporary political asylum at the Yugoslav Embassy from where they could look upon the battered boots of Stalin's statue and weep.

As for Gabor, he felt decidedly uneasy.

The streets were deserted. Even the normally-active professional ladies no longer plied their trade. Russian tanks roamed the wide boulevards, firing at random into buildings. Our street had suddenly become part of the front line in the *war* to reinstate the Soviet-dictated status quo.

With the Government in exile, the Workers' Council had stepped in to fill the power vacuum and defensive brigades organised battalions to join in the fray. It was up to civilians now. Sadly, our Air Force had been the first to be neutralised when the Russians occupied the airfields. Our second-hand Soviet planes were no match for the faster, newer Russian MiGs and some of our aircraft could not even take off. Then the Army barracks were occupied, along with roads, railways, radio stations and masts, as well as other strategic points. The workers put up a tremendous resistance but the losses were great. On both sides.

The Red Army actually suffered heavy casualties. To save face, the Soviets invited Maletier Paul, head of the Resistance, to Tokol air base to discuss a cease-fire. An old-time, Soviet-trained partisan, he had fought the Germans on the Russian side and was now our Minister of the Army. He and his delegation should have known better. They were promptly arrested.

Checkmate. Poor Hungary was without her trusted leader as well as her fighters and ripe to be done over again.



At the leather co-op, everything was at a standstill. Being a white, ground floor building on Rottenbiller Boulevard, it made a choice target. Further back on Dob Street, a burned-out tank served as a warning to the Russians to take off their kid gloves and we expected retribution at any time. I had vacated quickly, counting my small change and wondering where my next wages might come from.

Dob Street was famous, partly because it was about a kilometre long, narrow and not open to vehicular traffic. With time to kill, I decided to walk that way to visit the Dobos family. Alex, I knew, would be away at work, but the two women would surely have been worried by the rumbling of the tanks in the streets. They were right in the middle of a war.

For me, it was business as usual. For them it was scary.

Father Alex turned up later, slightly wobbly and obviously frightened by the street fighting. Something had to be done about Julika and her mother. Where could they be taken to safety? Alex had his hideout in the hot water pumping plant on Margaret Island in the Danube. I was not too concerned. I had been in sticky situations before.

Julika suggested that her mother's friend in a quiet suburb could perhaps provide shelter. A phone call assured them of a warm welcome but there was no tram or public service for the ten-kilometre journey. They would have to walk. Alex couldn't leave his post, nor would he have known what to do. I would be their guide and rather relished the prospect of becoming a Scarlet Pimpernel.

We thought that the siege could not last too long and did not encumber ourselves with clothing and provisions. I guided my charges through narrow streets to the Municipal Park where we walked along the wooded paths. Russian jets screamed over our heads while the tanks boomed in the distance.

Eventually we arrived at a modest tree-lined street where workers lived in small villas surrounded by hedges.

It was delightfully peaceful and, after regaling our host with our adventures, we sat down to eat. Scarcely had we finished when a neighbour, frightened by the aircraft, asked for refuge in the bomb shelter below the house.

Shortly afterwards, we took our own blankets and food down there, thinking the distant gunfire was coming our way. Around 3pm the growling, grinding sounds of tank tracks told us a T-42 was on the prowl. Why? There were no guns here.

My future mother-in-law became tearful when she had no reply to her phone call to Alex. She was close to a breakdown and I went back to her apartment to see what had become of him.

At the Municipal Park, a tank convoy with infantry on board appeared in the distance. I dived for cover, flung out my arms and legs in an artistic and corpse-like way hoping that with so many of the real variety around, I might get away with it. No bayonet came to prod me into eternity and, after nearly freezing to death on the cold ground, I slowly resurrected myself, brushed down my formerly neat attire and went on my way.

When I reached the Dobos apartment, Alex was pop-eyed, drunk, chain-smoking and contemplating the universe. He was satisfied with my news, had found the food left for him and was going to be okay in his bivouac. I departed to bring the happy news to Julika and her mother.

Around 3am, we all woke. A prowling tank had stopped and fired off a round with a horrendous boom. Brick dust showered over the house and, in the awful silence that followed, we peered out from our bunker to discover a heart-breaking sight. The cottages on both sides had been destroyed. Homes across the street had suffered the same fate. Every second house was in ruins.

This was terror against ordinary citizens.

If the early Romans punished through decimation, the Russians refined it beyond belief. No one here had helped the Resistance fighters. We had to make room for neighbours and their children but we could not remain here. It was too late to take Julika and her mother all the way home before the curfew and the best solution was to call in at Janka Ante's home, about thirty minutes away.

Fate, the gods, or the Almighty (I still wasn't sure which was which) had determined I should introduce the Dobos women to my distant relative. We were welcomed warmly. Surprised, was my good aunt but her nature was to be kind in any circumstances despite her own sorrow. While I had been in the Air Force, her much-loved second husband Geza had died suddenly.

It was no problem that I had brought two *shikses* into her elegant villa. We bedded down near the grand piano and, after a sumptuous breakfast, we set off to find our way back to uncertainty and trouble.

I cannot forget the date. It was 7 November, 1956.

*

I did not suspect anything untoward in the movements going on close to the Dobos apartment. The building opposite had been previously a hotel and a huge alley alongside it led to the 'Royal' movie theatre so there was always a crowd milling about. The complex also contained numerous rooms equipped for billiards and table tennis. I should have paid closer attention to the type of traffic frequenting the place.

Alex was not at home. The apartment was cold but I went down to the cellar for fuel and soon had water boiling on the large ceramic stove before returning to Mother's place. Julika gave me a goodbye kiss on the cheek but, before she had closed the door, a blast from a field gun outside the gate shook the whole building.

We had put our heads into the lion's jaws. Artillery and tanks on our side of the street were bombarding the hotel, the alley and the whole complex. The apartment block shuddered with every shot as the Russian crew feverishly loaded their four-inch gun. I could just see the tip of the muzzle

where it poked out of the alleyway. Devil's hardware, and windows overlooking the courtyard shattered, spraying glass out onto the Boulevard.

Across the street, keen machine-gun fire raked the pavement below us, punctuated by the crump of bazookas and the flashes of hand grenades and Molotov cocktails. The poor women were badly shaken. Being on the top floor, they were fortunately out of the direct line of fire but there was always the possibility of their being bombed in an air strike.

In the time we had been away in the suburbs, the hotel complex had been taken over by the Resistance as their headquarters. For two days the Russians pounded it, finally setting it on fire with incendiaries and then waited until the whole improvised fortress burned in huge flames and billowing smoke. They were too afraid to launch an attack into the alleyway with its cinema and complex exits and had decided to let the rebels escape.

Alex had turned up in the middle of it all, sliding down the coal-chute into the cellar from a street at the rear of the building. Then he was imprisoned and had plenty of time to ponder the strength of the lock he had fitted on the outside of the door. Cold and bored with his own drunken company, he had gained little philosophical stimulation from wood and coal.

He was lucky I had heard his yelling and banging and extricated him since the gunners had been bombarding things from his front gate. Nor was he happy. However, the Family Dobos was together again and I could return home.

Mother was in good shape. There was no shooting in our street, probably because the GPU [military police] and OGPU [secret police] had been heavily reinforced and the Resistance leaders decided against a frontal assault. Nevertheless, sporadic fighting continued below the Castle and the Citadel in Buda and on Szena Square.

Kadar's so-called treason had honed our anti-Russian sentiments.

