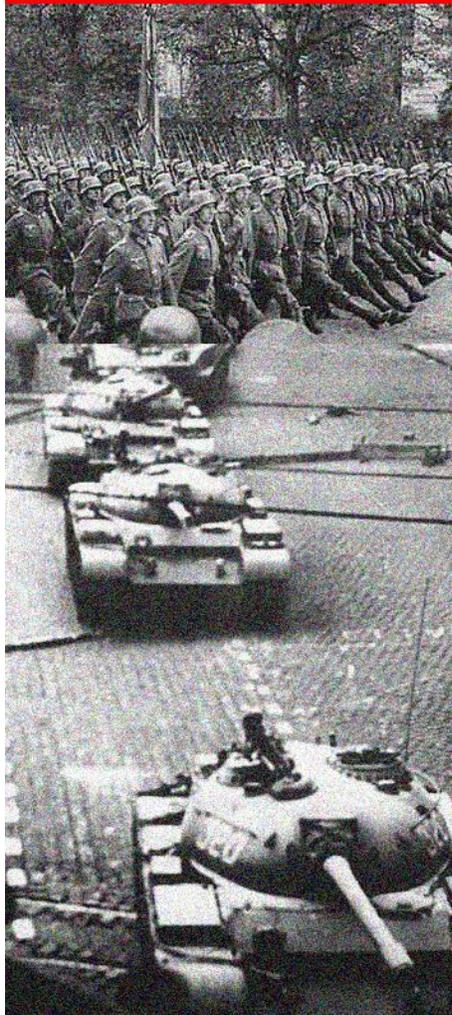


Hurdling to Freedom



A Hungarian's Escape to America

Volume 1_rev

A memoir by
Les Besser

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Hurdling to Freedom (download from the 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 an engrossing 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 definitely 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 talks about his boyhood at the outset of WWII, living in wartime conditions, and growing up in a difficult 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 devoted mostly 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, which revolutionized microwave component design in the 1970s. (COMPACT: Computerized Optimization of Microwave Passive and Active ComponentTs). 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, along with 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 wish to read Les' remarkable tale of childhood in trying conditions, carrying a gun in the Hungarian Revolution, escaping that reign under dangerous conditions, and eventually reaching ultimate achievement in high tech, download them at

https://www.hpmemoryproject.org/timeline/les_besser/hurdling_to_freedom_00.htm.

*John Minck
HPMemoryproject Moderator*

Preface

Few know this, but I was a billionaire at the age of 10!

The Nazi occupation, fascist tyranny, World War II, and its following reparation payments devastated my country, Hungary. Paper money became worthless. By 1946, the Hungarian *pengő*, our version of the dollar, had been hyper-inflated to the point where a **trillion pengő** could barely buy a loaf of bread. Rescued from the grip of Hitler's troops by the Soviet Army, Hungarians were promised a "Worker's Paradise." Unfortunately, one form of political despotism was replaced by another.

In 1952, the much-hated Communist dictator of Hungary, Mátyás Rákosi, asked with much sarcasm:

... In the so-called "free world," how often have governments used tear gas, weapons, bludgeons, policemen, and soldiers against those who only asked for more bread? What wouldn't the Voice of America give to be able to cite just one example of tanks and arms used against the masses in a socialist country ...

He could not have been more wrong. By 1956, we had witnessed how Stalin's utopian promises were little more than a diversion to buy time while the Soviet war machine gobbled up more and more countries, crushing dissent and stunting productivity. Unhappiness and frustration swept through Eastern Europe. This anger erupted into the Hungarian Revolution.

When I arrived penniless in Canada in 1956 without speaking English or French and three years later began college in the United States, I found a lifestyle that couldn't have been more different than the one I left behind.

Despite my "billionaire" status, my story began in extremely modest circumstances. A single mother raised me with only a formal third-grade education and adopted my cousin whose mother was killed in a bombing raid. She earned money by working long days, doing laundry, ironing, and house cleaning for others. I learned to appreciate the little we had, but it fired my ambition to strive for more. Joining a track club and becoming a champion hurdler also helped me develop a mentality to overcome other obstacles in my life.

I have been blessed by the opportunities available in the New World and am grateful for the lessons I learned. I was fortunate to raise my family in a privileged enclave of the San Francisco Bay area, called **Silicon Valley**. With their American upbringing, my children find my tales of poverty, war, and revolution almost too fantastic to believe. Now, as they raise their children, paraphrasing what Abraham Lincoln said summarizes my feelings about my new home:

The important thing is not what your grandparents were, but what your grandchildren will be!

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my wife for her encouragement, patience, and assistance 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.

Credit should also go to the Los Altos/Mountain View Adult Education class participants and instructors. Their feedback, corrections, and encouragement helped make the book more readable.

Last but not least, I wish to acknowledge friends from various parts of the world, particularly from Hungary and Canada, who also provided reviews and additional information.

Thank you to all!

Chapter 1: The Hungarian Revolution

"There is a chance that the top three Hungarian 400-meter hurdlers will retire after the Melbourne Olympics," my coach told me at our track club's 1956 end-of-season meeting. "That would elevate you in the national ranking and place you closer to making the team that travels internationally."

The coach's words sounded like magic to my ears. For the past six years, since I began to run hurdles competitively, my dream had been to be on the National Team—with the ultimate goal of someday competing at the Olympics. Setting the national Under-16 record in the 80-meter hurdles in 1952, winning the national junior 400-meter hurdle championship in 1955, and becoming a member of the National Track Team in 1956 built my hope for continued future success. Having recently turned 20, after having lived a little over half of my life under the socialist system, I was a content young man, filled with confidence about my future.

I had been raised—along with an adopted sister—by a single mother, Anna Besser. She worked long days doing laundry and housecleaning to provide my sister and me with the basic necessities. Throughout her turbulent life, Mother had made numerous sacrifices and passed over many "hurdles" to guarantee food and shelter for us. Except for a few months, while World War II raged over Budapest, we had sufficient food and wore simple but clean clothing. Our apartment in Budapest did not have such luxuries as central heating and hot water, but neither did many of the places that housed the city's population.

After graduating from a four-year technical high school, I worked as an electronic technician at a medium-sized company, Audio. My job consisted of testing incoming components for tape recorders and large sound systems—such as the Moscow Olympic Stadium's PA system, which my company designed and manufactured. Most of my working time was spent spot-checking circuit boards and electronic components. After my first year of employment, when I had gained some experience, my supervisor began sending me to vendors in other parts of Budapest to perform inspections before delivery. I looked forward to these factory visits most of all, as they offered me opportunities to leave our cramped inspection lab and meet face-to-face with technical professionals throughout the capital.

On a cool but sunny autumn afternoon, October 23, 1956, I was returning to Audio after spending the morning across town at *Tungsram*¹. Transferring streetcars mid-town, I noticed a mass of people heading purposefully up the wide boulevard near the Western Railroad Station.

"What's happening here?" I asked one of the onlookers.

"University students are demonstrating," he replied, after sizing me up carefully, and then walked away from me. Perhaps he was concerned that I might be a government security man in civilian clothing. It was safer not to talk with strangers. I understood that and remained quiet.

As they marched, the crowd grew to tens of thousands from all walks of life, holding hands and doing the unthinkable: carrying anti-Soviet signs and chanting slogans: "We Want Free Press!" "Release All Political Prisoners NOW!" "Bring Home Our POWs from the Soviet

¹ One of the original European lightbulb factories, bought out by General Electric after the fall of Communism.

Union!” Demonstrations were not tolerated in the People’s Democracy of Hungary—unless organized by the Communist Party, of course—and those signs and slogans had me wondering if perhaps I had stepped off the streetcar into a different world.

Unknown to me then, I witnessed a pre-planned demonstration that had started at the Technical University and marched across the Freedom Bridge of the Danube. The final destination was Heroes Square, where a giant statue of Stalin had been erected a few years earlier. On their way, the demonstrators stopped to pay tribute to the statues of two former revolutionary heroes: General Bem and the poet Sándor Petőfi. Later, I learned that student meetings had occurred at several Hungarian universities since the Polish ship workers’ uprising some weeks before. The new Polish leader, Wladyslaw Gomulka, had promised fundamental political reforms, although he assured the Soviet Union that their close ties would remain in effect. Encouraged by the Polish success, the Hungarian students created a list of demands and submitted it to the Budapest Radio station for broadcast. Their request was refused, so they planned a march with signs and flags on October 23. Most signs and banners had been created in the universities’ workshops and made out of plywood and cloth.



Left: Student demonstrators gathering at the Technical University. Center: Others joining the march. Right: A huge crowd gathered at the statue of General Bem.

My heart raced with a mix of fear and joy. I was tempted to join the group, but the expectation of a crackdown by the authorities held me back. More signs and placards boldly bounced above the crowd as it strolled down the boulevard: “Pull Out The Occupying Soviet Troops From Our Country!” “Fair Payment For Goods Shipped To The USSR!” “Open Our Borders To The West!” “Allow Multiple Political Parties!” Some demonstrators also carried red-white-and-green Hungarian flags with the socialist logo cut out from the center.

My disbelief soon gave way to mild annoyance as I realized that the demonstrators were blocking my connecting streetcar line, and I would have to walk a long way. Stopping at a pay phone—it was not easy to find a functioning phone—I called my colleagues at Audio and told them about the demonstration. They were as stunned as I was at the nature of the protest and particularly baffled that neither the police nor the much-feared *ÁVO—Állam Védelmi Osztály* (State Security Organization, Hungary’s answer to the KGB) were on the scene, cracking skulls and throwing everyone in jail. Knowing that the government would not tolerate this too long, I gave up going back to work and walked home.

Recently published references show that the Police Chief of Budapest sympathized with the demonstrators and refused armed police intervention. Army leadership had mixed feelings and also decided to stay on the sidelines. That left only the ÁVO, but at first, the Communist

government officials felt it would not be wise to unleash the feared group on the unarmed demonstrators.

Once home, I eagerly turned on our radio to learn more about the demonstration, only to find that it was not mentioned. Heroes Square, the Budapest version of Central Park, was only about half an hour from our apartment, so I decided to walk there. A vast wooded area surrounds Heroes Square. The paved region has a wide circular drive with statues of outstanding figures of Hungarian history, including the seven Magyar chieftains who led their tribes into the Carpathian basin in the ninth century.



A view of the statues at Heroes Square. The photo was taken in 2002.

Growing up, I was required to join other citizens to rally at Heroes Square, feigning enthusiasm for the annual Communist May Day parades. However, instead of coerced marchers, the square teemed with people of all ages. The crowd included Hungarian soldiers who were just as excited as the rest to stand in solidarity for their freedom. The mood was electric, and I overheard a conversation between a nervous demonstrator and a uniformed Army officer:

“What happens if the Army is called in to break up the demonstration?” Most of us lingering there probably had the same question on our minds.

“The Hungarian Army will never hurt its brothers and sisters standing up for a just cause,” replied the officer.

Despite such reassurances, the habits born of years of Soviet oppression weighed on my mind and had me constantly checking the edge of the crowd for possible signs of trouble.

The mood of the demonstrators, now numbering up to 200,000 by some estimates, began to grow more anti-Communist. People began expressing their ire against one obvious target: the 80-foot bronze statue of Joseph Stalin looming over one end of the Square. The monument had been erected in December 1951, at the height of the Stalinist era, as a gift to Stalin from the “Hungarian People” for his seventieth birthday.

Rocks and pebbles lobbed against the massive bronze structure were followed by shouts of “Tear this ugly thing down!” “Communist insult!” “It shouldn’t be anywhere near our Hungarian Heroes!” Soon, the entire mob seemed to agree: Stalin must come down. In a while, large tow trucks appeared. Workers hopped out with extension ladders and heavy cables that they looped around Stalin’s neck, trying to pull the behemoth down with the combined power of the massive tow trucks. I could not believe that no one tried to stop the action.

Stalin's colossal statue defied toppling; the steel cables just snapped. Next, workers arrived with blow torches and set to severing the back of Stalin's legs, just above the jackboots. After what seemed a painfully long time, the tow trucks and cables made another attempt, and this time—success! The eight-story-high statue slowly leaned forward, bringing a triumphant cheer from the crowd. Seconds later, the creaking statue swayed and crashed into the pavement with a huge THUD! The packed square erupted with shouts.



Left: The eight-story statue of Stalin, taken at an earlier May Day Parade, shows the tips of red flags carried by the marchers.

Right: Determined demonstrators climbed up the base of the statue.

I was mesmerized to witness such an incredible day. Being part of a vast, openly anti-Communist crowd that was yelling slogans had already elevated me to an all-time high. Most of us would have been afraid to whisper such things a day earlier, even to trusted friends. Seeing Stalin's statue toppled gave us a thrill we had never before experienced. Total strangers hugged and kissed, older adults wept with joy, and everyone was singing *Himnusz*, the Hungarian National Anthem:

*O Lord, bless the Hungarian Nation
With your grace and bounty
Extend over your guarding arm
During strife with its enemies
Long torn by ill fate
Bring upon it a time of relief
This nation has suffered for all sins
Of the past and the future!*



Venting anger by chopping up the statue of the hated former dictator.

I found myself singing along at the top of my lungs. More workers descended on the fallen Stalin, chipping away with pickaxes. Those fortunate enough to find themselves near the statue picked up bronze fragments and held them aloft, proudly displaying their mementos. Eventually, the persistent pickaxes severed Stalin's head, which was then unceremoniously dragged away by a tow truck (a scene to be replayed nearly 50 years later with Saddam Hussein's statue in Iraq). *Sic semper tyrannis*—Death to the tyrants! This last act was a reenactment of the savage medieval process in which convicted criminals were hanged at the gallows, and their body parts were dragged behind horses around the city.



Left: Ultimate insult for Stalin: The painted letters “WC” stands for “Water Closet,” the European abbreviation for “Toilet.” Right: The severed head after it had been dragged through the city.

Buoyed by its success with the statue (an unthinkable achievement only hours before), the crowd began casting about for new exploits. News began to circulate that our current Communist leader, Ernő Gerő (a Hungarian puppet of the Soviets), had just gone on state radio to denounce the “malicious acts of a handful of fascist hooligans.” He demanded that all who “mistakenly” participated in “anti-democratic actions” immediately return home. Hearing this news only added fuel to the fire. “We're not hooligans!” “March to the radio station!” “We'll force them to air the truth!” “General strike until they accept our demands!” With that, a section of the enormous crowd started marching towards the radio station about two miles away. Their goal was to demand again the broadcast of the 16-point declaration that the students had compiled at their meetings during the preceding weeks. Among others, these demands included:

- *An immediate evacuation of all Soviet troops.*
- *A new government under the direction of Imre Nagy.*
- *Free elections of parliament representatives.*
- *Revision and readjustment of Hungarian-Soviet relations.*
- *Reorganization of Hungary's economic life based on central planning.*
- *Freedom of the press and radio.*

I tagged along for about a mile, then peeled off to stop at my apartment, which was en route. I thought I'd grab some dinner and absorb the day's events. Tuning in the radio again, I heard Mr. Gerő's speech repeated. This time, a stern warning was added that such unlawful activities would not be tolerated, and perpetrators would be severely punished. No mention was made of the toppled statue or the demonstrators on their way to the radio station.

I quickly told a carefully selected group of neighbors in our four-story apartment building what I had seen. Since many people were still at work, my news was mainly passed on to the seniors, the retired, and the disabled residents. Of course, I was very cautious about preventing the three known Communists in our building from knowing I had spread such news because this act alone could lead to trouble. My neighbors were as mystified as my colleagues at work that an anti-Communist march could occur in Budapest.



As of 2011, the boots are the only remains of the giant 80-foot bronze statue of Joseph Stalin. They are on display at Szoborpark (Statue Park), near Budapest. Two other displaced mementos of the communist era are also shown here: An artwork of worker-peasant solidarity and the remains of Lenin's statue.

My mother had finished her daily work and was preparing dinner. She warned me not to do anything foolish to jeopardize my unofficial army draft exemption. After their eighteenth birthday, all Hungarian men were obligated to serve for three years in the Armed Forces. I had passed the mandatory medical examination over a year before and could have been called for service at any time. Perhaps the fact that I was a National Track and Field Squad member saved me from that call, but there were no guaranteed exemptions. Since my track club had been taken over by the ÁVO in 1953, there was a chance they would enroll me in their ranks. That uncertain threat that I might be an ÁVO soldier felt like the Sword of Damocles hanging above my head, but I shrugged off my mother's concern.



Photos taken in 1956: Mother at age 45 and me at age 20.

By evening, I was eager to know the outcome of the march: had the demonstrators succeeded in submitting their demands to the radio station? Under normal circumstances, no

one in his right mind would attempt such defiance, but this day was not typical. The demonstrators had already accomplished the unbelievable—parading through the city, denouncing the Communist government *and* the Soviet occupation, and demolishing the statue of the hated dictator. All these actions were done without a single person being arrested or hurt! Nevertheless, airing anti-Communist declarations through the government-controlled radio station did not sound realistic. Eventually, I told myself, the luck of those brave young people would run out, and they would find themselves arrested, badly beaten, and probably deported to a forced labor camp. Did I dare go with them and risk the same fate?

Television broadcasting in Budapest would begin a year later, in 1957. However, only two forms of official public news information existed at this time: newspapers and radio. Of the three available newspapers, *Szabad Nép* (Free People) and *Népszava* (People's Voice) followed strict Communist Party lines. At the same time, *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation) contained less propaganda but was still far from being a free press. Every significant Hungarian organization held daily “press review” sessions. The workdays began with these mandatory meetings, chaired by Party officials. Whenever Stalin's or Rákosi's² name was mentioned in a meeting, everyone was expected to stand up, clapping and chanting, “*Sztálin, Rákosi; Éljen a Párt!*” (Long Live the Party!)

The two Hungarian radio stations—Budapest 1 and Budapest 2—also followed rigid Party guidelines and broadcast through a massive 1,000-foot antenna that was the country's tallest manufactured structure. We heard carefully censored national and international news every four to five hours, followed by sports, music, and educational programs. The Party forbade listening to “Western saboteur” programs from other countries. Violators faced severe punishment if caught, ranging from deportation and loss of all personal property to lengthy imprisonment. When prosecutors also added espionage to their charges—often without any proof—a death sentence swiftly followed. Many families, particularly in the villages, owned “Folk radios,” perhaps named after Volkswagen (Folk's car). Folk-radios operated at only two fixed frequencies, designed to receive just the government-controlled stations.

Mom's meager earnings as a domestic worker and washerwoman did not allow us to own luxury items like a radio or record player. Fortunately, despite our poverty, electronics courses in technical high school and access to bartered radio components enabled me to build a radio with shortwave capabilities. The unique propagation of shortwave expanded our range to stations located far away, not just to stations from neighboring countries. The Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe (RFE) broadcast at various shortwave frequencies and beamed toward Eastern European countries 24 hours a day in several languages, including Hungarian. Fearing severe consequences for listening to “Western propaganda,” I always carefully concealed my illegal activities. Locking the front door of our apartment and using headphones instead of a loudspeaker minimized the risk. I only passed illicit information thus gleaned to completely trustworthy people. Although our government routinely jammed the Western news programs, I usually managed to find relatively straightforward broadcasts. However, that day, jamming seemed increasingly powerful and swamped out the news I

² The former Hungarian Communist leader, who was replaced by Gerő, shortly after Khrushchev denounced Stalinism.

wanted to hear. We did not have a telephone, so I felt isolated from what was happening in the city.

Later that evening, my desire to join the revolutionaries finally overcame any fear, and I went out into the street and headed toward the radio station. I had barely stepped outside our apartment when short bursts of submachine gun fire followed by loud explosions ripped through the air. I walked faster, and the sounds of shooting continued. About two blocks from the radio station, I ran headlong into a crowd of excited young people shouting and cheering to anyone who would listen: "The radio station is ours! The radio station is ours!" Although those statements were premature, the station's fate was already sealed.

The wailing of sirens quickly turned our jubilation into panic. I feared it was the *ÁVO*, and I was trapped in a maze of barricaded streets! To everyone's relief, three white ambulances slowly rounded a corner with lights flashing and sirens blasting. When they reached us, the driver of the first ambulance explained that they had come to pick up wounded demonstrators. However, I was surprised to hear several people in the crowd start yelling at the drivers, trying to open the ambulance doors. Then I listened to the reason: earlier that day, *ÁVO* agents had attempted to use an ambulance to smuggle weapons to the guards holed up inside the radio station. The rebels had discovered the ruse and confiscated all the weapons—submachine guns and hand grenades—for themselves. These new ambulances, however, were indeed on a medical mission and, after a quick inspection, were allowed to pass.

Mingling with the crowd, I heard bits and pieces of recent events. A small student delegation had initially been allowed to enter the broadcast station, but management refused to air their 16-point demand and ushered them out through the back door. The protesters did not know that the floor plan of the radio station was different from those of the surrounding residential dwellings. This rear entry also allowed the authorities to deliver more supplies to the station successfully.

When the crowd didn't see the students come out, they became hostile. The guards responded by lobbing tear gas and firing shots in the air, effectively clearing the street. Next, management ordered a mobile broadcast unit to the front of the building, trying to fool the student leaders into believing their demands would be aired. A young female rebel was allowed to read the declaration. However, tenants of the neighboring building placed their radios in the street-facing windows, and soon, it became apparent that only the regular radio programming was being aired. After this, the mood of the crowd increasingly became dark and threatening. Once again, the guards succeeded in clearing the street by using tear gas.

