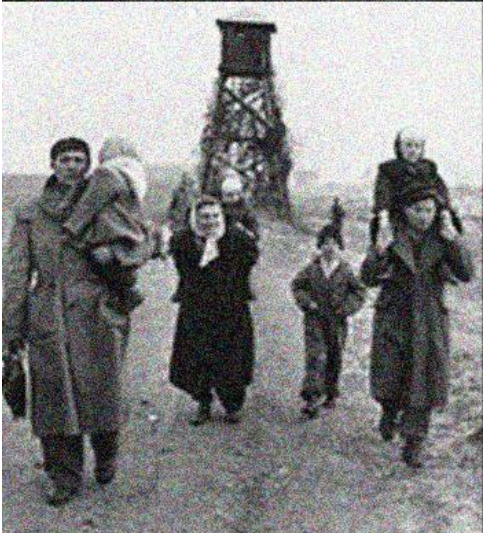
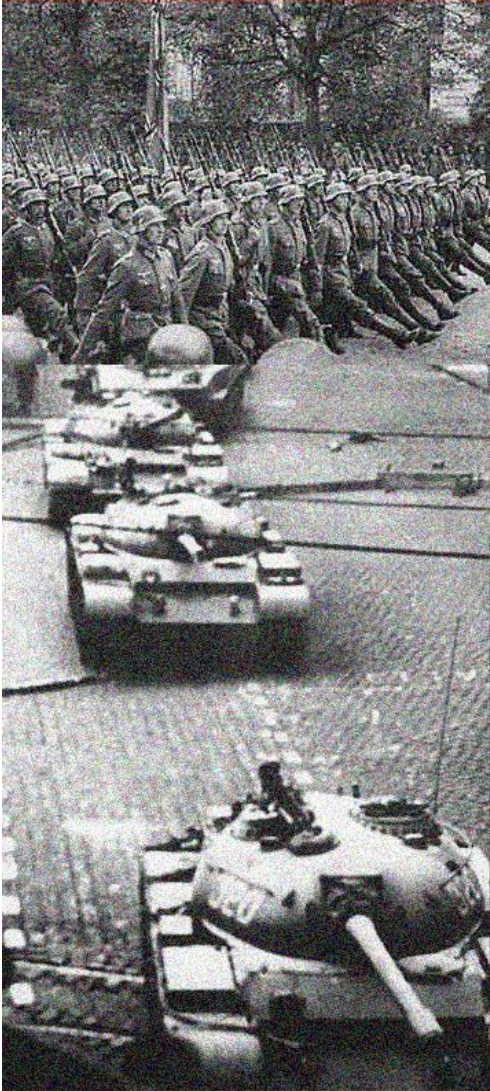


# Hurdling to Freedom



**A Hungarian's Escape to America**

Volume 2\_rev

A memoir by  
**Les Besser**



# **Hurdling to Freedom**

## **Volume 2\_rev**

**A Memoir**

**by**

**Les Besser**

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank my wife for her encouragement, patience, and assistance in writing this book. Our children have also provided reviews, editing, and graphic support. Without my family's help, I could not have completed the work.

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## Hurdling to Freedom (download a free Internet version)

*This is a story of survival. And accomplishment. It is a gritty tale of growing up in a Socialist country after surviving the physical dangers of the invasion by Germany, the later re-conquest by Russia, and the rapid conversion to a Socialist government. And yet, it is a fascinating account that keeps your interest as Les and his mother somehow survive the grinding conditions and danger of WWII that all civilian populations face as giant armies move across their lands.*

*No one gets to choose the year or place of their birth. But if you could, you would not choose Les' birth year of 1936, in the potentially troublesome part of Eastern Europe, just about the time that Nazi Germany decided to move East. Les' life story here is divided into two parts. Volume 1 tells about his boyhood at the outset of WWII, living in wartime conditions, and growing up in a problematic Socialist society. He grabbed education as he could, found rewards in athletics, and ultimately became a real fighter in the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Volume 2 is devoted to his emigration to Canada and later to the United States to complete his college education and embark on his remarkably fruitful microwave career.*

*The HPMemoryproject.org archive of remarkable essays is mainly devoted to Hewlett-Packard careers and the HP work culture. In Les' case, HP shared his technical career with Fairchild, Farinon, and COMPACT Engineering (later renamed Compact Software), the company he founded that revolutionized microwave component design in the 1970s. (COMPACT: **C**omputerized **O**ptimization of **M**icrowave **P**assive and **A**ctive **C**omponent**T**s). All totaled, his time at HP was a mere three-and-a-half years. Yet, his microwave career was rooted in the HP Computer-driven Vector Network Analyzers, profoundly changing microwave component engineering and design in the late 1960s. The combination of a microwave designer being able to MEASURE the performance of his actual component and the COMPACT automated design software revolutionized that period of microwave history. Jack Browne, Editor of the trade magazine Microwaves and RF, awarded Les the well-deserved title "Father of Computer-Aided Engineering Software." Les ultimately accounted for MAJOR sales of HP equipment, even as he built his own company.*

*Les' two books form a fascinating and gripping life story. Once you get started, you will likely be pulled into his story to see how it turns out. The Curator and I decided it would be appropriate to provide downloadable files of both books, AS LES WROTE THEM, for readers who wish to read all the details. If you want to read Les' remarkable tale of childhood in trying conditions, carrying a gun in the Hungarian Revolution, escaping that reign under dangerous situations, and eventually reaching ultimate achievement in high tech, be sure to download them at:*