Kadar the Traitor. The odium remained and yet he managed to achieve concessions from Big Brother that others could not. Perhaps future Hungarian historians will re-examine his contribution and remove the present taints.

In the absence of real government, the Workers' Council in Budapest voted for another general strike, except for work on essential public utilities. Hungary came to a stand-still and looters were scared off. However, under the Russian aegis, the Kadar regime slowly established itself, relieving the Workers' Councils of their powers, rather like a grocer with a salami slicer.

By late November 1956, a semblance of normality allowed work at the leather co-op to resume. After the excitement of the previous weeks, I had to return to grinding slavery since the Revolution had not improved my income. Someone obtained orders from shops to make a banana-shaped ladies' shoulder bag which was in big demand. Gabor, also called on retailers, coming away with materials and contracts. He planned on enlisting the aid of his future mother-in-law.

Mother Dobos lacked a proper sewing machine and had no experience. Undaunted, we produced numerous articles of comic description but these could not fill the public demand.

One pastime at the co-op was counting the number of workers remaining. Boring days were enlivened when previously mislaid colleagues turned up with accounts of adventures in Austria. It seemed that lorry drivers offered to take pedestrians across the border to Vienna. For a small fee, naturally, since Capitalism survives in the most unlikely places.

The defeated AVO had not yet re-organised and thousands of unhappy Hungarians took advantage of such lifts. Within a few hours they would be in a dream world where various organisations plied them with gifts and money. Few of these travellers had been at the Budapest barricades but they gracefully allowed themselves to be hailed as heroes. Those rash enough to return had merely come to fetch their families.

Alex caught the fever and dropped un-subtle hints that the Family Dobos should browse greener pastures. Julika and I had already discussed such a possibility. As a youngster, I had been a devotee of the adventure stories Jules Verne had made out of Dumont D'Urville's published voyages. I

particularly favoured New Zealand with its huge trees, whale hunters, sea lions and many other wondrous plants and animals.

Julika was not so keen.

“*Cannibals live there,*” she announced.

In harness

The leather co-op management suffered under many negative restrictions but they allowed members to make a little money on the side. My part-time income, and that of Mother Dobos, proved to Alex that we could make good. For a week or two, all went well then he started needling me, subtly at first, about my courage.

The Hungarian Air Force was likely to summon me for active duty. Under the new regime, I would probably be corrupted with promotion, better pay and might be allowed to finish my university studies but the latter was unlikely. If the government changed, I could go down with it. It was a slippery slope.

Leave Hungary? Despite the boyhood dreams of New Zealand, the reality held little appeal. Alex was no help, changing his mind constantly and confusing us all. Then his real intentions became clear.

“In view of the present uncertainties, why don’t you and Julika get married and afterwards, *que sera sera.*”

There’s not much a chap can do when his prospective father-in-law spells it out like that. However, Julika and I were not accustomed to grace the inside of a church and opted for a civil blessing.

About five minutes away in the former Italian Embassy on the corner of Oktogon Square, the Council used one of the large halls for marriage ceremonies.

I was now thirty-one. Time to settle down.

Lacking my own father beside me, I enlisted the leather co-op president as my witness and, on 5 December 1956, I tied the knot. Mother was present and not happy, afraid of losing me to another woman. Since I had already transferred my worldly goods to the Dobos apartment, there was little she could say except to question my choice. Why Julika when there were better girls about?

With Mother, the best way was to quote Cole Porter: *‘Night and day, she is the one’*

The Family Dobos entered the hall after me. Julika looked good in a formal black dress and white blouse. On her beautifully-coiffured hair perched a small, chic something that looked like a slice of white watermelon. In her hand, she clutched a white carnation nosegay which I had purchased at an exorbitant price.

Finally, an official lined us up before an ornate table supporting a huge vase of flowers. Hidden loudspeakers blared out Wagner’s wedding march and the celebrant walked in with great dignity. Mature and serious, she was well-dressed and wore the Hungarian tricolour as a wide sash, supported on her ample bosom by a small spray of flowers.

Julika and I answered her preliminary questions before she made a fifteen-minute speech on the sanctity of marriage, and other platitudes. Eventually she came to the meaningful bit where Julika relinquished her freedom and I was also challenged.

“I’ll do my best,” I replied. She smiled at my earnest expression.

The clerk invited Julika, our witnesses and me to sign his book, issued our previously-prepared papers and Gabor and his new wife walked back down the aisle, arm in arm, with Mendelsohn’s wedding march booming. There was no provision for a reception or even an impromptu toast and we had to disperse after the customary good wishes.

My brother Joseph was there, standing with his chin on his chest. After a short conversation, he came straight out with it.

“I’m skinned. Can you help with some cash?”

That was his way - seek me out when he had spent his money on his paintings. I gave him my last two hundred *pengo*. Now I was nearly broke but at least he was happy. A few days later, Mother told me he had gone to Austria where the art world appreciated him. An American art foundation offered to sponsor him in a studio.

Good luck to him. At last he has made it.

After having our likenesses recorded for posterity at a nearby photographer's, Julika and I returned to the Dobos apartment where I found Mother with Magda, her husband and a week-old baby. Out in the suburbs and lacking transport, she had not come to the ceremony but had managed to turn up for the wedding dinner.

How Mother Dobos had managed in such times of great shortage was a miracle. Then came the wedding gifts. Magda's was to arrive the following month but my mother-in-law had conjured up a new gold Swiss watch that must have been smuggled in. It was a beautiful piece, in perspex so that you could see the interior mechanism. I was delighted, since neither Julika nor I had expected anything in such troubled times.

In winter, it is dark by 5 pm. Mother left early, no doubt with a heavy heart. Alex also took off before dark to escape to his bivouac, leaving the newly-weds and his wife behind. Quickly the conversation palled, Mother Dobos getting edgier and Gabor working up a healthy head of steam.

It was time to close the door between her room and ours. Had Julika been informed of the rituals? I guessed not and her mother would be listening to every sound through the wall. Julika emerged in a tent-like nightgown, her nervous smile betraying the fact that she would have preferred to have been elsewhere. Protectively brought up and shy, she saw me in my new pyjamas and must have wondered what lay in store. In some trepidation, we both climbed into the bed and I kissed her gently. Then a series of rude noises from below made Julika grab me with all her might.

The bloody Russians had taken over the police cells on the corner of Dob and Trumpet Streets. The sentry must have had a fright or been bored because he fired his rifle in both directions with the yelling and screaming. Highly frustrating, or to paraphrase *Hamlet*, the consummation was still devoutly to be wished.

I asked Julika's mother in the morning if she had heard shots during the night. She said had heard nothing. Then she told me that we were going to travel to Kaposvar to visit the aunt who had brought her up.

The occasion was a sad one for the pig but it gave the family the chance to browse the new husband. I was going to have my honeymoon after all, except that Mother Dobos was going to tag along. I would have to find ways of dislodging her.

Winter outside of Budapest is pleasant. The bite of fresh air, snow-covered hills and meadows and cottages with their long icicles on the eaves was refreshing for a jaded soul. Curling smoke from chimneys signaled the warmth inside to cold travellers. All was still and nothing seemed to be moving as we changed trains and then steamed on to our destination. A small excited crowd awaited us and I was sized up immediately. Having gained weight and being dressed elegantly in a new overcoat, I might have appeared superior but, after cracking a couple of jokes, within a few minutes I was part of the family.

Half an hour's walk took us to the end of the town to a rustic cottage close to ploughed fields. It was no posh hotel and, apart from the kitchen-living room there was only a bedroom with a large double bed and a chaise-longue at its foot.