In Hungary, ownership of firearms was strictly forbidden, although a small select group was allowed to keep hunting weapons. Anyone caught with illegal arms faced a lengthy jail sentence. Generally, all personal property of the convicted person was also confiscated, and the entire family would be deported to the countryside to work on collective farms. Consequently, all firearms used by the young revolutionaries had to be obtained by devious means in the quietest manner possible. Weapons were acquired from sympathizing soldiers, police stations, and, in some cases, by breaking into the military armories. At the radio station, some of the rebels were armed with the weapons taken from the false ambulance.

When the next wave of demonstrators—now armed revolutionaries—tried to reach the station, they found it barricaded by the *ÁVO* guard. Four young men, waving Hungarian flags,

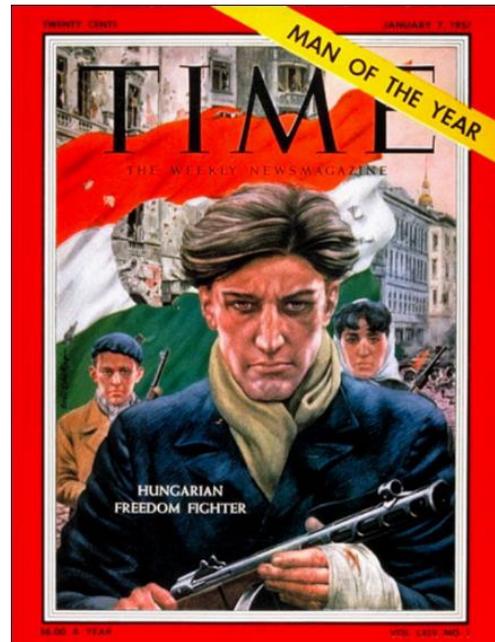
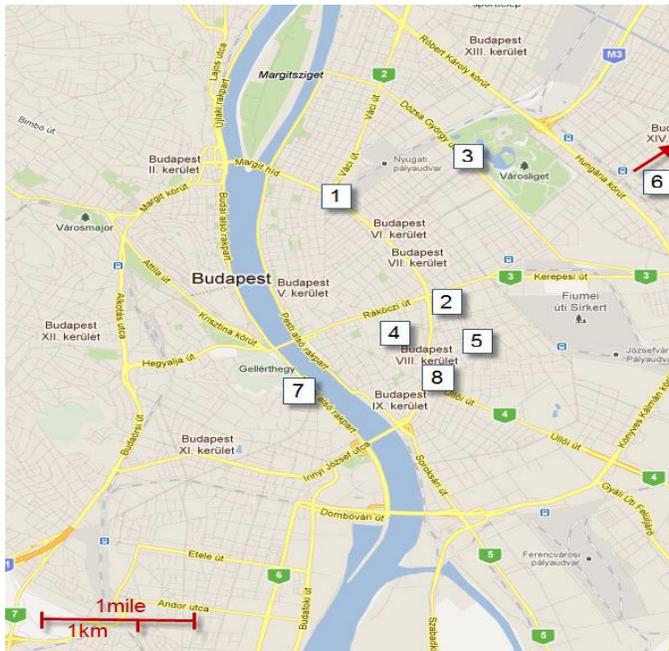
walked to the barricades and began to clear a path to the entrance. Ignoring the angry warnings of the *ÁVO*, the young men continued steadily toward the building, but the guards shot them before they reached their goal. The killings opened a floodgate in the angry crowd, and they swiftly stormed the building. They first lobbed bricks, and later grenades, through the broken windows. Using their recently acquired arms, others fired at the defenders from across the street, eventually silencing the guards. The rebels then rammed the gate with the mobile broadcast vehicle. After they entered the building, they learned it was a more complex structure than it had appeared. By going from door to door, in a few hours the revolutionaries had captured, disabled, or killed all the guards. Even though the non-managerial³ technical staff of the radio station was willing to cooperate with the revolutionaries and broadcast their demands, the transmission link to the radio antenna had already been switched to another location by the authorities. Later in the revolution, the government used that secondary radio facility to broadcast threatening messages. The revolutionaries, however, would gain total control over the city within the next five days and launch Radio Free Budapest. The planned general strike spread rapidly and remained in effect until the Soviet troop withdrawal.

In 1956, over one million people, roughly 10 percent of Hungary's population, lived in Budapest. A large majority of the inhabitants lived in apartments. A typical residence building had four or five floors with total units ranging between 50 and 60. Except for the largest apartments, which had entryways from the main stairway and windows looking at the streets, the front doors and windows of the others faced an inner courtyard. Uncovered walkways with iron railings on every floor provided access to the apartments. Each building had a central entrance, generally blocked by a large wooden gate locked between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. The *Házmester* (house master), who always lived on the ground level, was the only person with the key to that gate. Residents coming home after 10 p.m. had to ring a bell and wait until the housemaster or one of his family members came to open the gate. Tipping was customary and expected; the amount depended on how late you came home.



**Left: The Budapest Radio Station after the first siege. The sign reads, "Hungarian Free Radio."
Right: The renovated building in 2010.**

³ Upper management was always selected from trusted Party members.



Left: The simplified map of Budapest shows some of the revolution's important locations. The city had been combined centuries ago from three separate cities, Buda and Óbuda on the west side of the Danube River and Pest on the east side. Right: Time Magazine front page, January 1957

Legend for the Budapest map:

1. The Western Railroad Station is where I first saw the demonstration.
2. Location of our apartment, near the Party's district headquarters.
3. Heroes Square, where the Stalin Monument stood.
4. Budapest Radio Station's broadcast center.
5. Kandó Kálmán Electronic Technical High School.
6. Road to Audio, the factory where I worked.
7. Technical University of Budapest.
8. Killian barrack.

It was well after midnight when I arrived home from the radio station. The *Házmester* told me that my mother was worried about me. He was also very curious to hear what had happened outside. I only described the Heroes Square events, telling him I had stayed at a friend's house to repair his radio. Even though I trusted him politically, I did not want my mother to find out where I had been during the night. I was not sure if he believed me. Then he asked if I planned to show up at work that day, and I told him, "I will be on strike." That impressed him, and he refused to accept my generous tip.

As I walked up the stairs, I looked toward our third-floor apartment. Through the kitchen window, I saw the light suddenly go out. As I suspected, my mother was waiting for me, but when I entered our apartment, she pretended to be asleep. It was so far into the night that it was hardly worth going to bed, so I lay on the sofa and slept for a while in my clothes. In the morning, she asked when I came home and chewed me out for staying late. She probably did

not buy my radio-repair story either but did not press me very hard to find out more. I was relieved because I already felt guilty about lying to her. It would have been even more difficult to defend those lies.

Instead of the regular morning news program, both public radio stations played classical music, and I felt completely isolated from the developing events. As I stepped outside our apartment, I heard the sound of gunfire and explosions echoing through the ordinarily quiet courtyard, telling me that fighting continued out on the streets. At 8:45 a.m., Radio Budapest 1 interrupted the musical program with a special announcement, threatening that anyone involved in anti-government activities would be subject to martial law. Fifteen minutes later, a second announcement followed.

Overnight attacks of “counter-revolutionary”⁴ gangsters and hooligans created extremely grave conditions...Since our government was not prepared to face such a bloody sneak attack, under the terms of the Warsaw Pact, it requested help from the Soviet Armed Forces stationed in Hungary...

Referring to the fighters as gangsters and hooligans infuriated me and most other Hungarians hearing the broadcast. It had been bad enough to have the Soviet troops stationed in bases all over our country. Now, they were interfering with our desire for freedom!

After discussing the request with Moscow, the Soviet High Command readily provided help by sending two divisions into Budapest. They were equipped with hundreds of T-34 and T-45 tanks and armored vehicles. Later, another brief newscast of the Budapest radio stations announced that five Soviet jet fighters had flown in to support their troops.

Since I had already decided to honor the proposed general strike, I had time for the rest of the day. I decided to go to my club's stadium that afternoon because I did not consider track practice “work” and had already missed the previous day's workout. In the meantime, by switching my radio to shortwave, I finally tuned into VoA without significant jamming. I heard that even though the tanks could not fight effectively in narrow city streets, their sheer presence dominated the important boulevards and bridges heading over the Danube. Without any military training, the primitively armed young people, raised on Soviet propaganda movies and books, successfully resisted the Soviet armor that—fortunately for us—lacked infantry support and had not been expecting any significant resistance. When the tanks appeared, most revolutionaries scattered into small streets to regroup later. Tanks would not follow them into narrow streets, fearing Molotov cocktail⁵ attacks.

Other fighters brazenly resisted the tanks by creating barricades from cobblestones and overturned streetcars. What I heard did not sound like a fair fight, and I asked myself if I could do anything to help the revolutionaries. My urge to help conflicted with the fear of possible consequences. Realistically, I knew we could not defeat the mighty Soviet Army. However, after hearing encouragement from VoA, I naively thought if we could hold out long enough, the West would come to our aid.

⁴ The Communists reserved the term “revolution” for their fight against the bourgeois class.

⁵ Bottles filled with gasoline thrown at openings of a tank ignited immediately, forcing the crew into abandoning the tank and becoming easy targets for small-arms fire.



Two forms of barricades commonly used: Cobblestones and overturned streetcars.

Early that afternoon, just as the Budapest radio announced an extension of the “Surrender or Die” deadline until 6 p.m., one of my mother’s laundry customers, Lapát⁶, showed up to collect his shirts. He told me that many revolutionaries had successfully resisted the overwhelming firepower of the Soviet Army and that he planned to join some of his fighter friends under the cover of night. He had previously served his compulsory three years in the Hungarian Army and had received a sharpshooter decoration. He told me that some of the armories, opened by the rebels, held weapons available to revolutionaries. The government deadline to surrender did not seem to concern him.

After Lapát’s departure, I struggled to think of a way to be involved in the fighting. Since the only entry to our apartment was in the kitchen, where my mother was ironing, sneaking out without being noticed was not an option. Instead, I decided to tell Mom I was going to track practice. My only prior experience with shooting was limited to BB guns at a carnival gallery, but I said to myself that using a real firearm should not be that difficult. Mom was alarmed when she saw me packing my running gear, but I assured her I would only run at the Red Flag Stadium. She understood my long-term commitment to running and believed me. Around 4 p.m., I left our building carrying my sports bag and headed toward the inner part of Budapest instead of the direction I had promised Mom. Streetcars were not operating in any part of the city, so I had to walk.

Intermittent sounds of machine gun bursts and single shots rang through the air, but I could not judge where they came from. On my way to *Nagy Körút* (Great Ring Road), I passed small groups of people surrounding young men carrying guns and encouraging others to join the fight. My heart pounded excitedly, and I asked one rebel where he had obtained his weapon. He pointed toward the next street, telling me that a truck loaded with weapons was parked there, and two Hungarian soldiers were handing out guns. I threw my sports bag on my back and sprinted to that street to see if weapons were still available. When I reached the canvas-covered truck, one of the soldiers asked me if I wanted a gun, and I answered, “Yes, of course.”

“Do you know how to use it?”

“Yes,” I lied, with a straight face.

⁶ Lapát (meaning Shovel) was his nickname because his hands were the size of shovel heads.

He handed me a Soviet-made submachine gun with a drum-like circular magazine⁷, and I knew there was no longer any way of backing out. For a moment, I panicked. *I'm a technician and a runner, not a soldier.* If they catch me with a weapon, the consequences would be facing martial law. But strangely, just holding the cold instrument of killing in my hand gave me inexplicable courage to face our enemies. The fact that I did not know how to use it did not seem to bother me; I figured that I would closely watch others using their weapons before firing mine.

An Armed Revolutionary

Rebels with the newly acquired firearms quickly formed small groups, and I teamed up with five other men. The youngest of our group, a very short, freckled-faced boy named Feri, seemed no older than sixteen. The one who instantly became our leader, Miki, looked to be in his thirties. The remaining three were probably, like me, in their twenties. Miki had served in the Hungarian Army for three years, gaining knowledge about various guns and explosives, including hand grenades. He told us that a stronghold of fighters was near the large military barracks on *Üllői Street*, and we should join them. Besides Miki, only one of us knew how to use a weapon, so we accepted his leadership. During our walk, he gave us a crash course in the use of the PPSH-41 submachine gun (*géppisztoly*, meaning machine pistol), telling us that in the automatic mode, all 72 bullets in the drum-type magazine could be fired in a mere five seconds. Seeing the sports bag on my shoulder, he asked if I carried spare machine gun magazines and showed real disappointment when I told him, "No, it's only my running gear." Miki instructed us to fire single shots rather than bursts to save ammunition. We promised to be careful because we only had one magazine with each gun. We had no idea what would happen after we ran out of ammunition.



Soviet-made submachine gun, used heavily in World War II.



Three photos and an artist's rendition of young revolutionaries. The boy in the painting is holding a Molotov cocktail.

⁷ Similar to Tommy guns used by the FBI and Chicago gangsters in the 1930s.

The shortest path to the revolutionary base was through *Nagy Kőrút*, a central circular boulevard, and Miki warned us that it was also the most likely route for the Soviet tanks. We took that road, listening carefully for the noise of tanks. After only a short walk, we saw a smoldering Soviet armored vehicle next to a couple of dead Soviet soldiers. On the sidewalk, an angry crowd of people, some of them armed, faced two Hungarian soldiers and an officer shielding a bleeding Soviet officer pushed against the wall. The two Hungarian soldiers were unarmed—perhaps they had already given their weapons away—but the officer still waved his handgun, shouting, “This man may have important information and must be turned over to the Hungarian Army! We are not savages and will not kill a wounded prisoner of war!” Seeing our group, the officer commanded us to come over and asked for help protecting the captive Soviet.

As we pushed our way closer, the officer briefed us, saying that he and two soldiers had been headed to another army base to convince that unit to side with the revolutionaries. On their way, they had witnessed the ruin of the Soviet vehicle. After the cobblestone barricades trapped the armored car, a fighter had thrown a grenade into the rear, severely injuring its crew. The Soviet officer sitting in the front was stunned but, unlike the crew, suffered only minor head wounds. People dragged him from the vehicle and would have killed him without the interference of the three passing Hungarian soldiers.

Miki told the Hungarian officer that our group could escort the Soviets to the army barracks since it was near our destination. The officer “deputized” us with great relief, and we were on our way with the captive. To our surprise, once the Soviets felt protected, he spoke up in broken Hungarian, thanking us for saving him from the crowd's anger. He told us that his vehicle had become separated from the others traveling in a column, and he had found himself lost in the city. He said he liked Hungarians and never intended to harm anyone during his mission. Of course, we did not believe everything he said, but we were determined to deliver him to the Hungarian barracks without harm. He was having such a mission made all of us feel very important.

After walking about two blocks toward the army barracks, we saw a small group of fighters running in our direction. They told us that Soviet tanks were blocking our proposed path. They also informed us that all bridges over the Danube, which separates Buda and Pest, were now controlled by Soviet tanks. With that, the men headed toward the other rebel stronghold, Baross Square, to replenish their ammunition. Hearing the news, Miki decided it would be too risky to continue with the Russian officer, so he guided us onto a side street where he knew the caretaker of a school. His new plan was to leave the officer with one of us in the school while the rest of the group scouted for the safest way to the barracks.

We found the entryway of the school locked, but after Miki knocked on the caretaker's window, he appeared. Seeing our weapons and the Russian officer, he retreated at first, but Miki convinced him to let us into the building. After a heated exchange of words with Miki, the caretaker agreed to open the gym for us, but he made it clear that we would need to leave before the 8 p.m. curfew. We did not know about the curfew because it was announced on the radio that afternoon.

In the gym, we ate apples given to us by the caretaker. Miki chose me to guard our captive, saying my large bag would slow me down. Even though I told him about being an

accomplished runner with excellent endurance, he did not change his mind. Out of our group, he took the young boy with him. The other three were to take a different path. They were all to meet back at the school an hour later to decide which route would be the safest. Before leaving, Miki pulled me aside and whispered, "If we are not back, lead the Russian out of the building and shoot him." With that, they departed, leaving me alone with the officer.

Miki's blunt order affected me so much that even the Russian noticed my nervousness. Perhaps he had overheard what Miki said because he looked alarmed. I decided to have a little conversation with him and find out what kind of man I might have to kill. Although I had taken the compulsory Russian language course in high school, my knowledge of Russian was minimal. Fortunately, the officer knew more Hungarian than I spoke Russian, and we gradually began communicating.

Pavel (that was his first name) told me that he had joined the Soviet Army in 1943 at the age of 16. He fought against the German invaders during World War II and was wounded twice. After the war ended, he remained in the Army, eventually promoted to lieutenant. His father and an older brother were both killed in action. Like Pavel, his younger brother served in the Red Army, stationed in the Ukraine. Pavel's armored division was based not far from Budapest, and he had served there for six years. Although most Russians had not fraternized much with native Hungarians, he had managed to learn some of our language.

Late the previous night, his unit had received the order for the sudden invasion, commanding them to take a specific government complex back from the revolutionaries. Their order also specified to fire only if they were fired on first. When their armored car was trapped in a deep hole dug by the rebels, a grenade killed or seriously wounded his soldiers. His seat protected him from injuries, and with only a concussion, he would have been able to walk away from the wreck. However, a small group of angry Hungarians manhandled and almost lynched him before the three Hungarian soldiers stepped in to rescue him. The head wounds and facial cuts were the results of the beating he had received.

I told him a little about my life, including my short involvement in the revolution. Pavel just shook his head in disbelief. Although he understood and respected our cause—he had also fought against foreign invaders in his country—he could not imagine how a group of untrained and poorly equipped fighters could stand up against the Red Army. He predicted that most of us would be killed in vain because the Kremlin could not afford to loosen its reign without facing similar revolts in the other satellite countries. "Go home as soon as possible and look after your mother," he advised me.

His words resonated, and my instinct told me he was right. At the same time, my heart told me that I had taken the proper steps and should stay to help my fellow Hungarians. *No, I will not defect!*

Pavel lit a cigarette, and strangely, my hatred of Russian soldiers began to subside after we chatted for a while. After all, most of them just followed orders, and the Communist regime was our real enemy. I also remembered the kind Russian soldier who gave me bread after the siege of Budapest during World War II. We hailed them as our liberators until the Kremlin imposed its political and economic system over us. *Why don't they just let us live the way we want? We don't want to fight them; we want to be free of tyranny.*

My thoughts were interrupted by the caretaker reminding me that he wanted us out of the school before the curfew. By this time, I realized I could not kill the Russian in cold blood and decided to let him go. Pavel seemed relieved when I told him he could leave, but we both realized he would not go far in his uniform. I offered him the sweatsuit and running shoes in my bag, which he gladly accepted. I suggested he take his uniform with him in my sports bag and gave him directions to the Szabadság Híd (Liberty Bridge) held by Russian tanks. Quickly changing and stuffing his uniform into my bag, he hugged me and kissed both cheeks, saying he would pray for me to survive the fighting. As he left the building, I felt relieved, although I was concerned about how I would explain the missing outfit to my track club. Still, I assured myself that saving a human life justified giving up my possessions.

I was surprised to hear a Soviet officer like Pavel mentioning praying. Even though the Hungarian government had shown some religious tolerance, those who regularly attended church services could not expect to be promoted to any industrial managerial position or an officer's rank in the army. Having lived for decades under the Communist regime, I assumed that religious beliefs no longer existed. I concluded that, most likely, Pavel had kept his religious views to himself; otherwise, he would not have been promoted to the rank of lieutenant.



Left: Temporary street graves for fallen Hungarian fighters. Center: Burned-out Soviet tank with a dead Soviet soldier. Right: Two young revolutionaries, holding the Soviet submachine guns.

After Pavel left, I reconsidered his advice to go home. The possibility of being injured, crippled, or maybe even killed hit me for the first time. If the authorities would capture me, no doubt a severe repercussion would follow. The possibilities of facing a martial law court or my entire family being deported to a labor camp were frightening. *What should I do?*

A short time later, Miki appeared alone, breathing heavily, sweat running down his face. As soon as he noticed the absence of the Russian, he wanted to know what had happened. I explained that as the curfew approached, the caretaker had asked me to leave the school, and I had not dared to carry out his instructions to shoot the Russian. At first, Miki was angry with me, but after calming down, he said perhaps it was the best thing for me to do under the circumstances, adding that. Hopefully, the Russian would return the favor to a needy Hungarian one day. He then told me their scouting mission had not found a safe path to the army barracks. Worse, they were surprised by a small ÁVO group traveling in an open truck on their way back. Both sides opened fire. Miki's young companion was hit by submachine gun fire and collapsed.

Hopelessly outgunned, Miki retreated, leaving his wounded companion behind. To make things worse, his weapon jammed, and he barely escaped by scaling a fence. He had no information about the other three men who had left via separate routes and hoped they would find a safe place to hide during the curfew. For the next 10 minutes, he tried unsuccessfully to fix the problem with his weapon. Finally, after swearing at the Communist-made product, he gave up his effort and wanted my gun instead. I wondered if I could be of any use unarmed, but I accepted his reasoning that he would make better use of the submachine gun and handed it to him.

The caretaker returned, this time being really agitated. He demanded we leave immediately since it was well after 8 p.m. He could lose his job and possibly be imprisoned for harboring us after the curfew. We didn't want to cause trouble, so we told him we were ready to go. He took us to the entryway with great relief and opened the gate. Stepping outside momentarily, he indicated it was safe to go. The street was utterly deserted.

"You're no help without a weapon," Miki said as we walked away from the school. "Besides, you don't have the guts to shoot someone. Go home and let real men like me do the fighting."