[https://www.hpmemoryproject.org/timeline/les\\_besser/hurdling\\_to\\_freedom\\_00.htm](https://www.hpmemoryproject.org/timeline/les_besser/hurdling_to_freedom_00.htm)

John Minck  
HPMemoryproject Moderator

## Prologue

In Volume 1, I described the first 20 years of my life, including my mother's struggle to raise me and later her sister's child. Removed from school during fourth grade to help her family survive, my mother worked as a live-in domestic during the aftermath of World War I and the Depression era. Although her working hours lasted from early morning into the evening, she supplemented her formal third-grade education by learning from her employers and their children's governesses. Still living in the small city of her birth, by her mid-20s, she had developed good communication skills and had become a gourmet cook.

While she worked as a housekeeper for a bachelor, he impregnated her but had no interest in having a child. When she refused to have an abortion, the man fired her and sent her to live in Budapest. That is where I was born in 1936.

Unable to find a live-in domestic position where I could be with her, she found the Dancsa family, who took me in as a foster child. Their younger son, Pista, and I were nearly the same age, and his young mother nursed both of us during infancy. In the next three years, Pista and I developed a close friendship throughout his life.

In 1939, when my mother realized that emotionally, I was becoming part of the Dancsa family, she desperately tried again to find employment that would allow us to live together. But she failed. Influenced by the infamous Hungarian suicide song of the 1930s, *Gloomy Sunday*, she contemplated jumping into the Danube—holding me in her arms.

Literally, in the last hour, a kind Jewish man, József Braun (*Braun bácsi*), hired her and allowed both of us to move into his home. During the next three years, he became my mentor and helped me to develop a keen mathematical ability. Mother and I lived there happily until the pro-Nazi regime sent Mr. Braun to a forced labor camp. After finding another place to live, she supported us as a laundress and housecleaner.

My public-school education began in 1942, just as Hungary entered World War II on Germany's side. Because I was a skinny and sickly child, Mother had me excused from physical education. I excelled as a student, but my classmates considered me clumsy and unfit for sports. Even so, my secret hope was to become a soccer player somehow.

As soon as the Hungarian Army recovered most of the territories lost after World War I, the Regent of Hungary declared neutrality and ordered its troops to withdraw from the fighting. Hitler's swift response was to arrest the Regent, order the SS occupation of our country, and halt the withdrawal of the Hungarian soldiers. A new Fascist government took over and remained in control until the end of the war. Our disheartened troops suffered devastating losses on the Russian front.

Living through the last year of the war was extremely difficult for everyone in Budapest. Drastic food shortages, frequent aerial bombings by the Allies, and strict regulations imposed by the new government affected all residents. Mother, always sympathizing with the underdogs, helped Jews to obtain fake documents. We provided refuge in our tiny apartment to two elderly Jewish men. In addition to the already difficult living conditions, we also feared that the Fascist authorities would discover our two guests.

When the Red Army's 102-day siege of Budapest ended, our once beautiful city lay in ruins, but most Hungarians greeted the victorious Soviet troops as liberators. In a few years, however, we saw one form of dictatorship replace another. Our country became part of the Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc as the Cold War developed.

Following the war, two significant changes occurred in my life.

First, my mother allowed me to participate in physical education. I worked hard to catch up with the other kids and became a decent soccer player. With the encouragement of our neighbor, a former international Marathon champion, I also began to run daily.

Second, an eleven-year-old cousin who lived in the country lost her mother during a bombing raid. Her stepfather passed her care to my mother. Initially, I resented her and how she had been dumped on us, but we soon formed a close kin relationship. No longer was I an only child.

During my seventh-grade physics class, I built a crystal detector radio. My achievement directed me toward a career in electronics. After completing eighth grade, I was admitted to a four-year technical high school specializing in electronics. A high school degree was already beyond the highest education level in my mother's family. Although the college path would have been free in the socialized school system, I never took advantage of it.

At 14, I joined a track club and, under expert coaches, became a top-notch hurdler. Setting a new record and winning national championships in my age group gave me hope of competing one day at the Olympics. I sacrificed most of the typical teenage activities to succeed with my goal.

After graduating high school and receiving a technician certificate, I began to work in a factory. The same company also hired my "milk-brother" Pista, and our close friendship further developed as we worked in the same department. My sister was also employed and contributed to our family's income so my mother could lighten her workload.

Then, a completely unexpected event exploded in our typically tightly controlled country. The 1956 October demonstrations by university students led to a full-scale rebellion. The Communist government called for Soviet help, and the Red Army intervened. After days of heavy fighting, the superior firepower of their army put down the revolt. More than 200,000 Hungarians escaped the West within a few weeks to find freedom.

Even though I had only a minor role in the revolutionary activities, I escaped to Austria with a former classmate and his wife to avoid possible reprisal. By good fortune, the three of us received immigrant visas to Canada. Arriving there without a penny and not speaking English or French had made the start of our new lives difficult. Although my first name, László, was anglicized to Leslie and later to Les, I still looked and behaved like a typical foreigner.

This second book describes how I adjusted and learned to survive in the new world.