It was early to retire that night but like a scene from 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves'. Julika was installed in the big bed between the two older women and her young nephew. Gabor rejoiced in the company of the chaise-longue and, as he wished them good night, did he hear some muffled laughing from beneath the thick eiderdowns?

After dispatching the pig, the household busied itself with cooking. I love country-style food but I was after something else as well. In one corner of the kitchen, there was a seized-up leather-sewing machine. If it could be made to work, the aunt said I could have it for nothing and take it away.

Such a thing was worth a fortune and the cost of the freight would make my trip worthwhile.

I organised our return journey with a lorry driver who was delivering food. He was a proper crook and by the time he arrived, the truck was loaded with other passengers huddled together under the canvas roof. Luck was against us. The vehicle broke down halfway to Budapest, leaving Julika, Mother Dobos and I stranded in the freezing cold dusk.

Mothers-in-law have their uses. Mine flagged down a passing truck driver who accepted few *pengo* and loaded us on the back. It was very late when we arrived outside our apartment but we were thankful the torment was over.

A few days later the machine arrived and we made room for it in the kitchen. This gave me something to play with and I had hopes for a bright future. Within a few hours, I had it working and felt it would make me independent of the leather co-op once I had picked up my annual bonus and resigned. However, the gods were about to steal my dream. Or was it the Almighty?

Mother Dobos was crying a lot about Alex's drinking binges and his long absences. When he did return, or was delivered, he was unbearable. For my part, I was concerned about the future of my poor country. Julika and I had strolled along Gorkij Wood-row to see the Yugoslav Embassy surrounded by Soviet tanks and sentries and were surprised that they allowed us to stop and stare. It was obvious that Nagy Imre's life was not worth a fig leaf yet Kadar's betrayal was not yet complete. He had promised that Nagy would go free if he left his refuge but you could be sure Kadar would cut him down shortly afterwards. All in the name of the Party. It reminded one of the worst days of the French Revolution and Robespierre.

Alex's needling was becoming more frequent. I tried to avoid the confrontation but it was not long before he was telling his womenfolk lies behind my back. He seemed determined to do break up the family. Something inside me snapped one morning and I roared back at him in my parade ground voice. Suddenly I had two quaking females in tears and then, sullen silence. It was time to go.

To her credit, Julika agreed. She had endured sexual harassment in her job as an office worker. Mother Dobos supported us, too. She could see we had no future in Budapest.

It was almost too late. Kadar's people had tightened up on excursions to Vienna. We celebrated a sombre Christmas but Boxing Day brought a glimmer of hope. Mother Dobos consulted her friends and it was arranged that I should talk to a woman who lived near the border and was due to visit the city. Another adventure loomed.

Escape

For two days I worked at the leather co-op as if nothing untoward was happening. On 28 December 1956, I worked until five o'clock then quietly slid my precious tools into my bag.

Early the following afternoon, Julika and I began our countdown. Mother was bitterly unhappy as she escorted us down to the street. Trembling, she embraced Julika and kissed me hard as she had never done before. Now I was giving her more pain. I don't think she saw my last wave as I crossed the road.

Early on Saturday, 30 December 1956, Julika and I were ready, having packed a few essentials in a small suitcase. Mother Dobos had sewn three Maria Theresa gold coins worth some 1500 Austrian schillings into my coat and I had my Swiss gold watch. She had also given Julika a gold bracelet. I had a few hundred *pengo* in banknotes but they would not get us far.

We were about to depart when Alex turned up and about to go to work. He muttered something angrily and stormed off, leaving us to give a tearful embrace to my mother-in-law.

In the deserted and winter-cold street, Julika and I, well-dressed for the journey, caught the tram to the eastern railway station to meet the woman who would escort us across the border. She arrived with a basket and handbag on her arm as if she were coming home from shopping. It was all part of her cover in case we were separated in a crowded compartment.

We boarded a long train, with some thirty carriages packed with people heading for Sopron near the Austrian border. The moment I took a window seat in the middle of a large second-class carriage, a loud-mouthed fellow opposite stood up and declared,

“See this man [me]. Keep your eye on him! He’ll get through.”

This unwelcome attention indicated that easy border crossings were a thing of the past. There was more. A heavy knock on the outside of the carriage window announced the presence of a middle-aged Jewish woman and her entourage.

“Your kindness,” she addressed me. “Would you do me a favour? This young girl has a boyfriend in Vienna. I can’t let her go on her own.”

Before I had time to say “no”, Sarah was introduced.

“She needs to cross the border to be with her partner who wants to get to Israel.” The woman and her partner then vanished into the crowd. Leaving Sarah with Julika and me.

Before daybreak the train slowly pulled out through the city and emerged into the open countryside. The monotonous sound of the wheels could send one to sleep, except that in this crowded compartment travellers were lying along the baggage racks above our heads and packed tight in the aisles. The scenery was unchanging, until we stopped at Tatabanya where Hungary’s best coal was mined. So far, so good. Only 150 kilometres left to the border.

Our female guide was seated on the aisle some three metres diagonally in front of us. We had not exchanged a word or even glanced at each other. I guessed she was expecting some problem. If we were caught, my previous blacklisting would re-surface but there was no turning back. *Alea iacta est*. The die is cast, as the Romans used to say.

We stopped at various stations. People shovelled in their breakfasts from their laps but this was no picnic atmosphere. You could feel the tension. A family of five opposite us looked more at ease than the rest, even though they were facing the unknown.

Finally, a largish town appeared. The train slowed and the signboard above the station: GYOR. We were still quite a distance from Austria and the train was surrounded by AVO soldiers. No wonder our guide had separated herself.

The train jerked forward again. Three soldiers entered our carriage and asked each passenger courteously for their papers and destination. I confessed to a small village not far away, saying that Julika and I attending a traditional pork feast. The military mind noted that I was an electrical engineer, said “hm...hm..”, saluted and returned my I.D., not even bothering about Sarah’s papers. When the compartment was properly checked, the train steamed on for a further fifteen minutes before we rolled into another station.

Suddenly a loudspeaker boomed,

“Everybody off the train! Everybody off the train!”

Bayonets with soldiers behind them herded passengers onto the platform. Julika and Sarah preceded me as I walked as slowly as I dared, trying to think of a plan.

I stopped and turned to a corporal prodding me with his machine pistol.

“I want to talk to you,” and pointed to an empty compartment. He agreed, commanding his men to wait in the corridor. I had to move quickly.

“Look.” I showed him my new wristwatch. “Let us go and this is yours.”

He took the bait and departed with his men. Julika and Sarah joined me a little later but, as the train pulled out from the station, I could hear the cries of women and children. I had gained time but no freedom. I had also dared to corrupt an AVO man.

It was already dark by the time the train approached Kapuvar station. High snow-covered banks gave a brooding light to the whole area. Soldiers were likely to start their search at the front end of the train and I cajoled the girls into jumping off the last step of our carriage about five hundred metres from the platform. We might wrench an ankle but the soft snow would break our fall.

They did as requested and I followed with the small suitcase. We landed like cats and dashed towards an outhouse. Behind us, the station was lit on both sides and soldiers were shining powerful torches underneath each carriage and creating general confusion.

At last the lights were switched off and the train moved away leaving the station deserted. Julika and Sarah had been very brave but we needed shelter quickly. In the distance, a faint light from the village suggested we might find safety.