I was highly insulted, but it did not look like he was in the mood to argue. "Perhaps you're right," I said quietly. "Goodbye."

His command let me reach the final decision. Perhaps it was a sign from heaven. *I'll stay home until the fighting ends.*

The street was dark, and I began to run toward our street. Before crossing a wide boulevard on my way, I looked carefully for possible Soviet soldiers but did not see any. While sprinting across rapidly, I tripped over a pile of cobblestones that the rebels used while building barricades. The unexpected fall landed me with my face hitting the streetcar rail. The force of the blow stunned me for a moment. When I stood up, my chin felt numb. Touching my face, I could feel blood and used my handkerchief to stop the bleeding. My trench coat was ripped.

Running home took me only a few more minutes. I used the faucet in our courtyard to clean my face before going upstairs and trying to figure out how to tell Mother about joining the fighters instead of working out at my track club.

When I stepped into our apartment, I found her on the verge of a nervous breakdown. We hugged each other, and she demanded an explanation. Seeing my swollen mouth and a rip in my coat, she could tell I did not go to practice. I told her some of the events, omitting the part about carrying a weapon because I knew it would upset her even more. Still, after hearing me out, she took the framed picture of my First Communion—the only religious symbol we had in our apartment—off the wall and made me swear on it that I would not be involved in any more fighting. If I did, she threatened to "go up to the top floor of our building and jump over the railing."

I knew she meant it. Mother had told me stories before about some of the terrible things that had happened to her family during the First World War when she was just a child. Now that I had witnessed violence and killing and been afraid for my own life, I had a better understanding of what my mother had been through and was glad to be with her at home.

Later in the evening, Mother reminded me again: "I've lived through wars and fighting where many people were killed. I don't ever want to risk losing you." I repeated my promise

to stay out of all hostilities. That night, as I drifted off to sleep, I found my mind comparing my childhood to my mother's stories about her family and early life.



Left: My First Communion certificate; Right: Damaged buildings & equipment near the neighborhood where I lived



A memorial erected in Cleveland, OH, for the 60th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution

Chapter 2: My Family's Turbulent Background

My grandfather, Kálmán Besser, was a baker. His wife, Mária Juhász, had learned to be a seamstress in childhood. Their marriage took place in Székesfehérvár, Hungary, in 1910. Like 95 percent of the country's population, both were Roman Catholic. They lived in a small, no-frills unit with a dirt floor that was part of a single-level dwelling with brick walls and a tar paper roof. Six families shared the building, which had neither electricity nor indoor plumbing. My mother, Anna Besser, was born in that house on June 14, 1911, three years before the start of World War I.

The First World War began when a Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his wife in June 1914, leading to Austria-Hungary's declaring war on Serbia six weeks later. Russia mobilized to defend Serbia in response, and a chain reaction of war declarations followed.

Two major military alliances existed then—the Triple Entente (Russia, France, and Britain) and the Triple Alliance, also called the Central Powers (Austro-Hungary, Germany, and Italy). Additionally, each alliance maintained close ties to smaller countries like Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania.



Relative sizes of Triple Alliance (dark shade) and Triple Entente (light shade) shown in the 1913 European map

The large powers soon entered the war to fulfill their obligations. Austro-Hungary and Germany declared war on Russia. France declared war against Germany and Austro-Hungary. Germany attacked France through Belgium, pulling Britain into war. Italy and Romania initially proclaimed neutrality, but after making agreements for territorial gains, they also entered the war on August 27, 1916 (exactly twenty years before my birth) on the side of the Triple Entente. Romanian troops entered Hungary, forcing Austro-Hungary to withdraw its armies hastily from the Russian front. With the help of a German division, the Romanian attack was repelled. Savage fighting continued elsewhere, deteriorating to trench warfare and eventually to the use of poisoned gas. Airplanes had also been introduced to reinforce military tasks by the armies, bringing previously unknown terror to the civilian population.

Each year after Anna's birth, another child was added to the Besser family. Kálmán worked overtime in a bakery to provide for his growing family. His army enlistment was delayed due to poor eyesight during the first year of the war, but eventually, all able-bodied

men were taken to serve. By the time he was drafted in late 1917, my mother was the oldest of four girls and a boy. Barely six years old, she bore the responsibility of helping with the other children.



Two of the few photos my mother passed on to me from her childhood: a) The house where my mother was born, showing some of her family, and b) Mária in the center with one of her brothers and his family.

Hard times followed after Kálmán left to fight the war in Italy, which had been declared an enemy in 1916. A few letters came from him during the first year of his enlistment, but none after that. The family lived on Mária's limited earnings, barely enough to buy food and pay the rent. As a seamstress, she could provide clothing for her children but could seldom afford to buy them shoes. During mild weather, the children walked around barefoot; in the winter, she wrapped pigskin around their feet. Food was scarce, mainly when the war spread through Hungary. Circumstances grew more and more desperate, and finally, Mária had to make the painful decision to place four of her five children in an orphanage.

World War I ended on November 11, 1918, but the Besser family still had not received any news about Kálmán. They began mourning him and his older brother Ferenc, who had recently been declared "killed in action" on the Russian Front. Ferenc left behind a widow with three children, all of whom were just a few years older than their cousin Anna.

Turmoil after the war ended

With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Hungary became independent under the name of *Magyar Demokrata Köztársaság* (Hungarian Democratic Republic). On November 16, 1918, Mihály Károlyi formed a new government that tried to establish authority and restore the collapsed economy. Without any infusion of foreign capital, however, his efforts were futile. Most soldiers who returned from the war could not find jobs, creating high unemployment throughout the country.

A few weeks earlier, in the newly formed Soviet Union, a group of Hungarian prisoners of war led by Béla Kún planned to create a Communist Party in Hungary. After returning to Budapest on November 24, 1918, they formed the *Kommunisták Magyarországi Pártja*

(Hungarian Communist Party) and other Communist sympathizers from neighboring countries. Ethnic Hungarians were only a minority in the new party¹.

The disintegrated economy and skyrocketing inflation aided their recruiting. In a few months, the party had over 30,000 members, including unemployed former soldiers and young intellectuals—many of whom originated from ethnic minorities. Wanting total control, Kún merged his party with the Social Democrats, and they jointly became the largest political party in the country. Constantly agitating among the unemployed and inciting riots that led to bloody confrontations with the police, they managed to gain popularity at the expense of the ruling government. Károlyi eventually resigned and dismissed his cabinet. Kún grabbed the opportunity and formed a new government, naming it *Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság* (Hungarian Soviet Republic) on March 21, 1919. It was the first Communist government in Europe.

It lasted less than five months, but the Kún regime introduced land reforms, abolished aristocratic titles, nationalized the banks, and promised to restore the pre-war borders of Hungary. It also initiated a series of atrocities named *Vörösteror* (Red Terror) to eliminate potential political rivals.

However, the inefficient new economic policies led to inflation and food shortages. To make things worse, the Kingdom of Romania declared war on the weakened Hungary again. The Romanians were unhappy about not receiving all the territories promised by the Allies. France and Britain were concerned about a Communist government in Europe, so they agreed to the attack.

Without facing much resistance, Romanian forces quickly took over a significant part of Hungary, including Székesfehérvár, where my mother's family lived. My mother had nightmarish memories of the Rumanian occupation, during which soldiers terrorized residents and raped women. Continuing their quest, the invaders continued their push to Budapest, ending the short-lived existence of the Communist government. The occupiers systematically pilfered industrial goods, machinery, and raw materials. Taking advantage of the unstable political situation, simultaneous attacks against Hungary took place from Czechoslovakia on the north and Serbia on the south.

On a Sunday afternoon in the autumn of 1919, my mother and other children played in the yard when a long-haired hobo tried to enter through their front gate. One of the neighbor women set her watchdog to chase the intruder off. To everyone's surprise, instead of the expected attack, the dog ran to him, wagging its tail. The man shouted to my mother, "Anna, I am your father—home from the war!" With that, he collapsed.

The women in the yard helped him back to his feet and into his home, where the exhausted man slept for a long time. After awakening, his wife fed and cleaned him. When she cut his hair, she discovered a massive wound that had deformed the back of his head. As he regained strength, he began to recount his experiences of the past two years.

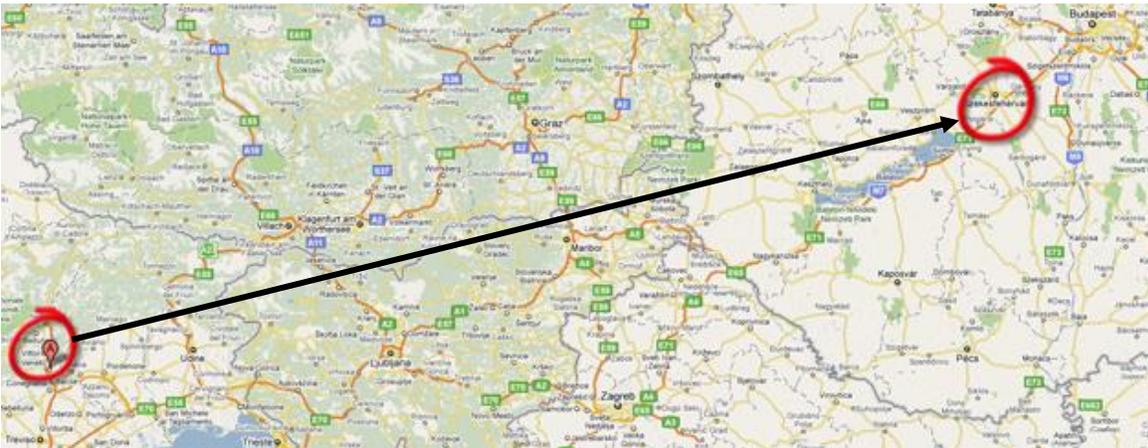
Soon after Kálmán was drafted, the Austro-Hungarian Army launched and maintained a successful offensive against the Italian forces. However, a few days before the war ended,

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_Soviet_Republic

his regiment suffered heavy casualties in a decisive battle at Vittorio Veneto. About 50,000 of their soldiers had been killed, and nearly half a million were captured and imprisoned. Kálmán was captured after an artillery barrage exploded nearby, killing several members of his unit and driving shrapnel into his skull. He was treated in a prisoner-of-war camp infirmary, but the shell fragment remained in his head. After staying in the camp for about six months, he and two others escaped. It took them several months to sneak out of Italy and return to Hungary on foot!

One of the escapees drowned while they were crossing a swollen river, but Kálmán and his remaining companion managed to reach Hungary's southwest border. Once they entered friendly territory, they begged for food and occasionally received shelter overnight. He knew that his head wound was severe; it led to excruciating pain at times, but he was determined to see his family again.

Encouraged by Kálmán's return, the Bessers took two of the four children out of the orphanage and promised the other two they would be taken home soon. During the following year, Kálmán's physical condition improved, but the fragment lodged in his brain led to unpredictable, erratic behavior. For example, once during dinner, he jumped up and threatened to kill everyone. Grabbing a large knife, he chased his family first around the table and eventually out of the apartment. He barricaded himself inside until neighbors called two *csendőr* (country policemen), who took him away and held him in custody.



Partial map of Italy, Yugoslavia, and Hungary. The air-distance between Vittorio Veneto (A) and Székesfehérvár is about 350 miles. It took my wounded grandfather several months to make that trip on foot.

After his release, the family lived in fear for their safety. According to my mother, he had changed from the gentle, loving man she remembered before the war to someone who sometimes behaved like a monster. He had trouble keeping his job due to frequent incapacitating headaches and moody behavior. One day, while he was loading bread into the sizeable honeycomb-type stove at the bakery, he burned his hands badly and was hospitalized. A few days after the hospital released him, with bandages on both arms, he became withdrawn and reticent.

Within a week, he died in his sleep. My mother often recalled her own mother's horrified screams on that morning when Mária awoke to find her husband lying cold and stiff. A simple burial without ceremony sufficed; Mária could not afford a regular casket. Kálmán's tired body was returned to the earth in a plain wooden box.

Just after Kálmán's return to his family, in November of 1919, an armistice stalling the Romanian threat was reached with the collaboration of France and Britain. A new Hungarian government was formed, headed by Admiral Miklós Horthy as its Regent. Horthy had been commander in the Austro-Hungarian Navy before the war. Known for his multilingual ability—he spoke seven languages fluently, including German, French, English, and Italian—Horthy entered Budapest on a white horse at the head of a newly created National Army. During the first two years of his 25-year reign, a reprisal to the Red Terror occurred under the name *Fehérterror* (White Terror). Their targets included Communists, Social Democrats, and Jews.

In the economic instability that followed the war, the widowed Mária could not make enough money to feed her remaining three children. She took my mother out of school rather than return her children to the orphanage. Little Anna had not even completed the fourth grade.

Labor unions and child labor laws did not exist then, and some neighborhood children were already employed at a nearby candy factory. The owner, Mr. Vidor, hired Anna to work in the candy-wrapping section. Christmas was approaching, and the traditional Hungarian tree decoration had long been *szaloncukor* (parlor candy), made of fondant and wrapped in colorful foil. Her assignment was to take the candy and wrap it first in soft tissue paper with frilly ends, followed by a colored foil around the center section. Then she tightened the wrappings at both ends of the candy with string. Finally, a looped string was attached to hang the *szaloncukor* on the tree. Eating candy from the production line was strictly forbidden, although my mother later admitted to me that many times she could not resist the temptation and secretly ate some.



Left: Anna at age nine, when she started to work at the candy factory.
Right: Szaloncukor, the favorite Hungarian Christmas tree decoration.

About two years later, Mária's widowed sister-in-law developed pneumonia and died. At that time, the orphanage could not accept any more children. Mária took in the oldest girl, Mari, two years older than Anna, and promptly put her to work alongside my mother in the candy factory. Mari was a beautiful girl, but work did not interest her. She was blessed with a beautiful voice and always fantasized about becoming a singer or an actress.

Anna performed her job diligently and was always ready to work overtime. When the employees received their pay every week, she promptly turned the entire amount over to her mother, even though some other girls bought clothes or other items for themselves. Mr. Vidor

kept promoting her, and by the time she reached her sixteenth birthday, she had become a forelady, supervising several older women on the production line. At that point, she was the family's primary money earner and had little free time. On the Sundays Anna didn't work, she and Mari went hiking with a group of young people. Hiking became her only recreational activity.

From early on, Mari was very popular with boys, and Mária had an increasingly difficult time controlling the activities of her beautiful niece. After turning eighteen, Mari left home with a couple of men in an automobile to pursue acting in Budapest. For a long time, the family did not hear about her.

The Allies² of World War I signed a treaty in 1920 at the Grand Trianon Palace in Versailles, France—without any representation from Hungary. The treaty established new borders for Hungary, drastically reducing its territory, as shown by the maps below. Hungary lost over 72 percent of its territory, 64 percent of its population, and five of its ten most populous cities; it was deprived of sea access and many of its most valuable natural resources.



(Left) Map of Europe before World War I, showing Hungary in black. On the right side, the light center part displays the drastic territory reduction reached at the Trianon Treaty in 1920. Over 70 percent of Hungary's former land, containing over 80 percent of its timber and iron ore, was taken away.

When the Treaty of Trianon was announced in Hungary, three days of mourning were observed throughout the country. Citizens wore black armbands to express their unfathomable grief over the losses. The deep desire to regain its territories and people led to Hungary's entrance into World War II only two decades later.

After Hungary lost most of its timber and metal ore at Trianon, its industrial production declined in the 1920s and was replaced with agricultural exports. Land reforms, although attempted by the Smallholders Party, were not effective. Most of the arable land was still in the hands of a relatively small group of former gentry. Groups of hired hands did cultivation and harvesting.

At the end of the 1920s, the worldwide economic depression had also reached Hungary. Mr. Vidor's candy factory closed its gates, and eighteen-year-old Anna became unemployed.

² The United States and Russia did not sign the Treaty.

There were no other factory jobs available. Having an incomplete fourth-grade education, her only hope was to find domestic work. Eventually, using a glowing reference from Mr. Vidor, she was hired by the Hoffman family as a live-in servant to take care of all household duties.

Her working hours started at 6 a.m. and lasted until 10 p.m., Monday through Saturday. On Sundays, she only worked a half day and had the afternoons off to spend with her family. She was thankful that Mária had taught her how to cook at an early age. Always diligent, she expanded her cooking skills by studying recipes at night from a cookbook she bought with her first pay.

Anna's mother, Mária, became infected with pneumonia just as her deceased sister had. She was taken to a hospital at the other end of the town. Anna visited there on a frosty winter Sunday, and the doctor told her that Mária might not live too long. After teary-eyed begging, Anna convinced Mrs. Hoffman to give her some time off Tuesday afternoon to revisit her mother. She left for the hospital during a heavy snowstorm. Although she was willing to pay for a *fiaker* (see photo), none could be found. During her hurried journey on sidewalks covered by ankle-deep snow, she prayed to find her mother alive.

Fate was not on her side. Mária had died by the time her daughter reached the hospital. Not being able to say goodbye to her mother haunted Anna for the rest of her life. To make things worse, the next day, the authorities took her remaining siblings to an orphanage, where they were to remain until they turned eighteen. Disillusioned by not receiving answers from heaven, Anna turned away from religion. She ended her previous practice of praying nightly.



Left: A horse-drawn taxi of the 1920s, called a *fiaker*. Right: 22-year-old Anna in the Hiking Club. The writing across shows her nickname, Panni.

Anna's Struggle

After losing both parents before her twentieth birthday, Anna did not have much joy in her life. Her family had disintegrated. Her youngest sister, Rózsi, was taken from the orphanage to a farm to look after a man whose wife had passed away. Her brother, who had already turned eighteen, had been drafted into the army and was stationed in a different part of the country. The fate of her stepsister Mari was still unknown. All remaining family members lived in poverty and could not provide her with any help or comfort.

However, with characteristic practicality and an intelligent understanding of people, Anna developed a mutually beneficial relationship with Elza, the governess of the Hoffman family's three children. Elza was a full-figured lady with an appetite to match her statuesque body. Having a higher social standing, the governess was allowed to sit at the family's dining table,

and the small portions served by Mrs. Hoffman at mealtimes often left her hungry. Anna always had her meals alone in the kitchen after the others had eaten, and she had access to all the leftover food. After Elza confided to Anna that she did not have enough to eat, Anna regularly hid snacks in the pantry and smuggled them to Elza late at night after the family retired. In return, the governess invited Anna to perform routine chores in the children's study room. Anna listened to the daily lessons and absorbed much of what she heard. This learning went far to make up for her interrupted education.

One day, Mrs. Hoffman returned from one of her many social engagements sooner than expected. Finding her servant ironing in the study room instead of the kitchen, she asked why. Anna thought she might be fired, but Elza quickly came to her defense, explaining Anna's desire to better herself. Surprisingly, the lady of the house was impressed and allowed the sessions to continue. Mrs. Hoffman and her husband even provided notebooks and an ink pen for Anna so she could improve her handwriting. About a year later, Mrs. Hoffman permitted Anna to read bedtime stories to the children. After working there for three more years, Anna could read and write as well as most adults who had finished eight years of elementary school. By then, she also had every second Sunday off and was again involved with a hiking group. Elza joined her regularly on the hikes, and they became close friends.

Mixing socially with other young people was a new experience for Anna. She seldom had opportunities to have close contact with strangers—particularly men—and carry on casual conversations. She had never been on a date, seen a movie, or watched a theater play. Without any exposure to arts, sports, or other entertainment, the young woman felt uneasy during their first gatherings, but with Elza's dedicated coaching, she gradually enjoyed the group's activities more. She particularly liked singing and quickly discovered she could carry a tune very well. Men found Anna attractive and began to pay more attention to her. For the first time in her life, she was having fun. Every week, she looked forward to being with the group.

A Man Comes Into Anna's Life

One of the hikers, László Solt, showed a particular interest in her. László had recently transferred from Budapest to open and manage the district branch of a national bank. At 39, he was the oldest man in the group. Coming from the capital, he appeared far more sophisticated than the others. He impressed everyone with his talk about the flashy lifestyle of Budapest's upper-middle class. His important position in the bank enabled him to live in a lovely house, while most young men in the group still resided with their parents.

Anna was highly flattered by the attention of this mature, soft-spoken man, and the two of them began to spend more and more time together during hikes. Elza, who was not as attractive and popular, felt left out and warned Anna that a relationship with a man like László could lead her into trouble. However, the well-intentioned advice came too late—Anna was already in love and would not listen to her friend.

László, born on January 26, 1893, in Budapest, was the second child of middle-class Jewish parents. The family lived in a prestigious city section where his father owned a sizeable fashionable clothing store. Young László had finished high school in 1910, and he had no desire for a career in the retail clothing business. He was very good at mathematics and had a strong interest in finance. After completing a three-year business school, he began to work in the head office of the First Hungarian Savings and Loan Bank. A year later, he was drafted into the army at the beginning of World War I. Like other men with at least a high school diploma, he instantly became a *karpaszományos altiszt* (officer-designate). He saw action in Serbia, Slovenia, and Italy; he was wounded twice, decorated, and elevated to the rank of lieutenant by the end of the war.

Back to civilian life, László returned to his banking position in Budapest, but in 1919, the short-lived Communist regime nationalized the bank. He was dismissed from the bank because he had been an Army officer. During the chaos in the country, he became disillusioned with his Jewish origins and decided to switch to the Roman Catholic faith. He also "Hungarianized" his family name by changing it from Grünfeld to Solt—using the name of an elderly couple who "adopted" him and became his godparents. Later that year, when Admiral Horthy became the country's leader, the bank returned to its previous operation, and László regained his position in the head office.