Julika quietly followed in my footsteps, uncomplaining. We came to a good pathway, eventually reached a peasant cottage and asked for shelter. I doubted if they had ever seen well-dressed people in such a tiny hamlet and the man who peered at us by the light of his kerosene lamp probably thought we were ghosts.

To our delight, we were offered a single bed and shivered under the heavy covers before waking at around 4 am. After rewarding our host handsomely, we returned to the railway station. It had been so cold that night that we had left few footsteps in the hard snow. Near the railway yards, the frost descended on us but there were two carriages well away from the station and we headed towards them. A little while later, a branch-line train puffed up to the platform, reversed, coupled on our carriage and we chugged away to the west.

The Almighty hand his hands on our shoulders.

The train ran for a good hour through the dawn before slowing for Osti station. Julika and Sarah were happy to step off on the side away from the platform and hide behind a shack. We waited until the train moved off before sneaking to another railway switch point.

There were three men inside, watching us as we strolled between the sleepers.

“How did you get here?”

I pointed to the train in the distance.

“You’re joking. It was full of border guards and dogs. You couldn’t put a straw between them.”

These kind folk must have considered us deserving cases, telling us who to look for in a village about five kilometres away. We finally found our man, Janos Bacsi, in a two-roomed crib where we spent the last day of 1956. Could we make it? I had run out of paper money.

I proposed to our host an agreement to be passed on to Mother Dobos which I knew she would honour. Despite my crumpled outfit, I still looked like a gentleman and the offer was accepted.

We sat down to a decent lunch and once again faced the prospect of treble-bunking in the only available bed. Janos Bacsi arranged to leave at ten that night. No lights or cigarettes, and quiet movement between the houses.

Shoes off, the three of us lay on the bed and I nearly fell asleep before I heard two distinctly male Russian voices from the kitchen. Our hostess, Bozsine protested vociferously that they should not attempt to enter our room. Her daughter, she remonstrated, was in bed with a heavy dose of the ‘flu and would give it to them.

“It’s a nasty one,” we heard her say. “You’ll need to protect yourselves.”

To prove her point, she placed on the table a flask of spiritous home brew that would knock a mule off its hooves. The Russians took it in long draughts until they were just about legless. Our hostess came into the bedroom beaming.

The day dragged on. We had our last meal of home-grown Hungarian goulash before we took off into the unknown. Eventually Janos Bacsi, staggered into view, propped up by his friends, stinking of booze and no use whatsoever. His younger escorts would have to step in and do the navigating.

At 8 pm, we hoped that copious cups of coffee might sober him up. The continual beratings by his wife did nothing to soothe my nerves but his friends assured me we were in good hands. Everything would go as planned.

They promised to return before 10 pm. We were in our top coats but our guides were nowhere to be seen. Had they been captured? There was an awful racket from the dogs howling at the moon, enough to make one think Dracula was on the prowl. Then they arrived.

We followed their footsteps but realised we were not alone. Shadows emerged from behind houses and we could see other escapees forming a line. A half-moon threw long shadows from the leafless trees, their branches accusing fingers, across the frozen ground.

You must not desert your country, they seemed to say.

There was no time for a guilt trip. Evil forces had torn our nation apart and the Russians were deporting thousands to Siberia. We were the lucky ones.

Creeping between the hovels towards open scrubland and marsh grass, we realised we had to cross an open fifty-metre stretch sown with land mines. The guides knew where to place their feet and, on the given signal, we bent low and ran across this to a frozen canal.

Apparently Austria had annexed half of this huge marshy area in 1919 and created the canal to drain the shallow lake. Clambering down the bank, the three of us spotted two punts used for transporting cane, the villagers' main 'official' source of income. Instead of paddles, there were long poles and we were to be skidded across the ice to the opposite shore. Our guides were obviously skilful smugglers and, no doubt, the authorities turned a blind eye once baksheesh passed across someone's desk.

Another family boarded the punt first, followed by Julika and Sarah. Still bleary-eyed, Janos Bacsi managed to push me onto the ice for my gallantry and, with a loud crack, I disappeared down into some three metres of achingly cold water. I could see the faint outline of the punt above me and kicked for the bank where hands hauled me up. Dripping and the subject of considerable mirth from those who were well-wrapped against the night chills, I could see that my good clothing now resembled something off a peddler's barrow.

I plodded on wetly as our guide took us through a ploughed field towards the dark outline of a pine forest. Suddenly, and out of nowhere, a border guard leapt from behind a tree.

"Halt! Was ist ze?" [Stop! Who are you?] he called, pointing his carbine in our general direction. Janos Bacsi replied briefly in German that we were escapees.

"Zer gut. Komen ze hier." We approached and Janos Bacsi explained that we would remain while he and his lads would return to their village. Like a good shepherd, the soldier us led forward to where, stuck in the ground, there was a small pole from which fluttered an Austrian flag.

"Mir habe imer Osterreich, mir habe Frei." The words of freedom. You are in Austria. You are in a free country.

Here, under a starry sky in Nature's rough ground, I felt I had been reborn. The soldier continued,

"You can light your cigarettes now." He even offered his, so very different to our men, a good ambassador for his country or, perhaps, just more humane.

My wet evening dress and sodden shoes was a minor affliction compared to the knowledge that our luck was holding. I could not tell if Julika was happy but Sarah desperately stuck by my side as if she were my twin.

About thirty of us had made the crossing. We spread out over the field towards the small town of Pamhagen, filed into a schoolhouse and took stock of our surroundings. The street was well-lit, the houses were clean, orderly and well-built. The people were tidily dressed in traditional costumes. Compared to conditions fifteen kilometres away in Hungary, it came as a shock.

This was a whole new culture.

Chapter 12: Refuge

‘New Zealand, for all its faults, has a soul which is kind and caring. This is my home now and my life has not been wasted.’

-Gabor Bain, 1998

The schoolroom floor was thickly strewn with straw. Earlier arrivals had taken up residence near the large, pot-belly stove which gave off a welcome heat. Julika, Sarah and I found a corner and received a hot meal with a drink and a bar of chocolate. This last item we hadn't seen in a long time. A stream of local people was eager to help and brought many gifts.

We were a weary cluster of undemanding hopefuls and our bedraggled appearance obviously deserved sympathy. Splendid people, these Austrians. Bless them. It was the first time that I felt we were actually counted as being human.

This breath of freedom affected me and I secretly shed some tears. We were able to have a good shower and scrub down, a generous delousing and a pile of blankets to wrap in. The three of us fell asleep almost immediately.

It was well after dawn when I woke but ‘the girls’ were still out to it. This was Julika's first real adventure away from her family. Here on the floor, with other people milling about, she lay in her day clothes and I felt guilty about what she had been through. She shook her head as I quietly offered her some chocolate.

What a way to celebrate New Year's Day 1957!

The locals were in their Sunday best ready for church as they popped in with goodies. There were no dirndls here. The women's outfits were similar to Hungarian peasant ones. It was also a good day to dry out my wet clothing and I stood by the stove in a blanket listening to the others forecasting what would happen next.

A bus was to take us to Theresien-Stadt. Formerly a Nazi concentration camp, it had become a United Nations refugee processing centre but I was nervous. No, we would go on to Vienna. I planned to use my limited German to explain that we wished to go to the address Janka Ante had given me. But how?

No one had taken our particulars and we sneaked out after breakfast. Then we met the local constabulary. Our dishevelled appearance plus the small black suitcase gave us away. We were politely requested to return to the school and they escorted us there with the utmost consideration.

Back at the school, I was ready to try again. We slipped out and flagged down a passing car. In halting German, I said that we wished to go to Vienna and where was the railway station, please?

The Almighty was obviously having a good day.

“Jump in,” said the driver. His passenger opened the rear door and we soon lost sight of the school. We were offered a sandwich and some sweets and this kindness began a train of events which otherwise might never have happened.

The driver took us to the Refugee Office ICEM in the heart of the city. There, even before our names were taken, we were given another blast of delousing powder, underclothes and all. Issued with stamps for food and free travel warrants as well as some Austrian schillings, we went off with a voucher for a three-day stay in a third-class hotel.

What next?

Sarah discovered her boyfriend outside the ICEM office and what a godsend! He had enlisted in an 'Elijah' Zionist emigration organisation for Israel and she would accompany him. I wished them well.

*

Julika and I found our hotel, a new experience. For the first time, we were really alone and had three glorious days for what really was our honeymoon. Such a luxury.

One of Janka Ante's addresses led us to a Jewish Hungarian chemist. He was friendly but had already been sucked dry by other refugees. Regretfully, we were too late, but he sent us on our way with some money, good wishes and two other places for help. One was the Jewish Organisation International. We paid a visit and had an interview with a proper interpreter.

After an hour we met Mr Kemeny, who took down our details but kept observing my wife carefully since she did not look Jewish.

Did I have any teaching in Hebrew? Yes, I had had plenty and could read it perfectly when I was a youngster. A paper and pencil was pushed across the desk and I wrote the alphabet, explaining the meaning of each symbol. Then came my biggest surprise.

"You are circumcised?" asked the interpreter.

"Yes, I haven't got the end bit. I had an accident in my youth and had it cut off, so my foster parents told me."

That caused some consternation and my questioner spoke briefly to the interpreter who asked me to display the item in question.

I walked around to his side of the desk, unbuttoned and revealed all. I guess he was more embarrassed than I was but he was evidently satisfied although I wondered what Julika was thinking. He seemed satisfied and, in an apologetic way, asked me if I would mind leaving Vienna to go to a mountain spa and await his decision.

Not at all. I liked the idea. It would give us the chance to rest and relax. The stress of the last few days was really beginning to show.

Austria

Vienna was charming. Our hotel room was centrally-heated and comfortable. We woke on our first morning to the joy of being unrestrained as we could never have been in the refugee camp.

Out for breakfast, it necessary to readjust to cleanliness and orderliness since there were no bombed-out houses festering in the streets and traffic moved quietly about its business.

My travel warrant gave us a free passage on the trams and we made long rides through the city. At lunchtime we came to an area containing many food shops, purchased the basics and took off to a park to eat. I was flabbergasted that vehicles stopped and smiling drivers allowed us to cross the road. I returned the courtesy with my hand on my heart in the best mime tradition and, before long, we were spreading out our first Viennese repast on serviettes below a large figure in bronze, Franz Schubert. This was also a cemetery where some of the great composers and artists were buried.

Friendly Viennese helped us find our way around. They had also seen occupying troops, particularly Russians, and knew what it was like living under pugnacious domination. Only a few months earlier, Austria had said a thankful goodbye to them as the last train pulled out for Mother Russia.

Austria had exercised great moderation towards our Revolution and accepted the moral requirement to help when and where it could. Unfortunately, among the genuine refugees there were troublemakers and criminals who muddied the name of escaping Hungarians. I could understand this.

Uncouth and poorly-dressed loudmouths did not fit into the culture of such a clean and quiet city. Nor did they wish to learn a new language, falsely believing that Austrians should learn theirs. As late arrivals, Julika and I realised that a lot of the former goodwill had evaporated. Despite Austrian

courtesy, there was friction developing. I resolved to speak German as much as possible. No one abused me when I tried to make conversation and, despite my linguistic shortcomings, they appreciated my attempts.

Janka Ante had also given me an address where I could make inquiries about my father's brother, Uncle Ferenc. I knew that one of my aunts, a famous opera singer whom we knew as Erna, had been killed and her body burned at Bergen-Belsen. I had met Uncle Ferenc once, a successful furrier, tall and distinguished-looking who was delightful company.

At a suburban three-storey stone villa, a short woman answered the bell at the concierge's flat and cut me short as I spoke in halting German.

"You're Hungarian," she said. "We should talk about that."

"Yes," I replied and she told me she had married an Austrian thirty years earlier and had lived in the building ever since. We chatted a little then I asked her about Uncle Ferenc.

She sighed then grabbed a bunch of keys and took me to the second floor.

"This was your uncle's flat," she said sadly. "He hid from the Germans and was here until the last day of the Occupation. A good man. His employees brought him food. Someone informed the Gestapo and he was shot in the head."

She was trembling and I was near tears myself.

"The council men came and took his body away. Perhaps he ended up in a common grave," she said. "We have no idea where. They also confiscated his possessions and no one knows where they are."

I left the place weeping.



Our stay in the hotel ended more quickly than we would have liked but we had recuperated sufficiently to take our next step. The options were the ICEM camp at Theresien-Stadt or to accept the Jewish Organisation International's suggestion to go to the spa in Upper Austria. We boarded a bus which took us along a narrow, winding road into the foothills. On the bank of the swift-running Enns River between high cliffs, two cables as thick as a man's arm were concreted into the hillsides for a ferry pontoon. The bus, carts and pedestrians embarked and it was really something to see the water surging against the taut cables as the machinery in the wheel house hauled us across.

At the alpine village of Bad-Krauzen, we disembarked outside a large, two-storey rough-cast chalet, where local folk were working under a Norwegian lieutenant seconded to the International Refugee Organisation.

Our new papers were examined, we were shown our bed in a large dormitory and given a parcel of confectionary, toiletries, towels, underclothing and so on. There was scarcely enough time to complete our showers when Hans, the Norwegian asked me as an electrical engineer to help with the cool-room temperature. He knew about as much German as I did but we understood each other splendidly.

I fixed the regulator and, in pidgin-German, Hans offered me the position of kitchen maintenance man. Here, within a couple of hours, I had a job. A second surprise came when he took our small suitcase and asked us to follow him to a small attic room. This was to be our home during our stay at the spa and, there was a large basket of goodies, with flowers and a greeting card from the local butcher. It was a gift most welcome.

The "Capo"

Apart from the cleaners, we were the first people on the payroll and the kitchen had yet to be set up. *Chef du mission* Hans needed someone to supervise this and he appointed me since I appeared to know a frying pan from a large dixie. The word then went around for an experienced cook and, fortunately, a chap recently-arrived from a labour camp kitchen offered his services.

He was a jovial member of the Bretheren who knew only a little about Hungarian gastronomic tastes. It took a few weeks before he finally got the hang of it and his offerings no longer looked like camel droppings.

Hans had foreseen this eventuality and issued chocolate bars which I distributed to each table with every meal. This was popular and some hoarded their ration and came back for seconds. Others were upset when the supplies ran out and I was blamed. Among the two hundred or so present there were bad-tempered death camp survivors who only looked after Number One.

When things began to get out of hand I would raise my voice and exhort the troublemakers to behave. As a result, it was spread about that I had been a *lager capo* in a death camp. This was a shameful slander mouthed by faceless cowards but I could do little.

Julika joined the locals as a kitchen hand, doing things she had never done before but she was popular and enjoyed the work. To our surprise, we were both well-paid for our efforts and we were able to send parcels of goodies to our relatives as proof that we were not idle.

One fateful day the postman delivered the appointment for our emigration interview. Several nations had agreed to accept a limited number of refugees for re-settlement and we hoped to get on a list.