During the next ten years, he was promoted several times. By the 1929 worldwide economic crisis, he was an assistant manager of a large Budapest branch. The bank survived the Depression, and in 1932, he was transferred to Székesfehérvár to set up a new regional branch. Being single and raised in Budapest, he did not look forward to living in such a rural area. However, he was promised a significant promotion in Budapest if the new branch operated successfully for a while. Considering the move to be necessary in his career, he agreed to the relocation. Missing the active social life he was accustomed to in the capital, he joined the hiking club. That is when he met Anna.



Left: László at high school graduation at age 18. Center: 23-year-old László, shown as a sergeant (fourth from the right) with soldiers of various nationalities that served in the Austro-Hungarian Army at Serbia in 1916. c) An Army lieutenant at age 26.

Only a few weeks after meeting her, László told Anna he was looking for a live-in housekeeper and asked if she would be interested in taking the position. He offered a higher salary than she received from the Hoffmans, every Sunday off, and a lovely room in his house. Anna accepted his offer without hesitation.



László the bank manager at age 39.

Upon hearing the news, Mrs. Hoffman was flabbergasted. She did her best to talk Anna out of making a big mistake by moving into the house of an eighteen-year old bachelor. She cited two examples of her friends' servants who had made similar moves a few years earlier and found themselves pregnant within a few months. The young women were promptly dismissed when they revealed the pregnancies to their employers. Nobody would hire them because they were pregnant, and both of the distressed women had committed suicide; one by jumping into a deep water well and the other by drinking caustic lye. When Anna still would not change her mind, Mrs. Hoffman made a final plea by offering more money. However, Anna was determined to leave and moved into László's place when a replacement servant was found for the Hoffman household.

The following two years were the happiest time in Anna's life. Even though to the outside world, László treated her as a housekeeper, behind closed doors, he became her mentor and lover. Anna admired his extensive knowledge and used her situation to learn as much as she could about the lifestyle of educated people. László frequently entertained bank clients in his house. When ladies were invited, Anna watched them carefully and tried to imitate their social behavior. Anna hired additional temporary help for larger dinner parties, but she was the boss in the kitchen and became a gourmet cook. Although she could not afford expensive clothing, she developed an appreciation for classy appearance. On the second anniversary of their relationship, László gave her a new dress from one of the best clothing stores in the city. She cherished that and kept it as a special memento for many years.

Anna had much more free time in comparison to her previous jobs. She could read books or, visit family members when she was not working in the house or visit family. Another of her sisters, Zsuzsi, had been released from the orphanage and worked nearby as a live-in domestic. When Anna contrasted her job to Zsuzsi's, she felt fortunate to be allowed so much freedom. Then, just when Anna's life seemed to be easier, she received some alarming news about her youngest sister, Rózsi.

Aunt Rózsi's Life

Rózsi had been placed in the *Fejér Vármegyei Árvaház* (Fejér County Orphanage) at the age of four. The facility had an elementary school. After completing the mandatory six grades, most of the students began to learn a skill in one of four major categories: woodworking and carpentry or sheet metal work and welding (usually for boys); domestic duties that included

cooking and sewing (for girls); and agricultural and farm animal care which both genders could learn. Students with promising academic capabilities could complete all eight grades and occasionally even enter high school.

After finishing the sixth grade, Rózsi spent half of her day working in the kitchen and the other half in the garden. She became familiar with various plants and learned to cook like all the other girls. Only occasional visits from her mother and Anna changed her daily routine.

The casualties of World War I placed a tremendous burden on the orphanage facilities and personnel. Eventually, the institution could not admit the growing number of orphaned children. To reduce the number of children, the county looked for potential employers who would offer jobs and housing for the older residents.

A middle-aged farmer, Ferenc Kovács, expressed an interest in hiring someone. He was recently widowed; his marriage of fifteen years had not produced any children, and he operated his farm with the help of several hired laborers. He wanted someone who knew how to cook and was interested in agricultural work. Also, before his wife's death, the couple had planned to adopt an orphan, and Kovacs was still hoping to have an heir.

His sister warned him that raising a child would be difficult without a woman in the house, so he decided to hire a housekeeper. Knowing that the orphanage was overloaded with young girls, he visited there. He interviewed the available girls and decided that 16-year-old Rózsi met his requirements—she knew how to cook and liked gardening. Kovács took her from the orphanage to his small farm located at Velence. Like most orphans, she was eager to have a regular home and gladly left with him — looking forward to a brighter future.

Moving to a farm presented a significant change in Rózsi's life. In the orphanage, she shared a large dorm with the other girls. Now, she and Kovács shared the small farmhouse with a bedroom, a sitting room, and a kitchen. She cooked the meals, kept the house clean, and helped with outside work.

Kovács initially set up separate rooms for sleeping, but after a few months, they shared the bedroom. When she became pregnant, he was jubilant and promised to marry her one day and adopt the child. She developed a loving affection for him, although he probably represented a father image she had never experienced. Kovács provided the affection and security that she had yearned for. After delivering a baby girl named Éva, Rózsi was happier than ever imagined.



Arrows pointing to Budapest and Székesfehérvár, separated by 40 miles. Also shown are Martonvásár, home of the orphanage, and Velence, where Rózsi was taken by Kovács.

Like many other small farmers, Kovács could not afford machinery. Instead, his large animals provided the “horsepower” for his work. The blades were stuck in the ground during routine field plowing one day. Yelling for the horse to pull harder, he went to the front of the plow and tried to free it. While his hands were on the plow, it suddenly became unclogged, and the sharp blades ripped into his belly. He let out a horrified scream as the horse dragged him for some distance. By the time others reached the scene and halted the animal, Kovács was dead.

Inside the house, Rózsi also heard the screams and rushed out. Finding the lifeless, blood-covered body of Kovács, she thought her life had also ended. During her time at the farm, she had become attached to the man who provided love, stability, and security. What would happen to her and six-month-old Éva now?

Within a few days, Kovács’s brothers and sisters gathered for the funeral. He had left no will or legitimate heirs, so all his property was passed on to his relatives, who felt no concern for Rózsi’s welfare. On the day of the funeral, one brother—kinder than the others—gave her some money, packed her belongings, and offered to take her and the child back to the orphanage. Determined not to have her baby raised the same way as she had been, Rózsi returned to Székesfehérvár.

For a while, Anna had lost track of her youngest sister. On her last visit to the orphanage, Anna learned of Rózsi’s move to the farm and obtained the address. She had sent a letter to Rózsi and, in the reply, learned of her niece’s birth. Rózsi asked Anna to keep the news about the baby a secret until after she and Kovács were married, and Éva had his family name. Anna complied, knowing how her family would react to such a situation. She did not hear from her youngest sister again until Rózsi stood at the door one day, holding a crying baby.

After hearing the heartbreaking story of how Kovács’s family had treated Rózsi, Anna sprang into action. Through Solt, she learned about an expanding factory that needed additional workers. Even though Rózsi had no industrial skills, she could be hired to do something. They went to the factory, and Anna waited outside with the baby during Rózsi’s interview. Knowing they would not hire a single woman with a small child, Rózsi concealed her motherhood. After some time, Rózsi emerged with a big smile on her face. The factory needed a second cook in the cafeteria. They had hired her and also would provide housing in the workers’ dormitory. The only problem was where to hide little Éva.

At the market where Anna shopped for food, she had previously met a woman who provided daycare for small children. Anna and Rózsi went to the woman’s house and asked if she had room for another child. At first, she was reluctant to provide full-time care, but she finally agreed to accept Éva at a price higher than what she charged for daycare. She also promised to hide the mother’s identity discreetly. That decision also protected her business because some of the parents might have been unhappy about having an illegitimate child mingling with theirs.

Soon after Rózsi began to work at the company, one of the workers, Ferenc Szilvási, began courting her. Within a few months, he proposed marriage. After learning about her child, he agreed to take the “whole package.” He adopted Éva after the wedding. Within the

next few years, their family size increased to five with the addition of a son, also named Ferenc, and a daughter, Zsuzsi.



Left: Rózsi, after she gave birth to Éva. Right: Rózsi's three children: Éva, Zsuzsi, and Ferenc.

My Origin

After working for Solt for two years, Anna felt secure and well-established as his housekeeper. On a personal level, however, a gap still existed between them. He always addressed her with the informal “you” (*tegezés*) and called her by her nickname, Panni; she used the formal “you” (*magázás*) in their conversations. When they were alone, she called him László, but he expected to be referred to as Mr. Solt in the company of others. He was very affectionate toward her in private but treated her as an employee of the outside world.

She enjoyed caring for him and secretly hoped that the time would come when he would reveal their deeper relationship to everyone. But fearful of losing everything, she did not dare express her real feelings. Her fear intensified when she realized that she was pregnant. She knew that the real test of his loyalty would soon take place. For nearly three months, she shared her condition only with her younger sisters, Rózsi and Zsuzsi. Eventually, it also became apparent to Solt, and she had to acknowledge the pregnancy.

His reaction was one of indifference. It almost seemed he had expected the news and had already prepared a response. He wasted no time telling Anna that, considering his important position and status, he could not openly admit that his housekeeper carried his child. Instead, he promised to help her financially—if she would move to Budapest. After the birth, he would also assist in finding a married couple to adopt the child. When this was accomplished, she could resume working for him. Knowing that most people in Budapest snobbishly looked down on those who lived in the country, he emphasized that having that city as a place of birth on the certificate would be helpful to any child. More culture and opportunities would be available in the capital.

Anna was crushed after hearing his proposed solution. Leave the man she loved? Travel to the big city without knowing anyone there? Be alone during the most challenging time in

her life? Give away her child? No, that was not what she wanted to hear! She had hoped that, like Kovács's promise to marry Rózsi and adopt Éva, Solt would also be happy to become a father and behave the same way.

What choice did she have? Recalling what Mrs. Hoffman told her about the other pregnant servants' fates, Anna was grateful that at least Solt was more considerate than some men. He could easily deny that the child was his and fire her. She could not go to the authorities because it would be her word against his; the outcome of any legal proceeding would undoubtedly be in his favor. Also, having an illegitimate child in a relatively small city would bring embarrassment to her family. In tears, she agreed to follow his proposal.

Solt contacted a former army corporal, Mihály Kakas, who lived in Budapest, and asked if he and his wife would discreetly help a young pregnant woman until she had her child. Mihály had served under Solt during the war; both had been wounded and shared a close comradeship. After receiving a positive reply, Solt helped Anna pack her belongings into two suitcases and put her on a train to Budapest. Waving goodbye to him as the train pulled away, she nervously headed to a new chapter of her life.

Mihály and his wife, Bözsi, met Anna at the railroad station in Budapest. They were both in their early thirties, and she immediately liked their outgoing, friendly personalities. Bözsi gave her a big hug while Mihály grabbed her luggage. A warm welcome eased Anna's fear of being alone in the big city. However, the size of the station and the number of people rushing around overwhelmed her after living in Székesfehérvár.

The trip to their apartment took some time. They began on one streetcar, transferred to another, and ended on the metro—a new experience for her. Mihály proudly explained it was the first subway line built in continental Europe, modeled after the London underground. Anna was very impressed.

The couple's apartment, located on a street adjacent to Heroes Square, was small; it had only a kitchen and a bedroom. A toilet at the end of the outside corridor was shared with another family in the building. The kitchen had a sofa where Anna was to sleep. They ate dinner at home that evening, and during the meal, she agreed to take care of all household duties while the couple worked during the week. In this way, she could provide service in exchange for her stay.

Summer passed by, and the time to deliver the baby approached. Although Anna sent letters faithfully every week to Solt, his replies became more sporadic. He kept asking if prospective adoptive parents had been found and did not show much concern for her welfare. Sadly, she began to sense that he had lost interest in her. As the baby's movement within her body grew stronger, she became excited about motherhood. In a letter to Solt written shortly before her child was born, she informed him that she might prefer to keep the child. He did not reply.

On August 27, 1936, she was taken to a hospital, and a few hours later, she became the mother of a baby boy. The next day, the wife of a well-to-do merchant delivered a baby girl in the ward. When the woman found out that her newborn was a girl, she was devastated—her husband had wanted a boy! In desperation, the mother offered Anna a large sum of money to exchange babies. Anna would not even consider the idea. She was determined to keep the son she had carried for nine months—Me.

I was christened in *Szent Imre* Roman Catholic Church on the Buda side of the city, next to the “Bottomless Lake.” Mihály and Bözsi became my godparents, and I received the name László (nicknamed Laci, or affectionately Lacika). Because I did not have a legal father, the birth certificate showed my mother’s family name, Besser.

After recovering from the delivery, Anna discussed her plans with Mihály and Bözsi. She could not stay in their small apartment much longer, and keeping me had destroyed any hope of returning to Solt. She hoped to find a live-in job in a household. Weeks of visiting employment agencies and answering classified ads did not lead to suitable work. Domestic jobs were available, but no one would take a mother with a child.

Since the *Városliget* (City Park) was only a few minutes from our apartment building, Mother took me there in a stroller on Sundays. On one of those occasions, she met a young mother who had two sons; one was only two months older than I was, and the other was two years older. Asking the mother who cared for her sons, she explained that she planned to stay home for the first six months while nursing her infant. After that, she would return to work, and her parents, who lived with them, would look after both sons.

My mother explained that it had been challenging to find work with an infant and asked if it might be possible for me to stay with them until she found a live-in job where I could be with her. To her joy, the woman answered, “Perhaps we could work it out. Come and meet my family.”

Anikó Dancsa, her husband János (nicknamed Jancsi), and their two sons, Pista and László, shared an apartment with her parents. Their unit had a kitchen with doors leading to two rooms connected by another door. The parents and the boys slept in one room and the grandparents in another. As was common in many small apartments then, a toilet on the same floor was shared with another family. The kitchen had a wood-burning stove for cooking; one of the bedrooms also had a wood- and coal-burning stove that provided heat during the winter. The apartment was under 900 square feet.

János was not enthusiastic about having another baby in their home, but Anikó convinced him that the two young boys would be ideal playmates. The grandmother took an instant liking to me and also voted in my favor. Finally, János gave in and arrived at a financial arrangement with my mother. Anikó even offered to nurse me because she had plenty of milk. A few days later, I moved in with the Dancsa family and shared a bed with their two boys. Since there were now two children nicknamed Laci, they called me Kis-Laci (Little Laci) and the older boy, Nagy-Laci (Big Laci). I “shared” Pista and Nagy-Laci’s grandparents, Nagymama and Nagypapa.

Once she had made arrangements for my care, Mother quickly found work as a live-in housekeeper for a well-to-do family who lived on the other side of Budapest. She visited me regularly on her days off, but despite her dedication, she realized I was far more attached to the Dancsa family.



Six-month-old “Kis Laci” with Mother.

Chapter 3: *My Early Childhood*

My living arrangement with the Dancsa family worked very well. As promised, Anikó nursed me along with her younger son. After she returned to work as a masseuse, her parents, Nagymama and Nagypapa, took care of the three boys. The two seniors also cooked for the family. Mr. Dancsa was employed by the Hungarian *Pénznyomda* (Mint), guarding the gate where trucks brought in raw material and took out newly minted money.

Using the reference Solt gave her, Mother soon found work as a housekeeper for the family of Mr. Márki, a well-to-do industrialist whose company produced components for German airplanes. Since my birth, she had written several letters to my father, trying to convince him to accept me. Her efforts had been fruitless to this point, and in desperation, she took me to Székesfehérvár on my first birthday. She hoped his fatherly instinct would not let him turn us away after seeing me. Wearing her nicest outfit, she took me to the train station. A few hours later, we showed up at my father's door.

An attractive young woman answered the knocking and inquired about the nature of our visit. Mother told her it was personal, and the woman led us into the living room.

"Mr. Solt is away, but I expect him home soon. Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Anna; I was his housekeeper," Mother replied. "And who are you?"

"I am Joli, and I take care of him now. He told me that you quit and moved away last year."

An uncomfortably long silence set in while the two women stared at each other. Mother sensed that Joli was already more than just a housekeeper to Solt. Then the door opened, and he walked in. Seeing the two of us sitting on the sofa, his jaw dropped in surprise.

"Joli, please go outside while I talk with Anna," said Solt after regaining his composure.

In a long, heated discussion, Solt explained that because my mother had chosen not to abide by his demands for placing me up for adoption, he did not feel responsible for my care. Mother asked if she could come back to work for him again, keeping me with her. The answer was a firm "No!" He had already hired a new housekeeper. Soon, he would be transferred back to Budapest, and an apartment in the city would not be the right place for a child anyway. He restated his conviction that my mother should not raise me but rather give me up for adoption. "He is a sweet little boy, and it would be easy to find a couple who would want him."

While talking, his dog came into the house and sniffed me. That was probably my first experience around a large dog, because I began to cry. Mother tried to comfort me, and the scene softened my father's heart. He gave her some money but firmly repeated that I should be put up for adoption. As for returning to see him again, he said we were not welcome. Before we left for the train station, he photographed Mom and me standing next to his dog and promised to send us the pictures. That time, he kept his promise.

My mother kept her composure until we left, but she was crushed. Seeing another woman with the man she loved was hard to accept. Having him show no interest in me was even more devastating. She sobbed most of the way home on the train.



Just after my first birthday, with Mom and my father's dog, in Székesfehérvár.

I soon considered the Dancsas as my family. Pista and Nagy Laci always treated me like a brother, but I was to call their mother Anikó néni¹ to differentiate her from my mother. I called their father Jancsi bácsi. As far as I was concerned, Nagymama (Grandma) and Nagypapa (Grandpa) were my grandparents.

My earliest recollection of staying with the Dancsa family was when Nagypapa, Anikó's father, chased me in circles through their small apartment. Their two bedrooms joined through a door, and both had other doors opening to two sides of the kitchen, forming a loop. Nagypapa had a Pickwickian body and a round face. Above his mouth, his gray prickly mustache became a weapon he loved using on little kids. All he had to say was, "I'll catch you and give you a mustache rub," and the mad race was on. When he finally caught us, he would massage our faces with his mustache, and we giggled endlessly. I loved that game and missed it when he disappeared one day, never to be seen again. The older boy, Nagy Laci, said Nagypapa had died, but I did not know what that meant.

I also remember occasional Sunday fishing trips. As a reward for our good behavior, Jancsi bácsi took the three of us by streetcar to the shore of the Danube. Once he had found an excellent strategic location, we sat on the steps leading down to the water while he baited the hook. We all cheered when he caught a fish and proudly put his catch into a bucket of water. On our way home, the three boys alternately carried the bucket. Nagy Laci was strong enough to hold it alone while Pista and I lugged it jointly. Anikó néni prepared the fish for dinner those nights.

The grossest but funniest events were when Jancsi bácsi passed gas that sounded like cannon fire. His preparation was always the same: he stood up, looked around to ensure he had an audience, took a deep breath, and let go with a thunderous explosion. All the kids around him laughed and laughed, but Anikó néni rolled her eyes in disgust.

¹ Young children in Hungary always address adult women who are not members of their immediate families with "néni" and men with "bácsi" added to their names. For strangers, the words néni and bácsi added after the family name, while for close acquaintances these words are added to the first names.



Right: I was about two years old when the three ladies, Anika néni, Nagymama, and Mother took me to City Park. Left: With Anikó néni and my closest friend, “Cousin” Pista.

Europe’s economy had survived the Depression, and by the mid-1930s, living standards were climbing in most continental countries. The living standard of Budapest’s inhabitants had improved significantly. Automobiles began to replace horse carriages on the city’s streets. An excellent public transportation system was developed. The arts and literature flourished; the music of composers like Bartok, Kodály, and Lehár became internationally known. The Technical University of Budapest graduated many mathematicians and scientists who contributed to technology development. Coffee houses became popular centers where intellectuals brewed new ideas. Foreign tourists who visited Budapest frequently called the city the “Paris of the East.”

With the growing middle class, interest in sports also became more lavish. In the 1930s, Hungarian athletes excelled in various sports, particularly water polo, fencing, soccer, swimming, modern pentathlon, and canoeing. Out of 49 nations participating in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, Hungary placed third in the number of gold medals won—ahead of much larger countries like France, Italy, and Great Britain.

One ominous development was occurring in the 1930s, though—under Hitler, Nazi Germany was preparing for another war, and its factories could not produce all the arms the Führer wanted. Since the treaty signed after World War I forbade importing weapons, German companies began buying parts from countries they trusted. Hungary gradually became their prime trading partner, allowing Budapest to recover its industrial production. However, there was a price to pay for the business relationship; Hitler wanted Hungary to follow Germany’s political direction.

By then, Regent Horthy had ruled Hungary for nearly two decades. Initially, he had acted as a radical rightist, but he gradually changed and allowed a democratic parliamentary form of government. He gladly accepted the economic benefits of the German trade relationship but wanted it without the political ties. It was a difficult and dangerous tightrope to walk.

Hungary was in a political turmoil. Since the end of World War I, Hungarians had been bitter about the Trianon Treaty, which had given away a large portion of Hungary’s population, territory, and natural resources. The new political parties demanded action to regain the losses. The *Nyilaskereszt* (Arrowcross) Party openly campaigned to recover the borders of the former “Greater Hungary.”

Hitler did not hide his ambitions to expand Germany's power and create the Third Reich. With the Italian leader Mussolini, he challenged some of the decisions made at Trianon. Hitler invited a Hungarian delegation to Berlin and offered a deal. If Hungary attacked Czechoslovakia, Germany would step in to finish the job and take the Czech part of the country. Hungary would then regain the northern territories it had lost at Trianon. Horthy declined the offer, afraid that such an attack might lead to a major international conflict and Hungary would be blamed as the aggressor.

In 1938, Italy and Germany called meetings at Munich and Vienna to examine and revise the Treaty's rulings. France and Britain stayed away, although they eventually agreed to the decisions reached at the meetings. As a result, German troops entered Prague, and Hungary was allowed to peacefully reclaim the southeastern portion of Czechoslovakia, where Hungarians had the ethnic majority. Regent Horthy led Hungarian soldiers into some recovered cities, and large celebrations occurred throughout Hungary. In light of this first success, the demand to regain all territories lost at Trianon heightened among the nationalistic parties.

Being just a toddler while all these storms were brewing in Europe, all I knew about was my small world with the Dancsa family. My affection for them naturally grew because I spent more time with them than with my mother. This became obvious to Mother one Sunday, just before my third birthday, when she took me for a walk in City Park. After returning to the Dancsa's apartment, I rushed to Anikó and clung to her, hardly acknowledging Mother's departure. She told me later that the event almost broke her heart. She finally built up her courage and revealed the circumstances of my existence to her employer. She asked Mr. Márki if I could live with her in their apartment. However, being a staunch Catholic, he did not want to allow such a sinful person to maintain contact with his family and fired her.

The following month presented the lowest point in Mother's life. Going through many interviews, she could not find any employment where I would be allowed to live with her. Finally, the employment agency stopped sending her for interviews when one prospective employer complained about referring a morally unfit person for a job. She could not go on much longer without work.

Finally, she saw an advertisement for a housekeeper—with good references. In desperation, she decided to apply without a recent reference. She told me later, "If I had been turned down again, I planned to take you to the Danube and jump into it, holding you in my arms."

The song that initiated the idea of suicide in her mind, *Szomorú Vasárnap* (Gloomy Sunday²), was written by Rezső Seress in the early 1930s. It was blamed for a sharp increase in suicides, and Hungarian authorities eventually prohibited it from radio broadcasts. Introduced in the United States by Paul Robeson³ and shortly after that by Billy Holliday and dubbed "the Hungarian Suicide Song," it quickly became an international hit. Here is a literal translation of the second verse.

² A Hungarian movie with the same title was produced in 2003 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOqiolytFw4&NR=1>). It is focused on the song and its effects.

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CyMF0Uhv08>

*Then came a Sunday when you came to find me
They bore me to church and I left you behind me
My eyes could not see one I wanted to love me
The earth and the flowers are forever above me
The bell tolled for me and the wind whispered, "Never!"
But you I have loved and I bless you forever
Gloomy Sunday (by Desmond Carter)*

Brokenhearted and deeply depressed, Mother was tired of living without having me with her and weary of the stigma of her unwed status.

The newspaper ad Mother saw asked for a handwritten résumé to be sent to József Braun at an address located in the 14th district of Budapest. Mother described her previous employment in detail, starting with the job at the candy factory at the age of ten. She emphasized that she was a hard worker, experienced with kosher cooking, and able to prepare dinner parties for small groups. She did not mention me. After mailing the letter, she went to a church for the first time in several years to pray. Recalling her mother's belief that St. Anthony⁴ always protected children, she asked for the saint's help to reunite me with her.



St. Anthony is often depicted holding the Christ child—maybe that is where Anna's mother got her belief that Saint Anthony always looks out for children.

A week passed, and she received no reply. Continued efforts to find suitable employment had also failed, and she was broke. Sensing her low morale, Mihály and Bözsi took her out for dinner on her birthday, Wednesday, June 14, 1939. At the restaurant, the gypsy violin player asked what song they wanted to hear. Mother requested her favorite, "A Vén Cigány" (The Old Gypsy). The sad song is about an aged violinist begging for a final opportunity to play for a group of well-to-do men dining in a fancy restaurant. The young aristocrats make fun of him and pay the waiter to throw him out on the street. Without having his last wish fulfilled, he dies of a broken heart. Mother sang the lyrics along with the gypsy, her tears flowing, foreseeing that her own life might also end soon.

The next day, interrupting her job search, she went to the shore of the Danube, contemplating which bridge would be the one for our fatal jump. She decided on the famous *Lánc-híd* (Chain Bridge) while humming the melody of "Gloomy Sunday."

⁴ To most Catholics, St. Anthony is the patron saint associated with the return of lost articles and missing persons. He is petitioned for help in finding almost everything that is lost, from misplaced papers to a lost lover, or a straying partner.

When she opened the door upon arriving home, she found a letter sent by Mr. Braun. With trembling hands, she opened it. Then, she began to cry with joy. His letter asked her to come for a job interview. St. Anthony had answered her prayer!

It turned out that Mr. Braun's hobby was graphology, and Mother's handwriting had impressed him, especially considering she didn't have much schooling. In his letter, he stated that he owned a small apartment house and needed a kosher housekeeper; he also wanted someone to manage the building's needs. He asked her to come for an interview on the following Sunday—the same day she had planned to end our lives.

Interview with Mr. Braun

József Braun, born in Budapest in 1903, was the oldest of three children of a middle-class Jewish family. His father owned a small textile store, and his mother stayed home to raise the children. In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, his father was drafted by the army, not to be seen by his family for the next nine years. Eventually, he was released from an Italian prisoner-of-war camp after contracting malaria. He passed away a few years after coming home.

His mother, Róza Braun, closed their store because she could not procure materials during the war. She moved her family to a smaller apartment and opened a coffee shop on the street side of the building. Her parents, who had a farm in a distant town, provided fresh milk, dairy products, and flour. At 12, József took on the role of man of the family. He woke up daily at 3 a.m. and carried a large milk can from the railroad station to the shop via street car. On Sundays, when József did not have to go to school, he took the train and brought back eggs from the farm.

After completing high school in 1921, József worked as a bookkeeper in a large shoe store. He also continued to help in the coffee shop early mornings before going to his job. Róza eventually expanded her business into a highly popular *cukrázda* (pastry shop) and began to focus on securing her children's futures. Daughter Mimi received a dowry of a furnished apartment. Son László took over the pastry shop. For József, she purchased the exclusive rights to manufacture and distribute coin-operated pool tables and financed him to set up a shop to build the tables.

József installed a network of pool tables in sweet shops, taverns, and social clubs, and the game soon became very popular. From then on, he traveled the country monthly to empty the coin banks. After five years of operation, he had earned enough to build a two-story apartment house, where he lived with his mother until she passed away. Finding himself alone and too busy to consider marriage, he wanted someone to care for him. He placed an ad in a newspaper looking for a capable woman to run his household. Among the many responses, he selected my mother for the first interview.

Mother took the streetcar to Fűrész Street Sunday afternoon and walked to house number 90. The two-story building, surrounded by a large garden with many fruit trees, looked new. Mr. Braun's apartment was on the second floor, with windows facing the garden and the street. He answered the doorbell and immediately put her at ease with a friendly introduction. He offered her cacao and *kuglóf* (a Hungarian cake) and then outlined his

expectations for a live-in housekeeper. The salary he would pay to the right person was higher than she had earned. In addition, it included medical insurance and paid vacation time, neither of which she had had before.

Next, he wanted to hear her life story, from childhood to the present. Mom opened up and told him everything except that she had a child. He listened patiently for the next hour or so, occasionally interrupting to ask questions.

“I am impressed with your background and perseverance. You had a difficult childhood, yet in many ways, you managed to do better than some who came from privileged families. I am considering hiring you even though I have not interviewed anyone else,” he told her.

“Thank you, Sir. I would always do my best to look after you and your house,” she replied, trembling with excitement.

“Is there anything else you should tell me?” he asked, looking directly into her eyes.

Mother hesitated for a moment. The job sounded so great that she was tempted to take it and continue to leave me with the Dancsa family. Then she realized that I would most likely treat her more and more like a stranger instead of a mother. Taking a deep breath, she decided to reveal the truth.

“Yes, I am afraid there is more. I have a son who is almost three years old. He has stayed with another family for almost his entire life. I only see him occasionally. I love him dearly and hoped to find a job where he could stay with me. What you offer sounds wonderful, but I don’t want to live any longer without having my son near me.”

With that, she began to cry.

“Anna, I have already checked out your background and know about your son. I would not have hired you if you had withheld that from me. Now that you have told me, the job is yours, and your son is also welcome to live here. I may never marry, and having a little boy around would be nice.”

Mother was in shock and kept sobbing. Was she dreaming, or could all this be happening? It took some time to realize that her fondest wish was coming true. After all the hard times, despair had been replaced by the hope of an excellent job and the opportunity to raise her son.



Two photos of Mr. Braun’s small apartment house. The left picture shows the view from the street. The right photo, taken in 2010, shows his 94-year-old widow standing in front of the kitchen door.

“Mr. Braun, I promise to be a faithful servant and do everything I can to please you. You have saved our lives.”

“I am also glad. When can you start?”

We moved in the next day. I had my first party on my third birthday two months later. Mr. Braun—whom I called Braun bácsi— invited several neighbor kids from the building, including Cousin Pista, to share a *Dobos torta* (layer cake with frosted caramel top) with me. I was the happiest boy in the world.

The Beginning of World War II

A few days after my third birthday in 1939, German troops attacked Poland, leading to the outbreak of World War II. Earlier, the *Anschluss*⁵ of Austria and the takeover of Czechoslovakia had not caused further armed hostility; the West overlooked them. The attack on Poland, however, triggered a chain reaction that eventually spread through the entire world. Less than three decades after the end of the First World War, another major catastrophe began, eventually leading to the death of sixty million people.

Hungary’s geographic location became strategically important because it was between the new German empire and the Romanian oil fields that Hitler needed for his army. To assure Hungary’s support, after Germany attacked Yugoslavia, Hitler allowed Hungary to reclaim an additional part of its territories lost at Trianon. Publication Minister Goebbels launched a successful propaganda program through Germany’s allies, blaming Jews for past social inequities. The Hungarian Arrowcross Party, initially formed in 1935, advocated racial purity—similar to the German Nazi Party’s goals—and the re-creation of the country’s pre-Trianon borders. The Party was dissolved by Horthy in 1937, but it formed again in 1939; it rapidly gained popularity among Hungary’s working class. In the 1939 election, it received 25 percent of the vote. Gradually, the Arrowcross Party turned more anti-Semitic, pressuring businesses not to promote Jews to managerial positions. Even though the political changes had not directly affected our lives, my mother’s employer became concerned about Hungary’s direction. Two of the tenants in our building joined the Arrowcross Party and began to post Nazi slogans in the stairways. Rumors also circulated that a law would soon be passed to prohibit Jews from hiring non-Jewish workers, and Mr. Braun rightfully worried that under such legislation, Mother and I would be forced to leave him.

Our New Living Quarters

Living in Braun bácsi’s apartment introduced me to many changes. His apartment had a full bathroom, including a toilet and bathtub equipped with a hot-water heater. The Dancsas shared a toilet with other building tenants; Pista and I had always used a chamber pot. Now, Mom introduced me to the proper use of the toilet—a terrifying experience. I still recall how it took quite a while to overcome my fear of being swallowed by the large bowl.

⁵ The annexation of Austria to create “Greater Germany.”

Braun bácsi also had a large radio with several knobs. The radio sat on a credenza in his room, and I had strict instructions not to touch any of the knobs. When Braun bácsi turned one of the knobs, voices came from the radio, sometimes speaking, other times singing. I was curious to find out if some little people were hiding inside, and one day, when I was home alone, I climbed up the credenza to investigate. I talked to the back side of the radio, but nobody replied. Later, I asked Mother to explain the mystery. She told me that the sounds came through the air, and I would understand how that works one day. Who knows—perhaps that experience contributed to my later choosing electronics as a profession.

A pleasant new experience was taking a bath in an actual bathtub. At the Dancsas, once a week, Anikó néni boiled water in two large pots and poured it into a washbasin. Nagy Laci had the first turn to be scrubbed with a sponge, followed by Pista and finally me. I never liked the process because the soap often splashed into my eyes when she wrung the sponge over my head. Now, I could sit in the bathtub by myself and have fun splashing.

Previously, Nagy Laci, Pista, and I shared a bed lying head-to-toe in a sardine configuration. The bedroom of Braun bácsi's apartment had two twin beds next to each other where my mother and I slept. Of course, I frequently crept over into her bed to cuddle, but it was great to know I had my bed.

Braun bácsi did not have much hair, and he thought little boys should have short hair. After living with him for a few weeks, he offered to take me to the barber. When we came home, Mom was not happy to see that I was almost as bald as he was. That night, she burned his favorite dinner. He probably got the message because he agreed to let my hair grow back longer after that incident. As an apologetic gesture, he took us to a photographer to record my new look for posterity.

Other than the burned meal, he enjoyed Mom's cooking immensely. He commented one day that in two months, he had gained back the weight lost during the time he cooked for himself after his mother passed away. Mother and I always ate at the same table with Braun bácsi and any others he invited for a meal. The rabbi of the local synagogue, Mr. Eisenberger, became a regular dinner guest on Friday evenings. Mom had strict instructions to adhere to kosher cooking rules on these occasions. The rabbi was a large man with a long gray beard. Rumors floated around that he possessed the power to heal people.

I always looked forward to Mr. Eisenberger's visit for a selfish reason. I rushed to let him in when he knocked on our door (he never used the doorbell). He always picked me up and hugged me first. After putting me down, he showed me his hands, one with a candy and the other empty. Next, he hid his hands behind his back and asked me which one I wanted. Somehow, I always selected the hand with the candy, and I was very happy for making the right choice. After dinner, while Mom and I took care of the dishes in the kitchen, the rabbi lit candles and prayed with Braun bácsi in the dining room.

Mom and I made one of our regular Friday trips to the grocery store. Our street had shallow rain gutters next to the sidewalks. One of my favorite activities was to run ahead of Mom, turn around, and jump in and out of the gutter while she approached me. On our way home, I fell after one jump into the gutter and could not stand up. Mother rushed over and tried in vain to help me. In a panic, she carried me to a nearby hospital's emergency room.



Left: My picture, taken at age two and a half. Center: Braun bácsi in 1939, when we moved into his place. Right: Mom and I after Braun bácsi had my hair cut short.

The doctor's examination did not reveal why I could not stand. He wanted to keep me there for observation until further consultation with an orthopedic specialist. Mom intensely disliked hospitals and would not leave me until she discussed it with Mr. Braun. Against the physician's advice, she carried me home and put me in bed. Then, she proceeded with Friday night's dinner preparation. When Braun bácsi came home, he was equally puzzled by my disability. He tried to stand me, but I could not do it. I did not feel any pain, but my legs would not hold me. He then proposed we wait for the rabbi's arrival and find out his advice.

At the usual time, we heard the familiar knocking on the door. Mother let Mr. Eisenberger in, and his first question was, "Why didn't Lacika open the door?" After hearing my mother's tearful explanation, he stood silently and prayed briefly with his eyes closed. Then he entered our bedroom, put his hands behind him, and said, "Lacika, come here. I have something for you." While the astonished Braun bácsi and Mother watched, I stepped out of the bed and walked to him without any trouble. As always, I guessed correctly, took the candy, and ate it. The rest of the evening progressed routinely. During the weekend, I had no problem walking or running. The following Monday, Mother took me back to the hospital, and the specialist examined me. He could not explain my sudden recovery, and Mother was convinced that a miracle had occurred.

All six tenants of the small apartment building owned by Braun bácsi had small children. Next to us lived the Csernus family with one boy named Laci, my age. Two doors away, the Bauers had two children, Árpi and Ingrid, one and two years older than me. The Nagy family had four sons of various ages on the ground floor below us. Their youngest boy, Misi, and I were the same age. The other two tenants on the main floor also had large families. The fathers of the Bauer and Nagy families were both members of the Arrowcross Party.

A spiral staircase led to an attic apartment where the sixth family lived. They only had a baby, too young to play with us. Still, we kids loved to go up there for another reason. The couple was away working during the day, and their live-in *nagypapa*, *Samu bácsi*, looked after their infant. When the baby slept, Samu bácsi told us exciting stories about Indian

fighters who roamed in a faraway place called America. None of the children knew where America was, but we always listened to his tales with fascination. Samu bácsi was nearly deaf; watching him hold a large cone to his ear whenever we asked him a question was interesting.

A Schwab family named Schmidt lived on the rear side of the property, separated by a fence. The father was our *Házmester*, whose duties included garbage collection and building maintenance. The family had only one child, Otto, who had a severely deformed back. Although he was older than I, because of his stoop, he was much shorter. All the neighborhood children called him *Pupos* (Hunchback) instead of his real name, and nobody wanted to play with him. I felt sorry for him, and occasionally—when nobody saw me—I sneaked back to their apartment to keep him company. We became good friends and played together with his collection of wooden puppets. Otto frequently had coughing spells and one time; he also spat up blood. His painful expression scared me so much that I ran home that day.

When I told Mother about this incident, she forbade me from seeing Otto again. Shortly after, we heard that Otto had tuberculosis and had been taken by ambulance to a TB sanatorium in the mountains. When Braun bácsi heard the news, he told Mom to take me to the hospital for a skin test. The test results came back positive. After a follow-up X-ray examination, the doctor had good news for us: although I had been exposed to Otto's disease, my lungs were not affected.

Having a large yard meant I could play outside for long hours daily. Climbing trees, picking fresh fruit, and making friends with the tenants' chickens provided exciting new entertainment. It was a safe area, and I enjoyed being in the garden. However, one thing scared me. A huge spider lived between two tall bushes in a giant maze of stretched-out cobwebs. From a safe distance, I often watched as a flying insect became trapped in the web, and the spider quickly moved in for the kill. Feeling sympathy for the victims, I planned to break the web but could not think of a safe way. I would have to stand very close to use a stick, and the spider might come after me. I tried throwing a rock from a distance, but it did not harm the web. I also hoped rain would wash it away, but the spider was still there, even after a large storm. I eventually gave up on my plan but always kept a safe distance from the cobweb and its occupant.

I spent most of my days outdoors and learned to play games with the neighbor kids. One game was to imitate riding on the streetcar. Árpí Bauer, a year older than me, had a cap and shoulder bag like the conductors used. He always played the role of the conductor, "selling" tickets and punching a hole into them during our imaginary rides. One day, he was generous enough to let me play the role of the conductor by loaning me his equipment. I enjoyed becoming the key figure in our game, but when I asked for Misi's ticket, he refused to comply. Being the son of a Party member, he felt it entitled him to be the conductor. I don't recall how our argument developed, but when he did not hand me a ticket, I punched a hole in his ear. Blood gushed out of the hole, and he ran home screaming. Mother gave some money to Misi's belligerent father to calm him down, and I received the first sound spanking I can recall. In addition, I was not allowed to go outside for an entire week.

After we moved into Braun bácsi's apartment, I became more attached to my mother, and Braun bácsi gradually became my substitute father. He was a kind and gentle man. He

taught me to read and write, play chess, and play number games. His activities led me to develop logical thinking. It is possible that his devoted tutoring and math games contributed to my outstanding math ability later in life.

Christmas approached, and I eagerly looked forward to its arrival. Although Braun bácsi was Jewish, he allowed us to observe our Roman Catholic holidays. In Hungary, *Mikulás* (Saint Nicholas) comes on December 6. That night, he places candy for good children and sticks for the bad ones between the double windows. Christmas trees are not set up until Christmas Eve and are kept until *Vízkereszt* (Epiphany), January 6. Instead of Santa Claus, *Jézuska* (Baby Jesus) delivered the tree and the presents. I hoped he would bring me a set of blocks—the kind our next-door neighbor's son owned—because I liked constructing various structures. I prayed to *Jézuska* every night to ensure he would not forget me.

After dinner on Christmas Eve, while I anxiously waited for *Jézuska* to open the windows, Mother rushed in and told me that our neighbors had already had the visitor, and he had left a beautiful tree. Of course, I ran over and admired the tree and their son's presents. We were playing with one of his new toys when an excited Braun bácsi told me our tree had just been delivered. Rushing home, I found the window wide open and a lovely Christmas tree standing in the corner of the room. In front of the tree sat a small white desk-chair combination with building blocks on top. Mother and Braun bácsi said, "He flew out the window just before you came back."



My first Christmas presents that I remember. The little desk stayed with us for several years. I used it to read and build palaces. At that point in my life, I wanted to be an architect or a soldier.

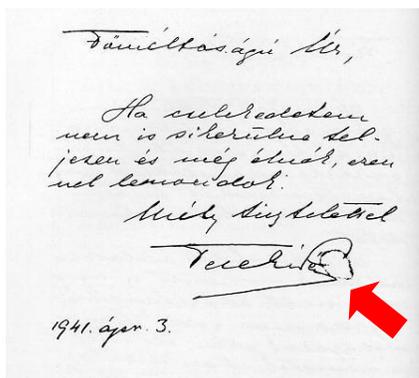
Hitler's Plan for Hungary

During this time of happy home life for Mother and me, the terrible events of World War II were happening in the world outside. The German *Blitzkrieg*⁶ (lightning war) swept most of Western Europe. By June 1940, German troops occupied Paris. In August 1940, Hitler called the second conference in Vienna to discuss further the territorial disputes caused by the Trianon Treaty. In reality, the occasion was neither a conference nor arbitration. Although both Italy and Germany were supposedly the hosts, the actual purpose of the meeting was

⁶ A new kind of warfare, introduced by the German Army during World War II, that used a heavily concentrated combination of air power, artillery, tanks, and infantry to break through the enemy.

to accomplish Hitler's objective of bringing Hungary into Germany's orbit. After the gathering, the German Foreign Minister Von Ribbentrop announced to the delegates that a large part of Transylvania would be returned to Hungary. While this decision delighted Hungary, it infuriated Romania and further inflamed the mutual hatred amongst the various nationalities that lived in the disputed border regions.