Returning to Vienna, we were asked to choose our new country and I opted for Brazil since few seemed to be willing to go there. Julika and I had the necessary injections and as I now had enough money, I purchased tools for my leather work and we went back to Bad Krauzen.

The spa camp was in upheaval. Some of our people had been attacked on a daily basis by Nazi riff-raff. It was only 24 kilometres to Linz and Hitler had been born in the village of Fischlham, to the southwest of the city. It still swarmed with his lunatic followers.

Our camp doctor was an aging, former high-ranking S.S. major who regretted that Hitler's thugs had not done the job properly.

The prime example was Herman Krumey who, after murdering some half million people, was awarded five years in jail and was now a teacher showing off his medals at the high school in Steyr, not far from our camp. Lieutenant Hans sent a protest to the district leaders and warned the United Nations that this Nazi menace was re-surfacing but I was conscious that the Mauthausen death camp, where my own father had been 'parachuted' down the quarry face, was less than thirty kilometres away. Now it was open to the public for a small fee.

Julika looked completely non-Jewish so it seemed safe enough to walk in the forest. We enjoyed the pure, snow-crisp air among the dark pines and firs as we stood on a tiny bridge to watch the fish swimming at their ease in a small creek. It was a magical sight, bringing to mind Schubert's trout, with big fluffy snowflakes drifting about us and soft crunching underfoot. Unfortunately more refugees were arriving daily and, among them another contingent of troublemakers.

Artful labour camp loafers appeared with a variety of tools and appointed themselves to various positions in order to gain preferential treatment and provisions. When one appeared, they always seemed to be busy doing something but it was only as a ruse to demand what they considered to be their rights.

Poor Lieutenant Hans, a young man with little experience of skulduggery, would bury his head in strong spirit but his was not social boozing. He assigned me to sort out the question of who appointed these no-gooders to their various positions. As a refugee myself, I found it difficult when confronting hard-core survivors who responded only to blatant signs of authority. This took the bloom off what had been a previously pleasant interlude.

From time to time, we travelled to Vienna to ascertain progress on our case and I heard that a mission had arrived from New Zealand to pick up prospective immigrants. They wanted people with entrepreneurial drive as well as trade skills.

That's for me.

Julika wasn't so sure. It was a long way from Hungary but my mind was set on seeing the people who were behind that door marked 'New Zealand.'

There were three men and one woman in the small office as well as Peter Kameny who had been the interpreter for my interview with the Jewish organisation. The leader was “Mr Ford”. Quietly spoken, lean and greying, his kindly manner appealed to me while his questions were not intrusive. I explained my job and that we were already on the Brazil list but that I preferred to go to an English-speaking country rather than a Portuguese one.

“Besides,” I added, “I’ve got extensive knowledge of New Zealand from Jules Verne.” That evoked a modest chuckle.

I described my knowledge the arts and music and emphasised my love of opera. Mr Ford seemed to be happy with this but cautioned that New Zealand had nothing like this yet.

“You’ll miss it if you come,” he said.

After a medical examination – no known illnesses and Julika strong as a rock - a week later we said goodbye to our kindly Norwegian boss and the kitchen staff and set off to a transit camp in Salzburg. Here, we were confined to a reasonably-sized dormitory sporting tiers of narrow bunks in long rows with little privacy. Two weeks later, two hundred of us boarded the overnight train to Rotterdam and the 12,000-tonne RMS *Sibajak*.

After crossing the Dutch border, we saw charming cottages and cob houses with smart lacy curtains and flowers everywhere. The cleanness and orderliness, the enchanting windmills on the dykes and the millions of push bikes made a deep impression. The train pulled into the Rotterdam Quay stop under a huge dome where thousands hurried about and porters unloaded various kinds of luggage by the side of the ship. Julika and I soaked up this surge of activity and excitement thinking that this was going to be the last memory we would have of Europe.

To a new world

With only a bag each, Julika and I had nothing heavy to load and we waited our turn to board, before being directed to the ship’s hold. Tired from our long journey, we looked like beggars in crumpled clothing. By contrast, the Dutch emigrants and a sprinkling of other European fortune hunters were well-dressed and prosperous.

The captain’s initial attitude, flowing down through the ranks, expressed a sort of apartheid. This meant that we, from Eastern Europe, were to be separated in everything from the shower rooms to the restaurant and the sleeping quarters.

We were second or third-class citizens even though our fares had been paid, as we thought, by New Zealand government subsidy. We had no money to spend on nightly card games or booze. Nevertheless, it was good in one way. The notorious Hungarian red-pepper temperament would have created mayhem had some of us had money for alcohol.

The galley hands were poorly-paid Indonesians who were efficient and clean. The slops that came from them were hardly their fault. Teutons were well-known for turning good raw materials into a tasteless dishes and I would have put Dutch cooks at the top of the list of food spoilers. Apparently our plates were filled with the same quality being served in the restaurant, except that First Class had saloon music which allowed them to forget the quality of what they were eating.

At the end of the main course, stewards arrived with bowls of coloured slush for dessert. This would come in rainbow hues but I was hungry enough to bite off the ship’s rivets with a pinch of salt. However, after the third appearance, I left our communal table and over the next few days, others joined me. Sea-sickness did not help. Among our group were real cooks and we approached the captain to explain the situation.

“If you will give us supplies and galley-space, our men will cook for us.”

He agreed, the purser made the arrangements, a giant bowl of beef goulash was prepared for the mid-day meal and everyone was back for seconds. There would have even been enough for dinner except that the other passengers caught a whiff of it and wanted their share as well.

The chef admitted that our boys were superior cooks and more economical. This first gastronomic victory saw the end of the slops and the disgusting puddings. I guess the captain was pleased to have quelled an incipient mutiny on the lower deck.

A second upheaval occurred through lack of money. We again approached the captain, who listened and telegraphed Wellington. The order came through to issue each of us with ten British pounds, a wonderful gesture. This made a real difference in the tropics since we could buy ice blocks and cold drinks.

A fortnight later we berthed at Curaçao to bunker to take on supplies. Julika and I went ashore with only our sea legs. Suddenly my upset inner ear balance nearly sent me under a car. She steered me towards the colourful tropical market where we bought a whole bunch of bananas, grapes and other fruit for a song.

At Balboa, and anchored in the stream prior to entering the Panama Canal, we went ashore “at your own risk” in the reputedly drug and gangster-crazy Panama City. Even so, we escaped scot-free from the Hispanic quarter and returned to the ship in the dusk after dancing to an original rock n’ roll band at the American Servicemen’s Club. It was a swinging finish to a happy day of sightseeing.

Journey towards hope

Back on the ship with my sea-legs regained, poor Julika was now ill. With eight adults in each steerage cabins sleep in this heat was difficult. Crossing the Line wasn’t pleasant either being reminiscent of a torturer’s fun day at a medieval fair, especially after being smeared in the lower regions with an evil concoction which no soap would shift.

A day later, we caught the edge of a huge hurricane and our 12,000 tonner rose like a matchstick on a crest before plunging into a trough where sky and spray loomed above a wall of water. For a chap from Hungary this was not as Jules Verne had explained it. On the radio, we heard that disaster had hit all the islands of the eastern Pacific.

We subsequently berthed at Papeete in Tahiti where I was asked to referee a soccer game. A crowd of locals and passengers gathered and had a rollicking good time. No one really understood the swear words from the opposing teams and our refugee boys won 3-2. After the game, Julika and I set off for the ship and were suddenly drenched by tropical downpour which had embarrassing consequences. My soaked and now body-hugging cream silk shorts revealed the most intimate details. I grabbed two large coconuts but certain bystanders laughed hilariously offering all sorts of comments in French.

“Tu n’as pas exaggerate?” and “Tu n’as pas modeste!”

As I walked up the gangway the duty officer asked politely if the soccer match had given me a hernia.

That night, after being propositioned by a Tahitian *fille de nuit* and retreating before a real, almost Hungarian-style, ding-dong between civilians and Legionnaires we strolled back to the ship, thinking of Gaugin and wondering about New Zealand.

On the 34th day out, the snobby Dutch captain held a ball to celebrate our arrival and invited most of the passengers to his table. All except us Central Europeans. What hurt even more was having to listen outside to the music.

Beggars at a banquet.

Even so, we had made friends with returning Dutch travellers who acquainted us with some aspects of New Zealand life. I wondered how a leather worker with hand tools might fit in but was cheered by the fact that it was a good place to bring up children, with free schooling, good medical services and inexpensive housing. The whole thing sounded like a grand social example to the nations of the world. It was also too good to believe.

Final landfall

Early morning, 10 May 1957.

Julika and I were on deck to observe the outer islands of our future home. Was this Hamlet's 'undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns'? We shed no tears about remaining in Europe but we were anxious about what lay in store.

It was late Friday afternoon when the ship sailed into Wellington Harbour and dropped anchor.

We were there but not quite! We had to stay in the stream for three days and we recalled the departure from Rotterdam. Confetti, brass band waltzes and marches, holding the streamer till the very last moment when the fragile strips of paper broke. The laughter, tumult and tears of farewell which carried on until the final lighthouse.

Would we be welcome here in New Zealand?

On the Sunday, a few cars appeared on shore, a jumble of cranes jutted out from dilapidated wooden shacks, the train marshalling yards were deserted and everything looked untidy. Among the shrubs and trees on the hillsides the red-painted, corrugated-iron cottage roofs made a pleasing sight but this looked like a village, not the capital.

A few fishermen were on the wharf but little else. This, as we soon discovered, was the New Zealand "weekend". Our first flavor of the new culture.

The pilot finally came aboard on Monday, along with Immigration Officers and we went through the bureaucratic rigmarole. Even New Zealand was not immune. We were registered under the status we had been until we had escaped – Julika, the music student and Gabor, the electrical engineer.

Our interpreter told us that we had been directed to a town I did not know and could not pronounce. It wasn't Auckland. Most disappointing. We were told to stay on board until called to walk across to the inter-island ferry *Maori*. Around 8pm, we were escorted to the ferry and a tiny, two-berth cabin in the bows. At least we had privacy and the sailing was so smooth that even Julika did not feel sick.

Our first real example of New Zealand life came very early, a sharp knock on the cabin door and something popped down outside. It was a large tray with tea, marmalade and toast for two. Our first meal in our new land even though we were still at sea.

In Lyttelton we boarded a train to take us to a dingy dump of a railway station in Christchurch. Here, we were herded together to listen to a harangue by a local Hungarian who, after a cursory greeting, reminded us to behave ourselves, partake of a language course at the Technical College and not to indulge in the favourite Hungarian pastime of attempting to seduce married women.

It appeared that patriots who had come by air in the weeks prior to our arrival had muddied the Hungarian name. Initially, at the height of world condemnation of Soviet brutality in Hungary, sympathy had been extended to these supposed poor and homeless freedom fighters. They were lionised and heaped with gifts yet few had been involved in the actual Revolution.

Many were of Slavic origin from Northern Hungary near the Russian border. Most were young adventure-seekers and only a few married couples with a trade. Some had been quick to realise how they could better themselves but had not bothered to learn English since they expected New Zealanders to learn their language.

When the whistle was finally blown on them, they quickly turned into foul-mouthed troublemakers who initiated fights all over the place, behaved irrationally and committed crimes. The newspapers had been full of their misdeeds. The eulogies quickly disappeared and now New Zealanders looked at Hungarians with suspicion. I felt that we were not particularly welcome.

Christchurch was not like Europe. It seemed as if we had been transported back to the 19th century. Life appeared to be easy-going and people were not really interested in the problems of others. The affairs of the village were more important than those of the world.



We left our railway carriage at what seemed to be an abattoir-like shack, a drafty, dingy place with worn or missing weatherboards and holed, corrugated iron sides. This part of the Christchurch railway station, the Lyttelton train terminal, was hardly an impressive sight.

A sturdy, balding chap stepped out from among the bystanders and introduced himself in such a way that even if I had known the language, I would have had difficulty in understanding him. Ah, the New Zealand dialect!

He led us to his Vauxhall Velox car and bundled us in. A short ride took us in to the heart of the city where the cathedral was prominent on one side and a red building, with a clock, on the other. We stopped outside this, a post office, and waited while he popped in to collect his mail.

Julika and I surveyed our surroundings.

This was a small village with a church at its centre. All the pedestrians, including our host, wore grey trousers with twenty-inch cuffs and sports coats, thin ties with diagonal stripes and grey, crumpled felt hats. The women were in body-hugging, dark blue or grey ankle-length frocks with a *decolletage* coyly hidden behind odd-looking fur around their necks. On their heads were the small blue or black hats that Europe had discarded last century. Their shoes were plump, priggish and black. Such was the *haut couture* of Christchurch.

Accustomed to working with well-dressed people, this colonial elegance sent shivers down my spine, especially since they all seemed to look the same. Perhaps it was a sort of uniform? Surely this couldn't be happening in a modern Western country.

At last, the Vauxhall drove down Cheltenham Street to a villa-like cottage in Merivale suburb.

"We're home," indicated our driver, letting us out still clutching our bags and the tiny suitcase. A plump woman came out to greet us with the same tonal inflections of her man, at her feet a toddler with the face of a Tintoretto cherub smeared with food. She said something which I could not fathom but I nodded my head and then a tribe of children debouched from the house. There seemed to be enough to make up a soccer team.

"This is my son, my daughter," they were introduced and so on up to the seventeen-year old girl.

Surrounded by hub-bub, we were escorted to a small, untidy room and scarcely had time to get our bearings when the oldest girl called to us to come for a cup of tea.

Something to eat! Julika and I had eaten our last meal on the ferry hours earlier. The kids were noisy, all talking at once and us not understanding a word but courteously nodding our heads or laughing where it seemed appropriate. The lady of the house on her perch directed the throng as to what to do when pouring cups of tea with milk sloshed in and offering two vanilla biscuits. These virtually went down in a single gulp. That was it?

"Tea" obviously had a different meaning here.

The one-sided conversation continued and, if we missed a nod, they would slow down then enunciate more loudly as if we were deaf. My head was swollen with so much loud talk that I needed to rest. Julika felt the same way but not the ten kids. They rumbled up and down the stairs, their cries and screams ululating above their mother's booming commands and the whole house echoed and re-echoed.

Around 5pm, we were called for dinner. All twelve gathered at the table. The man of the house sorted out the food onto the plates as if he was a mess-sergeant: one medium-sized potato in its skin, one tablespoon of peas, two tablespoons of green beans, two thin slices of carrots, one small portion of corned beef as thick as tissue paper. Yet I could hardly tell them how long it had been since we had eaten a decent meal. The food went down quickly and we were introduced to another cup of tea and two vanilla biscuits.

Next morning, we endured more Kiwi tea and two biscuits. I had to do something before I dropped with hunger so Julika and I decided to go into town to find something more filling. Using the cathedral spire as our guide, we walked along the Avon River banks and the willows were a wondrous sight.