The early success of the German armed forces convinced many in Europe that Germany would quickly win the war. Hitler's assistance in regaining lost territories was used by the right-wing parties in Hungary to prove that Germany was a true friend and ally. However, fearing that Hungary would again be sucked into a major war, Prime Minister Teleki unsuccessfully opposed the alliance. When Regent Horthy allowed German troops to pass through Hungary to invade Yugoslavia in April 1941, Teleki shot himself in the head to show his defiant disagreement. He left two letters addressed to Horthy: one resigning from his position and the other protesting Hungary's coalition with Germany. His first letter stated, "Your Excellency, if my action fails and I stay alive, I resign. With deep respect, Pál Teleki." The letter was dated April 3, 1941. He did not survive.



Left: One of the two suicide notes left by Prime Minister Teleki, announcing his resignation. It is possible that the circular pattern at the end of his signature, pointed with an arrow, was caused by a tear drop. Right: A monument erected after World War II, to honor his effort to prevent Hungary's entrance into the war.

After Teleki's death, the fascist elements of the country gradually gained the upper hand. László Bárdossy, a Nazi sympathizer, succeeded Teleki as Prime Minister and paved Hungary's way into World War II. Once again, Hitler allowed Hungary to regain additional territory from Yugoslavia. Although my country recovered large segments of the territories lost at Versailles, in doing so, it sold its soul to the devil. Germany's *Anschluss* of Austria painfully reminded Horthy that he could not afford to refuse Hitler's demands for too long. His foreign policy became closely aligned with Germany's, and in 1941, Hungary joined the Axis⁷. At that point, Great Britain severed diplomatic relations with Hungary.

Passing through Hungarian terrain, in June 1941, the *Wehrmacht* (Hitler's army) invaded the Soviet Union. A week later, three airplanes bearing unrecognizable insignias⁸ bombed a Hungarian border town. Two of the unexploded bombs were Soviet-made, leading to the

⁷ The "Axis powers" were initially formed by Germany, Italy, and Japan in September, 1940. The pact was expanded later by the admission of Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria.

⁸ After decades of searching through archives, nobody could identify those bombers. Some feel that Soviet planes mistakenly bombed the city after straying off their original German targets. Others believe that they were disguised German planes used to provoke Hungary into entering the war.

conclusion that the planes came from the Soviet Union. The national outrage that followed forced Hungary's government to declare war on the Soviet Union. Acting on Hitler's demand and his promise of quick victory, half a million poorly-equipped Hungarian troops were sent to the Eastern Front.

Our lives had gradually changed during the early 1940s. Uniformed soldiers were seen more frequently on the city streets, although they were not noticeable in our suburb. None of the men in our building was drafted initially, but the two Nazis became more boisterous with their anti-Semitic slogans. When my mother collected the monthly rent, Mr. Nagy even refused to pay, saying he was "donating that money to help our troops." When Braun bácsi interfered, Nagy called him a stinking Jew and spat on him. Braun bácsi filed a complaint with the police, but no immediate action was taken to remedy the assault.

Two of the older Nagy boys approached me the next day when I went down to check the chickens. The boys looked menacing. I wanted to run upstairs for safety, but one blocked my way to the stairway. When I tried to flee in the opposite direction, I ran directly into the giant cobweb I had carefully avoided. Recalling the monster spider that lived in the web, I was terrified and began to scream.

Hearing the commotion, Mother ran downstairs, rescued me from the bullies, and assured me the spider was not in my hair. After that incident, however, I was afraid to play outside.

Braun bácsi took me to the first movie that I remember. The 1940 classic *Blue Bird*, with Shirley Temple, focused on a selfish young girl named Mytyl, who always wanted something she did not have. In her dream, she and her little brother follow her desire to find a bluebird. A good fairy transforms the family's dog and cat into a man and a woman to protect during their journey. The four of them travel through the land of the past, the future, and the rich. The dog-like man remains loyal, but the catty woman only wants her freedom and leads the children into danger. After not finding the bluebird, Mytyl learns that true happiness exists in their home. Being a five-year-old, I was deeply impressed by the movie, possibly influencing me to prefer dogs to cats!

I was ready to begin first grade, but considering the growing political situation with the neighbors, Mother was concerned about my safety. She and Braun bácsi reviewed the various alternatives and concluded that it might be prudent for us to move out. In the city's eighth district, he found a small apartment within a one-minute walk to an elementary school. Braun bácsi purchased furniture, bedding, and kitchenware to help us settle into our new home. With a sense of loss tempered by gratitude, Mother and I moved there in September 1942. I began to attend school the following week.

Mother and I Living Alone

The four-story apartment building on Aggteleki Street differed significantly from Braun bácsi's house. Instead of six neighbors, we had about forty. A broad paved road with buildings of uniform height on both sides replaced the quiet, narrow dirt street we had enjoyed. Two blocks to the left and one block to the right lay two busy boulevards where noisy streetcars and buses ran regularly. The large corner building next to us had a wide entrance for horse carriages. We discovered that one of the Budapest breweries had stalls

on the main floor for their horses. Mother warned me immediately not to listen to the colorful language of the carriage drivers. Of course, her caution ignited my curiosity about the way they spoke. I learned a few new words that led to big trouble when I repeated them in school later.

Our building had no elevator. In addition to its main stairways, it also had narrow spiral stairs in the back—primarily used by the *Vice-Házmester* (a low-grade employee assigned all the dirty work in the building) to collect garbage from the apartments in a large box and drag it down to the central garbage bins. A second stairway extended down to the coal cellars and up to the attic. Residents used the back stairway to haul coal and firewood from the cellars to their apartments in the winter. Only the larger apartments had bathrooms, and the other residents had to share a communal toilet. Opening onto the rear stairway on every floor, a dark and smelly room contained three shared stalls, each assigned to two or three apartments.

A shared laundry room was next to the rear stairway on the main floor. It was furnished with a wood- and coal-burning stove to heat water and a large wooden tub. A low-wattage bulb hanging from the ceiling by its electrical wires provided the only light. As I recall, the room was always humid and dark.

Our apartment on the third floor had only two small rooms—a kitchen and a bedroom. At some point, our unit had been separated from the larger apartment next door. Our bedroom had probably been the servant's room previously. The apartment had neither a water heater nor a bathroom.

The housemaster introduced us to two of the tenants with whom we were to share a toilet located at the adjacent side of the courtyard, about 35 meters from our front door. A small ceiling light bulb lit the windowless WC with its three stalls. The room had a very unpleasant odor, and I always did my best to minimize the time I spent there.

For cooking, the kitchen had a gas stove. The kitchen also had a *fregoli*, a moveable wood-framed set of wires to dry wet clothing. A rope running through two pulleys in the ceiling enabled us to move the *fregoli* up and down. A small coal-burning stove in the bedroom provided heat during winter. In the dirt-floored basement, a specific coal cellar was assigned to us to store firewood and coal.

Mother began looking for work the day after we moved in, and I left the apartment to find playmates. I did not have to go very far. Two boys, who were a few inches shorter than I, stood on the walkway of the inner courtyard. After staring at each other briefly, one of them said, "You can come over here. We won't hurt you."

I felt indignant. *Why would I be afraid of those smaller boys?* I asked myself. Then, I strutted over and introduced myself to show that I was not scared.

"My name is Laci. My mom and I just moved here yesterday from the 14th district."

"I am Tomi," said the boy with reddish hair. "My father is a cobbler, and we live in the shoe repair store downstairs on the street side."

The other boy, who had many freckles on his face, was called Albert. He told me that he had an older sister, Lizette. His mother and the children had relocated to Budapest from Belgium. They lived on our floor.

"Why did you move?" asked Tomi.

“My mother worked for a Jewish man, and we could no longer stay there.”

“Are you Jewish?”

“No, Roman Catholic. How about you?” I asked.

Albert replied, “I am also Catholic, and Tomi is Jewish, but we are good friends. We will start first grade next Monday. What grade are you in?”

Because I was much taller, they thought I was older. “I will also go to first grade,” I admitted. “Maybe we’ll be in the same class.”

None of us had attended kindergarten, so we immediately began to speculate about the kind of teachers and activities we would have in school. As it turned out, we shared the same classroom for the next three years and became close friends.

Chapter 4: The First Year of School

By Hungarian law, everyone in the country had to register his current address at the district police station within 48 hours of changing residence. Registration records were forwarded to a national data center so that government officials always knew where everyone lived. Parents also had to apply at the nearest elementary school for admission during January of the year when their children reached their sixth birthday.

Because I had already been admitted to a school close to Braun bácsi's house, Mother needed to transfer my records to the boys' school nearest to where we had moved the week before school began. Girls and boys, through the first eight grades, attended separate schools. Early Monday morning following our move, wearing my best outfit, I walked to school with Albert and Tomi, escorted by our mothers.

All the first graders were directed into the school's gym—a large hall full of strange equipment. Wooden platforms of various heights were standing in a corner. On one of the long walls, multiple segments of horizontal wooden wall bars were mounted in a ladder-like form. Mother told me they were called *Bordásfal* and were used to strengthen the body. Small steel hoops with dangling nets hung high above our heads at the centers of the narrower walls. When I asked Mother what these were, she didn't know. A father standing nearby overheard my question and said they were used for basketball. His answer did not make sense to me. Why would they make a basket with a hole in its bottom to hold balls? I was puzzled but did not ask any more questions.

Many boys already knew each other and formed small groups, talking among themselves. Albert and Tomi joined one of the groups. They invited me, but I stayed with Mom, holding her hand. Being in the noisy hall surrounded by so many strangers scared me.

The crowd suddenly became silent when a man and two ladies came in and stood on a small podium. The man introduced himself as the school's principal, and the ladies were the teachers of the first-grade classes 1A and 1B. He told us that classes were held from 8 a.m. until 12 noon, Monday through Saturday. Every student would receive two booklets: one with final grades posted twice a year and another to be kept by the student for teacher-parent communications and mid-term progress reports. Our first-grade curriculum included eight subjects: reading, writing, arithmetic, music, physical education, nature and neighborhood, arts and crafts, and religion.

Next, the principal read a list of the school rules that included:

- Students must be in their seats by 8 a.m. They must not leave the school until the end of the last class period.
- Students must stand up when a teacher or the principal enters or leaves the classroom.
- Students must not speak during classes unless called upon by a teacher. To ask a question, the student must raise the right hand with two fingers pointed upwards and wait until the teacher responds.
- Students must stand up when they talk to the teacher.
- No pushing, shoving, rough-playing, or fighting allowed.

- First-time violators will receive a written memo that a parent must sign and return. A second disobedience leads to a written warning. The student will be expelled after two warnings in a given school year.

He then reviewed the supplies and books we needed for the school year. We would write only in first grade with pencils, but ink pens would also be used in the second grade. Finally, he wished us good luck and asked the teachers to announce the students' names for the two classes. I hoped my two new friends, Albert and Tomi, would be in the same class as me. My wish was granted when we were placed in class 1B **and** 23 other kids. We kissed our parents goodbye and exited the gym.

Our teacher, Miss Haraszti, lined us up by height in the hallway. Then, she assigned seats to everyone based on height. Because I was the second tallest in the class—a fact I was very proud of—I ended up in the back. The classroom had three columns of dual twin table-chair combinations. My seatmate was Laci Tarnai, the tallest boy in the class. We learned that we lived on the same street and already knew how to read and write.



Pictures of a two-section gym wallboard and the way we walked to elementary school. Noone was driven...

After we were all seated, she told us we must address her as *Tanitó* (teacher) *néni*. Then, she began to enter our parents' names in alphabetical order into a large book. My name was second in the class, following Tamás Bellág. When it came to my turn, and she asked for my father's name, I did not know what to say. Somehow, that topic was never discussed at home, at least not in my presence. When I asked Mother once where my father was, she sharply replied, "He lives far away." From the tone of her voice, I knew I should not ask the question again.

I told the teacher that my father lived somewhere else. To my relief, she proceeded to the next person. After gathering information from all the students, she spent the rest of the day reading stories and talking about her former students. We stepped out to the paved schoolyard during the hourly class breaks but respectfully stayed away from the bigger boys. I also ate my snacks, a lard sandwich and an apple. When the bell rang to indicate the end of the break, we returned to our classroom. By noon, when it was time to go home, we had all come to like our teacher and looked forward to returning the next day.

During the short walk back to our apartment building, Tomi and Albert asked where my father was, and I told them I did not know him. Albert then revealed that he had a father while they lived in Belgium, where he was born, but his parents fought frequently. One day, his

mother packed their clothes into suitcases, and they took the train to Budapest. Since then, he had not seen his father. Tomi said he was happy that both of his parents were living with him—except when his father sometimes beat him with a wide belt. Albert and I decided perhaps it was better that we didn't have a father around to beat us.

Mother quickly found customers in the neighborhood for whom she could do laundry and ironing. She needed to work in our kitchen regularly because she could use our building's laundry room only once a month. She was not paid well for her work, and we had little money to spend. However, when I arrived home from school on the first day, she took me to purchase all the necessary books and supplies. Braun bácsi had already given me a shiny leather school bag for my sixth birthday. Mom appreciated the present because it was the most expensive item on the shopping list.

When Mom put me down to sleep that night, I did not want her to sing for me. Instead, I asked her to tell me about my father. Who was he, and why did he not live with us like the fathers of Tomi and cousin Pista? Why couldn't Braun bácsi be my father? Although we had only moved away from him a few days before, I already missed his presence and the games we played together.

At that time, Mother was not irritated by my questions. Instead, she sat beside me on my bed and explained that my father came from a well-to-do family, and those kinds of people did not marry poor people. She told me that perhaps I would meet him one day, and he would likely be happy to see me. As for Braun bácsi, she shook her head. "He was our employer, and one day he will meet a nice Jewish lady to marry."

I knew the difference between rich and poor, so her explanation made sense. Although I was somewhat curious about my father, I did not have a strong urge to meet him after what she told me. Before going to sleep, however, I promised Mom that when I grew up, I would be rich. Then, she would never again have to wash other people's clothes. We would also have all the food we wanted to eat and never worry about money.

Albert and I walked to our classroom on the second day of school. Tomi was already there. We checked out each other's school supplies when the bell rang and took our seats. As our teacher entered the door, we all jumped and stood silently. Miss Haraszti waved us down, then sat behind her desk and flipped through the large roster book with all our names. She instructed us to say *Igen* (Yes) when she called our names during the roll call. All 26 of us were present that day.

The first reading class began with learning to pronounce the Hungarian alphabet, which includes 42 letters and digraphs. Compared to the English alphabet, it sounds much more complicated, but once someone memorizes and learns all the sounds, reading any text of the phonetic language becomes very easy. We never used dictionaries to learn proper pronunciation; after completing second grade, most children could read and pronounce even long Hungarian words without hesitation.



This class picture was taken at the end of the first school year, in June 1943. I am standing in the second row from the back and third from the left. Tomi stands in the last row, third from the right. Albert sits on the right side of the front row. Our teacher, Miss Haraszti, sits beside the principal on the right. Laci Tarnai, who sat next to me in the classroom, stands third from the right in the center row. Boys wore short pants until the age of 14, all year round. In the winter, we added long stockings.

The Hungarian alphabet includes nine additional vowels and nine extra consonants. It may appear difficult at first, but these various letters and combinations are always pronounced the same way in words.

Hungarian vowels:

a, á, e, é, i, í, o, ó, ö, ő, u, ú, ü, ű

Hungarian consonants:

b, c, cs, d, f, g, gy, h, j, k, l, ly, m, n, ny, p, q, r, s, sz, t, ty, v, w, x, y, z, zs

I was utterly bored during the first months of reading classes. After all, Braun bácsi had already taught me how to read three years earlier. Writing and arithmetic classes were equally frustrating. I complained to Mother, who asked the teacher if I could move to second grade. Her request was flatly denied. Although I could read, write, and count at the second-grade level, I was very clumsy at drawing. Furthermore, if I did not complete the first-grade religion class, I could not take Holy Communion during my second grade. Finally, I was tall for my age but frail (Mom had already excused me from physical education). The teacher felt it would not be wise for me to be among the older and bigger boys.

The music class was interesting, because I like to sing. Mother sang to me regularly at bedtime. At school, Miss Haraszti taught us several funny songs by humming the melodies first and then making us memorize the words. I looked forward to that class.

For religion class, we split into different groups. Catholics, being by far the largest group, stayed in our classroom. Albert was also Catholic, so he stayed with us, but Tomi went to a different room with the other Jewish boys. Father Bogen taught our class. He was a strict man who spoke very loudly. He first taught us a new prayer, the Apostles' Creed. When one boy did not stand up fast enough to pray, the Father bopped him hard on the head. After that, we all followed his commands without fail.

Physical education was held in the gym. I was the only boy excused and had to sit on the bench while the other boys jogged around, exercised, and played games. After the class ended, the boys wanted to know what was wrong with me. I was embarrassed and asked Mother if I could participate in PE that night. She answered, "No, I don't want you to lose weight and become sick again." Her fear probably had a foundation because I was anemic and frequently ill. I had also had my tonsils removed a few months before. Still, to sit on the bench and watch the others have fun did not seem fair to me.

On our way home one day, Tomi asked if I would like to go and see where he lived. Their shoe repair shop was on the right side of our apartment building's street entrance. Tomi's father, *Weisz bácsi*, was a big man with wavy red hair. After Tomi introduced me, he greeted me with a loud, friendly *Szervusz* (Hello). Unbuckling the wide leather belt that held a shoe on his lap, he stood up and shook my hand. That was the first time I experienced an adult's handshake, and I felt honored by his action. He briefly asked Tomi how the school day went. Then he sat back down, secured the shoe to his lap, and resumed work. Seeing the wide belt in his strong hand and recalling that Tomi had told me that belt was also used to deliver spanking, I promised myself never to cross *Weisz bácsi*. Also, because Tomi and his father were the only people I knew with red hair, I concluded that all people with red hair must be Jewish.

Through a narrow stairway in the rear of the shop, Tomi led me to a cramped, dark attic space above the shop. Seeing their living quarters, I realized that some people lived in places even smaller than ours. At least we had a kitchen. Tomi's parents only had a small two-burner gas hot plate for cooking. In addition, he told me that they also shared one of the WCs on the ground floor inside our building.

"What do you do after the main gate of the building is locked at night?" I asked.

"I use a chamber pot, and Mom empties it in the morning after the gate opens," was his answer.

Once again, I realized that I preferred our apartment. Our WC was also outside, but at least we could access it anytime.

There was a grocery store on the street side of our building, next to the shoe repair store. The owner allowed customers to purchase food and delayed payment until the end of each week. Shortly after we moved in, Mother took me down and asked the owner to let us buy groceries and pay later. The owner recorded Mom's name in a book, and we became regular customers. In the beginning, she always paid what we owed in full. Later, there were times when she did not have enough money, and the man refused to extend her more credit.

On those occasions, she sent me down to buy food because it was known that the owner was not as strict with children.

Mother was very thrifty. She bought leftover food items at a lower price whenever they were available. We always had the fruit from the bottom of the boxes after other customers took the nicer pieces. The owner sold us the loose grapes that had fallen off the stems.

My school snack packed by Mom was standard: I got a lard sandwich and a piece of fruit in the summer. In the winter, I only had a sandwich without fruit. I always envied the kids from well-to-do families, because they ate *zsemle* (crunchy white roll) with butter spread inside and fresh fruit. One of my classmates, who sat in front of me, Vili Erdélyi, always brought shiny red apples to eat. They looked so tempting. One day, during the first break, I ate his apple. Unfortunately, the boy sitting beside Vili saw me and promptly ratted on me. Vili did not say anything, but when the next class began, he fidgeted in his seat. Miss Haraszti noticed and asked him, “What is wrong with you?”

Vili remained quiet, but his neighbor put up his hand. When the teacher pointed to him, the boy said, “Besser stole Vili’s apple and ate it. I saw it happen.”

Every boy stared at me silently, and I wished the earth would open and swallow me. Miss Haraszti walked over and asked me, “Is that true?”

“Yes,” I whimpered, holding back my tears.

“Why did you do that?”

“His apple was so much nicer than mine, and I wanted to taste it.”

“Let me see your apple,” she demanded.

I pulled out my little green apple and showed it to her. “Since you already know how to write, sit down, take your notebook, and write: *‘I stole something that belonged to my classmate,’*” she commanded.

By then, I was crying, but I managed to write the sentence in my notebook. “Show it to your mother and ask her to sign it,” the teacher said sternly.

Most kids stayed away from me during the next break, but Tomi and Albert proved loyal. As always, we walked home together after school. I went upstairs to our apartment and prepared myself for Mother’s reaction when she found out about my shameful deed. I expected a sound spanking.

We had supper after she came home, and I did not look at her but sat in silence. Sensing something was wrong, she asked me, “What happened?” Without saying a word, I showed her the note. It took her only a few seconds to read it.

“Tell me the whole story,” she said sharply, and I complied, preparing myself for the wooden spoon. To my surprise, she signed the note and said quietly, “We are poor, not thieves. Don’t ever take something that does not belong to you. Go to bed now!”

I lay in bed while she washed the dishes—a task always my chore—hoping she would come and sing for me per our typical nighttime routine. I waited in vain until I finally fell asleep feeling worse than if she had spanked me.

My Relatives

Although I had only a limited amount of clothing—sewn mainly by my mother—she always prided herself in keeping it clean and my shoes shiny. Wearing neat clothes helped me align myself with the boys from families with better financial standing. In school, there was an invisible social barrier between the well-dressed boys and those whose grubby appearance was reflected in their academic performance. The poor kids were generally not good students, and Mother knew this. She constantly reminded me that to be accepted by the “rich,” I must look neat and have good grades. She expected me to do well in school, and I did my best not to disappoint her. Regarding reading, I followed Miss Haraszi’s instructions like the other kids. I read by syllables, even though I could fluently read sentences. I became one of her favorites, and she praised me at the parent conference. Mother was very proud of me.

Occasionally, we visited my two aunts, Rózsi néni and Zsuzsi néni, who lived outside the city. To see them, we boarded the train from the Southern Railroad Station of Budapest and traveled for some time. The train moved much faster than the streetcars, and its locomotive spewed long trails of black smoke.

Rózsi néni, her husband, and their three children lived in a small village called Kápolnásnyék, where the streets and the sidewalks were unpaved. They shared a single-level house with two other families. Their unit had no electricity; they used kerosene lamps. The WC was an outhouse that smelled far worse than the toilet we used in Budapest, and it did not flush. Instead of toilet paper, we used wrinkled newspaper. I did not like the arrangement, but my three cousins—Éva, Feri, and Zsuzsika—did not seem to be bothered by it. Éva was two years older than I, while Feri and Zsuzsika were both younger.

My cousins’ home did not have faucets with running water. They had a deep well in the yard and pulled up the water in a large bucket by a long chain. Only grownups were permitted to operate the well, and Mom sternly warned me to avoid it.

The large nearby lake presented another danger since none of us kids knew how to swim. However, on warm sunny days, an older man who lived in their building—*Pintér bácsi*—gathered up several kids and took us to the sandy shore. He allowed us to run around, splash in the shallow water, and catch live frogs. That was my first experience in a lake, and I loved it.

I looked forward to visiting our country relatives, even though their living arrangements and clothes differed. I wore shoes and clean, ironed clothing while their outfits were shabby, and most of the time, they walked barefoot. I liked that my cousins looked up to me because I was a “city boy.”

Country life was different in many ways, and my cousins introduced me to many things we did not have in Budapest. I was familiar with dogs, cats, and chickens from living near tenants who kept these animals. The brewery station next to us in our street had horses. However, my cousins’ place had farm animals—ducks, geese, cows, goats, and pigs—that I never encountered before. Most of them were tame, but the other kids warned me that geese and male goats could become aggressive, so I stayed clear of them.

The pigs fascinated me. Although filthy and stinky, I found them very friendly and curious. They talked with snorting noises. One of them seemed particularly interested in me, and I wanted to be closer to him. As I opened their gate to step inside, another pig ran by

me, heading to freedom. I managed to grab his tail, but the beast was too strong and dragged me through the mud. Letting him go, I snatched a pitchfork and tried to steer him back to the pen. The stubborn pig did not want to obey. As I chased him around the courtyard, Pintér néni heard the commotion and came outside to investigate. Seeing me running after their pig with a pitchfork in my hand, she yelled, "Don't kill him, don't kill him." At that point, her husband came to my aid, and we eventually corralled the swine and put him back where he belonged. Mother was very unhappy about my dirty clothes and did not allow me to go near the pigs afterward.

Another fascinating experience was watching the goats and cows herded out to the pasture by a couple of young boys every morning. In the late afternoon, the large group of animals returned to the village, and surprisingly, they always remembered where to go. One by one, they peeled off at the gates of their respective homes. I did not know that a cow or goat could be so bright.

Visiting my other aunt, *Zsuzsi néni*, was not fun at all. She lived with her husband in the town where my mother was born, and they did not have children. Her husband, Misi bácsi, probably did not like kids. He never talked or played with me. They did not have any pets or neighbor kids either. Mom and Zsuzsi néni had a great time talking to each other about their youth, but I usually just sat in their house and read a book I'd brought along.

As *Mikulás* (St. Nicholas) Day and Christmas approached, Albert enlightened me about who brought the presents and the tree. He learned it from his sister, who was two years older. It was a disappointment to hear a story that conflicted with what I had believed before, but when Mother heard what I had been told, she seemed relieved. She assured me I would still receive a present because I had been good, perhaps even some candy in the window on St. Nicholas day.

In early December 1942, she asked me to go with her to a warehouse and help carry several boxes home. When we arrived home to open them, I saw the neatly stacked colored papers, aluminum foils, and soft candy in the various boxes. She told me we would be paid for assembling the *szaloncukor* (parlor candy), and we could also purchase some for ourselves at a discount to decorate our tree. Seeing that I was already drooling over the candy, she asked me to promise not to eat any, but sometimes, when she was not looking, I could not resist swallowing a few. She taught me the wrapping process she had learned at the candy factory. We frequently sang together during the job, and I felt it was important to help her to earn more money.

One Sunday afternoon, while we were busily wrapping the candy, someone knocked on our front door. Because very few people had telephones in Hungary, unannounced visitors were common, and we never knew whom to expect. When Mother opened the door, I heard a joyous scream and a strange voice saying "*Servusz*" to her. I rushed to the door and saw her embracing a lady I had never seen before. Mother turned around and said, "Come here and meet your aunt, Mari néni." I did not know anything about this aunt, so I did not know how to behave. Mari néni, however, entered our apartment, picked me up and kissed both cheeks. "*Szervusz Lacika*," she said, "I have been looking for the two of you for some time. Now that I've found you, we'll see each other frequently."

Mari néni wore a lovely fur coat, and her hair had elegant wavy curls. She also had a pleasant aroma, which I later learned was perfume—something my mother could never afford. A small box in her hand contained a model racing car she gave me. She wound it up, and I could steer it by way of a small remote wheel connected to the car by a long wire. I had seen those in the apartments of some of the rich kids when they invited me for a play session, and I had always hoped to have one. Now, my wish had come true. I happily played with the car while the two women chatted with each other. Later, Mother told me that she was delighted to see her oldest sister after not knowing her whereabouts for over a decade. She then filled me in about the reason for not having seen her.

After turning eighteen, young Mari left their birth town for Budapest with the hope of launching a singing career. Two men had taken her to the city, and eventually, she was hired to sing and dance in a small theater. Later, she became a regular singer in a stylish restaurant near the Eastern Railroad Station. After working there for about a year, the owner's son proposed to her! Mari néni told us they would be married soon after Christmas and invited us to the wedding.

Unlike Mari néni, Mother's other siblings (a brother and her fourth sister, who still lived in Székesfehérvár) had shunned my mother from the time she had her illegitimate child and never reciprocated her efforts to maintain their relationships. The same was true for all her aunts and uncles. I only learned about these relatives from Mother later.

Mother's laundry services and our seasonal *szaloncukor* assembly did not bring in enough money for us. She put a daybed into the back of our small kitchen to supplement her earnings and rented it to a middle-aged lady to sleep on. Our *ágyrajáró's* (bed-renter) name was Ilonka néni; she did not have any family and could not afford an apartment. She worked as a dresser for one of Hungary's well-known actresses and only came home late at night after the performances. Occasionally, she gave us free tickets to see some of the theater shows. I recall going there for the first time to watch a musical play. I enjoyed the singing parts and asked Mother to repeat some of the songs for me at home at bedtime.

In addition to my two pals—Tomi and Albert—I made new friends at school. Following Mother's advice, I mainly mixed with affluent kids who were good students. Since I also was doing well in class, they readily accepted me. Occasionally, the parents invited me into their homes to play. Most of them lived in apartments much larger than ours. Some boys even had their own rooms, and the families had servants. I was always invited to share the afternoon snacks the servant brought for the children. Fearing rejection, I never revealed that my mother used to be a household employee. If they asked me about my father, I lied and told them he was a soldier away with the army. I did not tell my mother about those lies.

Each student had a small wooden box, called a *tolltartó*, to hold pencils and pens. Some of those boxes were fancy, with a sliding top to keep the contents secure. Just before classes began one day, a boy called Hölcer dropped his box, which opened as it fell to the floor. We all helped him gather its contents, but our teacher came in, and we had to stand up. After she told us to sit, Hölcer continued to search for something. He had already found all his pencils but not the eraser and told the teacher about it. The boy next to Vili immediately pointed toward me and said, "Probably Besser stole it like he stole Vili's apple."

I was stunned and loudly protested the accusation. Miss Haraszti asked me if it was true. I replied, "No." She then walked to Hölcer and looked through his desk drawer. Not having any luck, she asked him to look in his pockets. To my great relief, he found the eraser there.

Miss Haraszti lectured us at length about being extremely careful of charging someone wrongfully because such words could never be taken back. She said, "It is true that Besser made a mistake once in the past. However, he promised not to do it again, and I believe he will keep that promise. You must all do the same." Then, she asked my accuser to apologize for his action. He did so, and I accepted it. Nevertheless, the two of us avoided each other after that incident.

World War II Approaches Budapest

By the winter of 1942, Hitler's planned *Blitzkrieg* of the Eastern Front had been thwarted. Counting on a rapid takeover of the Soviet Union, the attackers were not equipped for cold-weather warfare. The Soviet counteroffensive destroyed a large part of his invading forces, which included the Second Hungarian Army. Over 200,000 Hungarian soldiers were killed or captured by the Red Army at one of the curves of the Don River (*Don Kanyarja*).

Christmas approached, and grave news was circulated about the fate of the Hungarian Army, which faced one of the most severe winters of the Soviet Union. Soldiers with bandages and crutches became a common sight on the streets of Budapest. Government slogans asked everyone to donate money or valuables toward buying warm clothing for the men fighting our enemy. We could not afford to give cash, but after I went to sleep late at night, Mother knitted gloves for our soldiers.

Horthy's faith in a German victory vanished. The Hungarian economy began to falter, and rationing of many food items was introduced. Following the demands of the Arrowcross Party, all Jewish and Gypsy men between the ages of 18 and 48 were required to report for *Munkaszolgálat* (forced labor service); most of them were taken to serve on the Eastern Front. Braun bácsi, at 39 years old, fell into this category. He was first taken to clear forests and build railroad lines. Later, he was transferred to a copper mine in Serbia. We feared the worst because we did not hear from him for the duration of the war.

Posters showing evil Bolsheviks aiming to take our homeland appeared on the walls of buildings, encouraging citizens to do everything possible to support our troops. My two country uncles and several men from our apartment building were drafted into the Hungarian Army.

The Arrowcross Party conducted marches and incited the population to blame the Jews for our suffering. To avoid discrimination, most Jews "*Hungarianized*" their family names, and many of them even became Roman Catholics. Tomi's parents changed their name from Weisz to Vásárhelyi, and earlier, Mr. Braun changed his name to Brassai¹, but that did not help them. Tomi's father, like Braun bácsi, was taken to serve in a forced labor camp. His wife had to take over the shoe repair shop, but she was later deported to

¹ Typical Hungarian family names end with the letter "i" or "y," generally indicating the geographical location of birth.

Germany, where she eventually died. Tomi was more fortunate and found refuge in a *védettház* (protected house) operated by the Swedish government.

Following the local custom, the night before Mikulás (St. Nicholas) Day, I placed my carefully shined shoes between the double windows. Even though I already knew *Mikulás* did not bring the goodies or sticks, I still cleaned the shoes thoroughly in case he stopped by. Rushing to the window after waking up, I found a tangerine and some candy— a real treat during winter. Of course, I shared it with Mother and even gave a segment to Ilonka néni, our bed-renter. When we compared our *Mikulás* gifts at school, I told my friends about receiving a tangerine, but they were not impressed. I realized that most of them routinely ate something I considered exceptional.

Early Christmas Eve, Mother bought fresh carp at the fish market. She announced that we would have the traditional Christmas dinner, *Halászlé* (fish stew), which I loved. After school, she took me on the streetcar to the city outskirts to buy a tree. It was a modest-sized tree, but I was excited. I looked forward to decorating it with the box of *szaloncukor* she had purchased from the lots we had wrapped earlier. Next, she cooked dinner, and the familiar aroma of the fish stew filled our small apartment. Ilonka néni joined us for dinner since the theater where she worked did not have a performance that evening. Mother served the meal and reminded me not to talk while eating. Carps have many small, delicate bones, and children had to be extra careful not to swallow them. However, being silent was a small price for one of my favorite meals.

Before sitting down to dinner, I looked to see if there were presents under the tree, but I did not see any. I began to accept that Mother did not have money to buy one for me. To my surprise, she took me to the bedroom after dinner and pulled a sled and two small boxes from under our bed. She had set aside some of the money we earned wrapping the *szaloncukor* and bought the sled for me. I found a lovely soft scarf from Ilonka néni in one of the boxes to keep me warm during the cold winter. The other gift from Mari néni was a pair of gloves with fur inside. Since plenty of fresh snow covered the street, the two ladies escorted me outside our building and took turns pulling me on the sled. I was thrilled, knowing that Christmas will always be a cherished memory.

Mother and I headed to *Mari néni's* wedding in a nearby Catholic church a few days after Christmas. The bride wore a beautiful white dress. Her husband, István Winkler, was in his Hungarian Army uniform. After the wedding, we walked in the snow to the restaurant Mr. Winkler's father owned for a wonderful dinner and entertainment. The restaurant was crowded, and the guests included several German Army and SS officers. As Mother learned, the Winkler family had German ancestry, and high-ranking officers frequented their restaurant. Although we both liked the dinner and the warm reception from Mari néni's new in-laws, Mother told me we would not go back there again. She said if Braun bácsi was held captive in a forced labor camp, we would not associate with people who advocated the Nazi philosophy. Of course, that did not apply to Mari néni, and she visited us occasionally after her husband returned to his military duty.

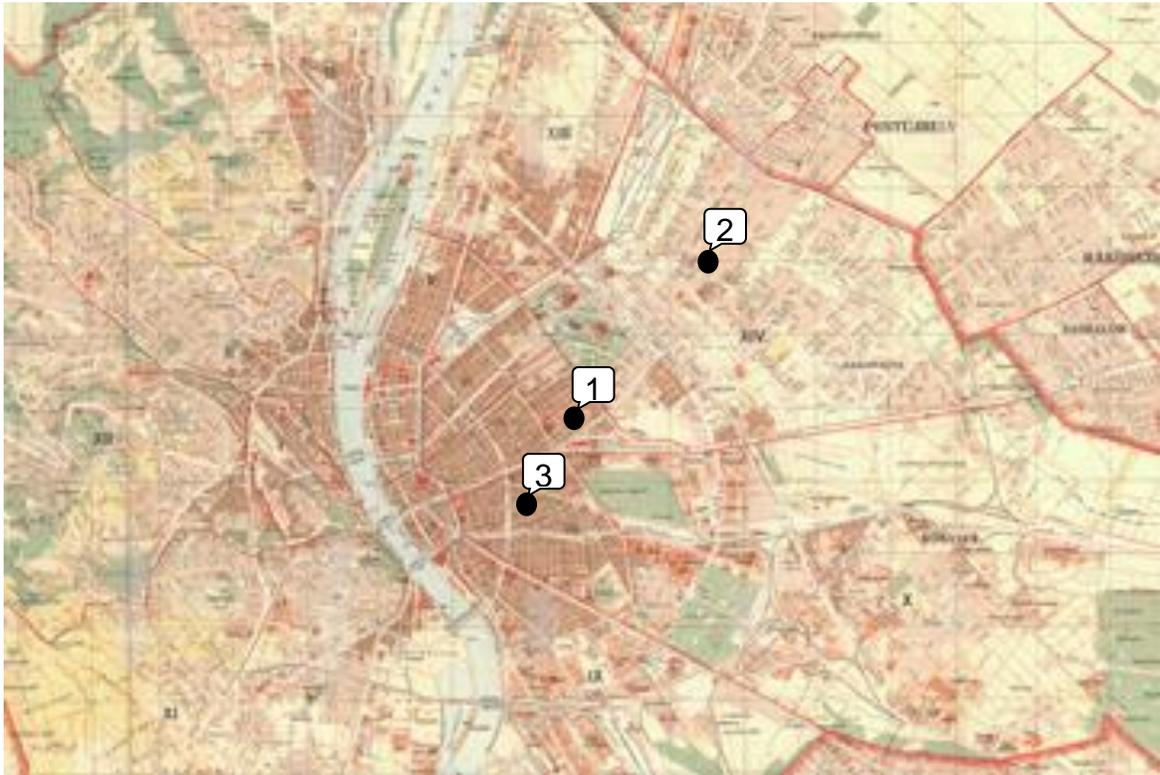


Two pictures of Mari néni taken in her mid-thirties. The left photo shows her during a singing engagement. The right photo shows her writing a letter to her husband while he was in the army. He appears in the mirror in the photo on the desk, which is covered by a traditional Hungarian tablecloth.

Our teacher explained that we would take home an official report in our *bizonyítvány* (grade booklet) in mid-January. The school has five grades, ranging from “A” for outstanding to “F” for unsatisfactory. Anyone receiving one unsatisfactory grade would have to take a make-up exam during summer before the beginning of the next term. If the test was passed successfully, he would be allowed to continue. Two unsatisfactory grades would require repeating the entire school year. I desired to receive good marks, but freehand drawing was difficult. I worked extra hard on the homework assignments and many times asked Miss Haraszti to spend time with me so I could improve. She was accommodating, and eventually, my performance progressed. At the end of the first semester, I received an “A” in every subject, and Mother was extremely pleased. We both felt terrible about being unable to tell Braun bácsi the good news. His sister Mimi néni and her daughter Judit lived in his apartment, but they knew nothing about his fate. I missed him very much and prayed to St. Anthony every night for his safe return.

Because the reading, writing, and basic arithmetic being taught had not reached my skill level, I was still bored by these classes. However, I liked the “Nature and Our Neighborhood” class because it covered interesting new information. I learned that our capital, Budapest, originally had two parts, separated by the Danube—Buda and Pest. After building *Lánchíd* (*Chain Bridge*)—the famous suspension bridge—across the river in 1849, the two cities became more closely integrated. In 1873, they officially became a single city. By 1942, Budapest had fourteen districts. Three major ring roads encircled the inner parts of the Pest side, and we had to learn their names along with our neighborhood streets.

Miss Haraszti also taught us basic personal hygiene. She emphasized the importance of clean hands and, for a while, inspected our fingernails daily for cleanliness. Kids with dirty fingernails had to take a note home. Mother always looked at my hands every morning before I left for school so I would not fail those inspections.



Partial map showing the 14 districts of Budapest in 1942. Three callout arrows point to where I lived: (1) with the Dancsa family, (2) with Braun bácsi, and (3) after we moved to the large apartment building.

While we lived with Braun bácsi, our *házmester* (house master) hauled the firewood and coal to our apartment to keep us warm during the winter. In our new place, that task became our responsibility. Each apartment was assigned a small cellar in the dirt-floor basement for storing wood and coal. Mother would take me down to the musty, smelly, dark cellar with a candle in hand. She chopped up some of the logs with an axe to make kindling. She warned me repeatedly never to touch that sharp instrument. We then carried the wood in a basket and the coal in a bucket up the rear stairway of the building to the third floor. She held the coal bucket with one hand and the wood basket with the other. I lent her a hand to help carry the coal bucket, which was the heavier of the two. She built a fire in the small stove located in our bedroom. We kept the door to the kitchen open to keep both rooms warm. She taught me how to start the fire because I was usually alone after school until she came home from work. On cold days, however, I tried to visit friends to save heating material—and to receive free snacks.

During the spring of 1943, to prepare for possible bombing raids, all the apartment buildings in Budapest had to reconfigure their basements to provide emergency air raid shelters for the occupants. In our building, a basement section, where the street-front shops kept inventory, was converted for that purpose. The entrance to our shelter was on the ground level under the front stairway. Two emergency exits facing the street and two leading into the coal-cellar section were added for the extreme possibility that the building might collapse. One of the residents volunteered to become our building's Air Defense Official, and he received special training from the government. At a house meeting, he announced that air raid sirens would be tested occasionally. "As soon as you hear the siren, you must rush down

to the shelter and stay there until the second siren indicates the end of the mock attack.” The first simulated air raid came in the evening a few days later. Mom and I ran to the shelter and stayed there for a few minutes. The neighbor kids and I joked and did not take the exercise seriously. Mother’s reaction was different because she had lived through one war already and remembered some of its dire consequences.

Mother’s Birthday

One day that spring, my friend Albert wanted to show me something special, but first, he asked me to swear not to tell anyone about it. After I complied, he led me to their apartment and pulled a package containing a small vase from a closet. Albert told me it was a surprise present for his mother’s birthday a few days away.

“When is your mom’s birthday?” he asked me.

I was embarrassed because I did not know. Mother always baked my favorite *Dobos* cake for me on my birthday; during the last few years, she had even invited some friends to celebrate. She had never mentioned anything about her birthday, and it had never occurred to me that she would probably enjoy having something special on that day.

That night, when she came home, I asked her, “When is your birthday?”

“Oh, I don’t keep track of that. Why do you want to know?” She laughed at first but then told me it was June 14.