Half an hour later, we were ready to spend the ten pounds given to us at the railway station by the Immigration Officer. But on what? The bread looked like white bricks. There was no spiced sausage or small goods, little in the way of cheese or dairy products and a pint of milk if you remembered to bring a bottle.

At last, on the corner of Hereford and Colombo Streets, we took refuge in a shop declaring itself to be “Ernest Adams” where a cream-filled sponge looked inviting. We pointed to what we wanted, paid over two shillings and sped back to Hagley Park to eat. Rich, orange-flavoured muck, but it filled the empty space and entertained the birds and ducks as well. It seemed a long way from Vienna and munching tasty continental food beneath the Schubert statue.

It would take time to understand this slice of Old England.

We got ourselves lost on the other side of Hagley Park but a taxi driver came to our rescue, depositing us outside our billet for a reasonable fee. At dinnertime we were provided with a potato piled on top of a thin slice of greasy mutton on a plate of parsnips and cabbage which had been boiled to death.

Don’t think me ungrateful, but something had to be done about the noise and the cuisine. The following day, Julika and I located the Labour Department who brought in the translator and, shortly, we were able to say farewell to our hosts. We were taken to Hansons Lane in Riccarton where there were proper units for married couples with a communal kitchen and dining room. There was recognisable food and plenty of it and we were told we could stay until I found a job and we had our own flat.

I could only talk German with a smattering of English but I managed to obtain a job in a leather factory owned by a German man. Within three weeks, Julika and I were able to go out and look for a place of our own. We discovered that there were plenty of rooms to let in the city but not for Hungarians. For days we trudged the streets without success, thanks to the fear our compatriots had created among landlords.

At last, in an old, shaggy building on Hereford Street, a Dickensian lady calling herself “Mrs Clifford” appeared behind a small window to inform us that she had numerous flats to let. It seemed that she had taken pity on us and would rent out “Number 11” upstairs on Cashel Street.

At first sight, it was a dilapidated single room with a small stand-in cooking box. A gas meter would oblige us for cooking and lighting if we fed it with silver coins. A further reconnaissance revealed a broken window which I had to cover over with a blanket.

This was the beginning of the Canterbury winter. However, despite the inconvenience of our ancient accommodation, we were on our own with one small kitten for company. It was a memorable start to our struggle for existence *but we were free!*



Reflections

We could now begin life as a married couple in a country where men did not carry guns and shoot each other. The summer of 1957 was pleasant. We eventually had the broken window fixed and learned some English although, when shopping, it was still a matter of pointing and trusting that the butcher or grocer was honest.

Our immediate neighbour was an old Russian emigre with insomnia who banged around noisily in the middle of the night. After I threatened to do him in, Julika calmed the situation and the old fellow decided to shift to safer pastures.

She got herself a job packing sweets in a nearby confectionary factory. I became foreman in the leather workshop and we scrimped and saved enough to put down a deposit on a new house.

By that time, we had two children, one still a babe in arms. They had a whale of a time on the property which had been a former horse paddock while we slogged to turn the gorse and tall grass into a recognisable lawn and garden.

Julika and I felt like real pioneers. Yet this was the sort of independence we could never have achieved back in Budapest.

Life was leisurely. We gradually learned to fit in to our new surroundings and I found ways and means of earning more money - working as a kitchen hand and a wine steward - before setting up my own leather factory and retail store.

The business prospered for a time, despite competition, until cheap overseas imports knocked the bottom out of the trade and I was forced to close down.

Was worth it? Julika and I have come a long way in the last forty years and not just in terms of physical distance.

In the 1950s, I was just another “bloody foreigner” which progressed to being a “bloody Hungarian” which says something about the nature of discrimination in New Zealand. Julika came home from work one day saying that one of her colleagues had asked her if she was married to a Jew. With her delightful sense of humour, my good wife replied, “I don’t know, but he is tall enough for me.”

I have entertained New Zealanders in public with Shakespeare recitations and Hungarian poetry, performed mime shows and folk dances, created sculptures and paintings and have never ceased to practice and learn more about music. Unfortunately, none of these things would give me a living here in Christchurch as they might have done in Europe.

Where do I feel I belong now? New Zealand, for all its faults, has a soul which is kind and caring. This is my home and my life has not been wasted. Through all the tribulations, I have managed to hold my head high.

Why am I writing all this?

The Almighty may have wished me to talk so that a few might listen. In 1979, I returned to Europe, finding that most of my relatives have departed this life. Of my four siblings, I am the last survivor.

In Frankfurt-am-Main, I wanted to visit Goethe’s house and got into conversation with an English-speaking Polish film maker who was researching the rise of the Neo-Nazi movement. He was interested in my own story and, on reading something from one of Goethe’s works in the great man’s home, we discussed whether a chap should write his own autobiography.

For me, the answer was simple. To do so was the greatest possible courtesy to future generations and that is why Gabor Bain has put pen to paper in 1997 and 1998 to remind folk of what it was like to have been an ordinary man in the 20th century.

Editor’s note:

Sadly, the Canterbury earthquakes, following Gabor’s death in 2010, interrupted a narrative which would have included Julika’s observations on New Zealand life.

This has not been possible but her son Robert continues the story....

Thirty years of living on the edge

‘Is there life after The Holocaust? Is there life after a personal Holocaust? How do you make something of a life after a personal devastation or ethnic cleansing?’

My father relentlessly pursued the answer.

Over time, I discovered that, to Jews, the Holocaust is what Gallipoli is to the Anzacs and that my father was quietly shattered by his earlier years of surviving oppression. Then this had been followed by the pogroms of the Hungarian 'Black Cross' weeding out supposed anti-Communists. These were not easy times for either of my parents.

My father was a taciturn pragmatist not given to bouts of emotion (unless it was anger) but with a deep love of education. In the end, I suspect that he rejected Communism for intellectual reasons rather than because of his personal history. I know that he grieved the loss of academic achievements in Europe by pursuing a life in 'Godzone' in a different culture, country and language.

His life in New Zealand was spent as a blue-collar worker trying to feed his two hungry sons but his limited personal time was spent mostly chasing the intellectual goals of his younger days. This included reading, writing, sculpting, painting canvases, playing and teaching the guitar (which he played in front of our family television almost every night), watching opera and ballet, gardening and fishing.

He greatly enjoyed the freedoms New Zealand offered while being openly disdainful of rugby, racing and beer. He did not miss Hungary as much as my Mother did and, unlike her, spoke little about it to his sons.

My childhood was idyllic in many ways and yet, as a young teenager, I was depressed and anxious. I believe there were hidden facets in our family life which profoundly influenced my world view resulting, at least in part, from observing my father's search for meaning. As a committed Christian since my university days, it was painful seeing him wrestling with his own beliefs and finding little consolation, with my mother trying to smooth troubled waters. His battle was evidenced in his continuing to write memoirs, essays and commentaries until he died not long after the 7.1 Christchurch magnitude earthquake on 3 November 2010.

My father's death was a great loss to our small family. It represented a seismic shift in relationships as often happens in strong patriarchies and it took me many years to fully comprehend his passing.

Looking at a faded monochrome photocopy of his face at the age of thirty, I see the steel which lay beneath, the strength, stubbornness and the sternness. He wasn't given to indulging temperamental teenage sons but he was a survivor, going on with daily living when all hope of happiness had vanished.'

-Robert Bain, the second son, aged 54, November 2017