I quickly decided to buy a present for her, just like Albert did for his mom. I had about six weeks left to act. Determining what to buy and how to pay for it wasn’t easy. I considered a vase, but we never had flowers in our apartment so that it would be useless. Then I remembered how she had admired the beautiful flower displays at Mari néni’s wedding. She would enjoy a bouquet of flowers. *Yes, that will make her happy.*

The next day, I went to the market to find out how much a small flower arrangement cost. I asked several vendors and learned that the price depended on the type of flower. Recalling that she crocheted tulips into our tablecloth, I figured that tulips must be her favorite. Next, I had to decide what color to buy, so I asked her favorite color that night. She replied, “I like blue the most because that is the color of your eyes.” Back at the flower market again, they told me that purple was the closest to blue, and six of them would cost 50 *fillérs*². That roughly equaled my mother’s hourly earnings. The next challenge was to find ways to make that much money.

Since many of the men were already serving in the army or had been taken to forced labor camps, I could occasionally perform odd jobs for our neighbors to earn some money. The more challenging part was resisting the temptation to spend it immediately on candy or ice cream. I admired Albert’s thrifty nature and how he had saved money for his mom’s present. In that respect, he was much better than I was.

Mother’s birthday arrived. Although I worked diligently, I still had only 20 *fillérs*, and I was desperate. While she was in the laundry room downstairs, I noticed her purse lying on

² One *pengő*, the Hungarian currency used until 1946, equaled 100 *fillérs*. The equivalent value in today’s US currency is \$10.

the night table next to her bed. *Perhaps I could secretly borrow some money from her and return it after I have earned it,* I thought. Quickly looking through the purse, I found the little coin purse where she kept her change and took out the required 30 *fillérs*. To be sure I would repay her, I wrote a note saying, *"I owe Mom 30 fillérs,"* and put the paper in my pocket. Then I ran to the market and bought the flowers. I told the farmer lady, "This is for my mother's birthday." She smiled and gave me an extra tulip for the same price.

At home, I put the flowers into a tall empty bottle. After filling the bottle with water, I placed it on the kitchen table and anxiously waited until she came upstairs. When she came to the door, she asked me to help her carry the wet laundry to the attic. I complied but could hardly contain my excitement while she hung all the clothing up. Finally, we went back to our apartment. As soon as she stepped into the kitchen, she noticed the tulips.

"Who brought the flowers?"

"They are from me for your birthday."

She hugged me and said, "Thank you, they are my favorites! But how did you get the money to buy them?"

I swallowed first and then said without looking at her, "I earned it from the neighbors by helping them."

Mother was delighted. That evening, while she mended holes in my stockings, she told me about her sixteenth birthday. After six years of working at the candy factory, she was promoted to production line supervisor. At noon, the owner brought a cake for her to share with the other girls. That was the first birthday celebration in her life. "Today is my second one, and I thank you for remembering it," she said with tears in her eyes. "I am so lucky to have a son like you."

I did my best not to think of the money I took from her purse and acted very happy. During the following weeks, I offered help to everyone in our building and took every opportunity to make money until I had the 30 *fillérs* I owed her. I hid the money in my nightstand and looked for a chance to return it to her purse—but could not find one. She took the purse with her daily when she went to work. She placed it next to her on the night table at night, and I did not dare to try it. Finally, one evening, as we headed for bed, I noticed she had left the purse on the kitchen table. Knowing that *Ilonka néni* would not be home until much later, I had the perfect opportunity to return the money to Mother's purse. Before she sang for me that evening, I retrieved the coins and kept them in my hand. After she stopped singing and fell asleep, I waited for a while, lying quietly in my bed. I whispered, "Mom" to her. She did not reply, and I was ready for action.

Leaving my bed, I tiptoed to the kitchen and closed the door behind me. In the dark, I found her coin purse. I started to unzip it, but in the process, I dropped the money from my hand. The coins scattered around the floor, and I could not find them. Searching in the dark, I bumped into the chair and knocked it over. At that point, the bedroom door opened, and Mother turned on the light. She discovered me kneeling on the floor with her coin purse in my hand.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

I felt terrible as the thought flashed through my mind: *Mother will think I am stealing her money.*

"I, I was trying to pay you back," I whimpered, not knowing what to say.

"I already read the note you had in your pocket, so I know what you planned to do," she said. With that, she led me back to bed and kissed me. "You are the most wonderful son any mother could have. I am very proud of you."

She stayed up for a while and told me a story, but I did not hear the end. I fell asleep happy.

At the end of the school year, we received our grades, and once again, my mother was happy to see my report with all "outstanding" grades. Other memorable events during that summer were a boat trip on the Danube and several visits to my country cousins' place. I also regularly visited my surrogate family, the Dancsas, taking the streetcar alone. *Nagymama* was always busy with household duties, yet she still found time to play cards with Pista and me. Her favorite game was rummy, but we played occasionally with a unique deck of Hungarian cards. *Nagymama* loved to win.

Second Grade and First Communion

In September, I began school again with the same teacher. Our daily schedule was very similar to what we had the year before, except we learned to use an ink pen instead of a pencil in the writing class. \ I could no longer erase mistakes the way I could when I used a pencil. In addition, the ink often left marks on my hands that were very hard to wash off. Once again, Mom arranged that I be excused from physical education—even though I begged her to let me participate. I was embarrassed to sit on the bench again during those sessions.

A significant event of second grade was the preparation for First Confession and Communion. Father Bogen taught the Ten Commandments to the Roman Catholic boys in our class, and we had to memorize them. He gave us a list of the commandments, and we had to write after each one the number of times we had disobeyed that commandment. The priest also emphasized that we must clear our conscience of our wrongdoings and make peace with our enemies. I had no enemies, but the boy who had unjustly accused me of stealing the eraser and I were not on speaking terms. A few days before the First Confession, I approached him and asked if we could be friends. Being Catholic himself, he gladly agreed. After that, my conscience was clear, and the evening before confession day, I sat down to complete my "list of sins."

Of course, I did not know exactly how many times I had violated each commandment, so I entered my best estimate on the sheet. However, when I came to the seventh, which stated, "*Ne paráználkodjál!*" (don't be sexually promiscuous), I did not know what the long word meant. To be on the safe side, I entered "4x." Before I went to bed, Mother asked if I had filled out the form. I showed it to her. After reading through, she crossed out my entry for the sixth line. "You haven't done that," she said.

The next day, I made my confession. The priest instructed me to pray a few "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys" for penance, and I could then proceed to the Holy Communion. Father Bogen had previously instructed us not to chew the holy wafer, so I kept it in my mouth until it dissolved. I felt pure after the process.

My First Communion was the only time Mother came to church with me. Before that, I had asked her several times why she did not attend Sunday mass, and her standard reply was, "I am too busy. You go and pray for both of us." Knowing the long hours she worked washing, ironing, and cleaning apartments, as well as cooking and sewing at home, I accepted her answer. I continued to take Holy Communion several times each year for as long as I lived in Hungary.

Even though Mother didn't go to mass, Sundays were set apart from our weekday routine and celebrated as special occasions. That day, we had meat—generally chicken, stewed or fried. She always bought live chickens and cut their throats at home. Although I felt sorry for the victims, I enjoyed eating the meals they provided. We consumed everything except the feathers, intestines, and toenails, including the heart and liver. Mother also scrambled the blood, the way most people scrambled eggs.

Although we did not have a radio at home and did not subscribe to a newspaper, the gloomy news of the war still reached us. The situation of remnants of the Hungarian Army still fighting in the Soviet Union became hopeless. László Bárdossy, the German sympathizer Prime Minister, resigned in late 1942. Regent Horthy then appointed Miklós Kállay to the post; he was a moderate who wanted to withdraw the Army from the war. Kállay's options, however, were limited. Hitler would not allow Hungary to leave his side, and without a doubt, he would order his troops to occupy the country. The remainder of the Hungarian forces would never be able to resist an attack by the *Wehrmacht*. On the other hand, continued support of Germany would lead to the increased influence of the Arrowcross Party at home and severe international consequences again if Germany lost the war. Duplicity was the only logical choice for Hungary—play along with Hitler but also put out armistice feelers to the Allies.

Horthy and Kállay secretly reached out to Great Britain, attempting to negotiate a cease-fire agreement that would become effective when the British forces reached the southern border of Hungary. German spies, however, relayed the news to Berlin. Hitler became furious and felt like he had been stabbed in the back. While Horthy visited Germany in March 1944, the German troops took control of Hungary. The Gestapo established headquarters in Budapest. Under such pressure, Horthy replaced Kállay with a pro-Nazi Prime Minister who faithfully followed every instruction received from Berlin. Hungary was compelled to serve Germany's needs by exporting weapons and food to them. A new law required all Jewish residents of Hungary over six years of age to wear a 10 x 10-cm (4 x 4-inch) yellow star on their clothing when they appeared in public places.

One afternoon, Tomi and I were walking on Rákoczi Street toward the nearby library, holding hands as we chatted. As required, Tomi wore a bright yellow star on his coat. A short, stout man wearing an Arrowcross Party armband grabbed my shoulder without warning.

"Where is your yellow star?" he yelled.

"I am Roman Catholic," was my meek reply.

Not believing me, the man leaned over and swiftly yanked my short pants down. After seeing that I wasn't lying³, he became furious. "Then what are you doing with this Jew?" he screamed, pointing to Tomi.

"He is my friend."

Shouting an obscenity, the man pushed me away so hard that I fell to the ground. "Catholics and Jews are not allowed to be friends," he added, to emphasize his point.

A small crowd quickly gathered around us. I did not stand up, fearing that the man might hit me. Tomi looked equally terrified. Suddenly, a large man stepped in to shield the two of us. He pulled me and my pants up and then turned to our attacker.

"Leave them alone; they are only children!" he snarled at the bully.

The crowd sympathized with our protector, but the Party man did not back down easily. While he argued with the group, Tomi and I took the opportunity to dash away. Not wanting to risk the possibility of another encounter with the Nazi, we sprinted around the block and back to the safety of our apartment building. That evening, I told Mother about our scary episode, and she instructed me not to walk with Tomi on the streets in the future. Following her advice, from then on, Albert and I walked to school beside each other, with Tomi following behind us.



**Photos taken in 1943.
Left: Mother at age 32.
Right: I was seven years
old and beginning
second grade.**

³ In Hungary, only Jewish boys were circumcised.

Chapter 5: World War II

My class had a new teacher for third grade—Miss Paula Lekner—who was extremely short for an adult. Perhaps to make up for her lack of height, her speech was unusually loud and high-pitched. She carried a short, thick wooden ruler and warned us that she would use it if we disobeyed her. We did not have to wait long to find out what she meant. A boy named Krausz ate part of his snack during class on the first day, and Miss Lekner noticed. She told him to stand in front of her and hold his right-hand palm up with his fingertips together. Once he did that, she held his arm with her left hand and hit the top of his fingers with the ruler several times. When Krausz began to whimper, she told him to stand in the corner and take his punishment like a soldier.

Witnessing the incident quickly convinced us that even though she was undersized, we'd better behave in her class. We all missed the kindness of Miss Haraszti and wished she could continue to be our teacher, but she only taught first- and second-grade classes. We had no alternative but to adjust to Miss Lekner's strict style. As third-graders, we had an additional hour of classes; we stayed in school until 1 p.m. every day, including Saturday. Two new subjects were added for that year: verbal communication and basic geography.

Soon after the school year began, Budapest's first air raid occurred. The wailing of the sirens sounded ominous, and Miss Lekner quickly marched us to the shelter underneath the school. The raid was soon over, and we returned to class. Later, I learned from a neighbor that enemy planes had only performed reconnaissance instead of bombing missions. That night, another raid occurred. The new blackout law, which demanded that all windows be covered entirely so enemy aircraft would not find easy targets, was already in effect. As we exited our apartment into total darkness, I saw powerful light beams scanning the sky. In the shelter, our building's official told us that air defense gunners used high-power searchlights to find the attacking planes. Once an aircraft was illuminated, the gunners attempted to shoot it down. During that raid, we could hear the muffled sounds of explosions. The next day in school, the kids talked about the air raid. One boy, whose father was a pilot, told us that a large bomb could destroy an entire building. After that I prayed every night that our building would never be hit.

During the autumn of 1944, Romania abruptly surrendered to the Soviet Union, and its soldiers were absorbed into the Red Army. As their combined forces approached the southeastern border of Hungary, the German occupation increasingly affected our lives. Jews were moved out of their apartments to a section of the city near the large synagogue. It was called the *Getto*. The family of Tomi's uncle, who lived on our floor, was among those who had to leave our building. An Arrowcross Party member, Mr. Bakk, moved into the vacated dwelling with his wife and sister.

Mr. Bakk and another Party member who lived on the same floor became good friends. We heard them talking loudly outside of their apartment about "purifying Hungary from the Jews." One day, the two of them marched around the balcony in their uniforms, drinking and singing the Arrowcross Party's marching song that praised their leader, Ferenc Szálasi. Mother watched them with disdain from behind our window curtains and warned me to stay clear of them.

Regent Horthy tried secretly negotiating an armistice with the Western Allies, but they replied that Hungary must surrender to the Soviet Union. At that point, reality set in. Instead of the British-American forces we were hoping for, the Soviet Army entered Hungarian territories. Wishing to avoid further bloodshed, Horthy announced, in a radio broadcast on the morning of October 16, 1944, that he had signed an armistice with the Soviet Union.

Hitler was prepared, and his reaction was swift. Operation *Panzerfaust* kidnapped Horthy's family and threatened to execute them unless he retracted his announcement. Elite SS troops surrounded the government building complex where Horthy worked. Having no alternative, Horthy met Hitler's demand and, in another broadcast, ordered the Hungarian army not to resist. Horthy then resigned his post. He was placed under house arrest and soon taken to Germany with his family.

The Arrowcross Party leader became Prime Minister, ushering in a reign of Nazi terror. The new government ordered all men between 17 and 50 to enroll in the Hungarian Army and resist the Soviet invasion to the "last drop of blood." SS Colonel Adolph Eichmann¹ arrived in Budapest to personally supervise the deportation of Jews. About half a million Jews were sent to German concentration camps—a large percentage of them to the infamous Auschwitz. When transportation was not available, many of the Jews were lined up at the shore of the Danube and shot to death. Their bodies could frequently be seen floating in the river.



An unusual bronze monument runs about 100 meters along the shore of the Danube, depicting the shoes left by the defenseless victims who were shot into the river.

Many of my mother's current and past employers were well-to-do Jews; most of them had treated her kindly, and she wanted to protect as many Jews as she could. In the early part of 1944, the Nazis still recognized safe-conduct passes issued by consulates of neutral countries like Sweden and Switzerland. Mother managed to obtain passes for some of those in need. I recall standing in line with her at one consulate until the Arrowcross thugs used rubber truncheons to disperse the crowd. Later, when the safe-conduct documents were no longer honored, she helped Jews by providing them with documents from our extended family. The

¹ The infamous SS-Obersturmbannführer who organized the mass deportation of European Jews. He fled to Argentina after the war, but Mossad agents took him to Israel in 1960. He was tried and hanged there.

following three stories illustrate the ingenuity and courage required to save Jews from a terrible fate.

Braun bácsi's twelve-year-old niece, Judit, was hiding at a boys' orphanage operated by the Catholic Church. Her mother, *Mimi néni*, was hiding in a different place. Somehow the Nazis discovered Judit's true identity, and she was immediately taken to the *Getto*. When her mother received the news, she desperately came to us for help. Mother gave her birth certificate to *Mimi néni* with the hope that it would help to deceive the Nazi guards at the *Getto*. If the fake identity were discovered, *Mimi néni* would say she had found it on the street. My mother would verify the story for her protection, claiming she had lost her document.

Mimi néni showed up at the *Getto's* gate, acting outraged and claiming that her Roman Catholic daughter had been erroneously carried away from the orphanage. The guards believed the hysterical, beautiful blonde's claim and released Judit. Later, they both obtained refuge in a safe house operated by the Swedish consulate. Judit now lives in Stockholm, and I met her in Budapest during a trip in 2010. Later, she contacted an Israeli organization, Yad Vashem, to apply for an award for Mother's heroic action that saved several Jewish lives. (I picked up the award at the San Israeli Consulate in 2015.)

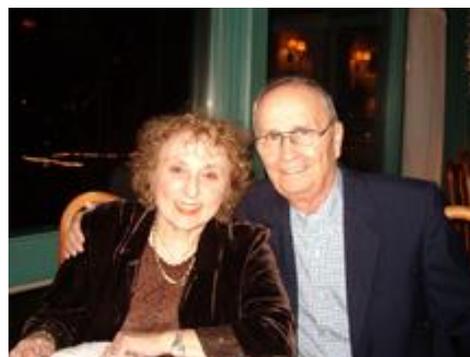
Another of Mother's customers, Éva Shister, whose husband was already in a forced labor camp, was also looking to avoid the *Getto*. Since she had no more documents, Mother and I traveled to her birthplace and asked family members if they would help. Aunt Zsuzsi néni immediately offered her birth certificate. Mother's brother and another sister, the siblings who rejected her when she had an illegitimate child, still refused to talk with her. However, one of Mother's cousins gave her a deceased uncle's papers. Mother also obtained copies of her dead parents' documents.



Left: September, 2010 in a Budapest restaurant. My wife Susan and I, with Judit sitting on the far right. Between us is Braun bácsi's 94-year-old widow, Emmi néni. Right: Judit's beautiful mother in 1944.

In Budapest, Mrs. Shister looked at Aunt Zsuzsi's document and realized she faced a conflict about her age. According to the birth certificate, my aunt was 30 years old. Mrs. Shister was 26, but she looked younger—more like 21. Afraid of possible challenges, she altered the birth date on the document. After she took the document, we did not see her again until after the war ended. As I learned later, she had a few close encounters with the Nazis, one of which

almost led to her death. Fortune was on her side, however, and she survived. Sadly, her husband was not so lucky; he died at the labor camp. After the war ended, she met an American engineer who visited Budapest, and the two of them were married in 1949. She now lives with her husband in the United States.



Left: Éva Shister in 1944 at the age of 26. Center: After she and Richard Brown married in 1949, the couple moved to New York. Right: At their 60th wedding anniversary in South Carolina.

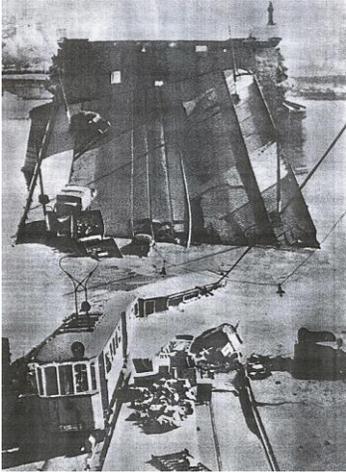
The documents of Mother's father and uncle went to two elderly Jewish men, Mr. Laufer and Mr. Sziklai. Their apartments had already been confiscated, and they had nowhere to live. According to their new papers, they resided in the country. However, a simple look at them revealed that they were city people.

Mother finally offered to let them stay with us, even though it meant asking our bed-renter to leave. I was sad about Ilonka néni's departure because she had become part of our small family during the past two years. She told us interesting stories about famous stage stars and frequently brought home special treats from the theater where she worked. Still, the safety of the two men was more important, and she agreed to move somewhere else. After that, Mother and I slept on the daybed in the kitchen, and the two men took our places in the bedroom. We told our neighbors that the homes of our "relatives" had been bombed—a common occurrence in those times—and the men would stay with us for a while. Laufer bácsi told me that if I brought home a newspaper for him every day, he would pay me. Sziklai bácsi also paid me to shine his shoes regularly. With two jobs, I felt that I was becoming rich.

The War Reaches Budapest

One afternoon early in October 1944, we heard a tremendous explosion without the warning of the air raid sirens. Shortly afterward, we learned that one of the six bridges between Buda and Pest—Margaret Bridge—had been blown up. The disaster occurred while the bridge was full of buses, streetcars, and people. Hundreds perished in the icy waters of the Danube. Later, we learned that the German Army had previously mined all the bridges of Budapest. They planned to destroy every bridge if they had to retreat from the Soviet Army. Some people speculated that the Germans probably wanted to test the effectiveness of their explosives, but most likely, the first blast was accidental, and a subsequent chain reaction finished the job. The actual cause of that explosion never surfaced.

By November 1944, the air raids over Budapest had intensified, so the authorities decided to close all schools. Because most of Hungary's industry was concentrated around Budapest, the city was regularly attacked by the bombers. Carpet bombing² annihilated entire city blocks. Railroad stations were also targeted; we lived about half a mile from the Eastern Station, and our neighborhood was not spared. A four-story building across our street was completely demolished. Survivors of the destroyed buildings often took refuge in the unused schools. Our city, once called the "Paris of the East," began to crumble; our lives became more miserable.



Left: Margaret Bridge originally had two sections: one connecting Pest to Margaret Island and a second one continuing to the Buda side. The mysterious explosion in October 1944 destroyed the first section. In January 1945, the Germans blew up the second half, along with all the other bridges of Budapest. Below: Damage in Budapest caused by aerial bombing.



Instead of running to and from the shelter for the frequent raids, some of the residents of our building moved there permanently. Most of those staying in the shelter were women, children, and older adults. The two Arrowcross men were rarely at home, and most of the other men from our building were already away, either serving in the army or taken for forced labor. Mother and I stayed near the shelter entrance during the air raids to shield our "guests" from

² A concentrated aerial bombing aimed at the complete destruction of a large area.

our neighbors' prying eyes and ears. The two Jewish men — “my grandfather and his brother”— avoided conversation with everyone by pretending they had terrible colds. Nobody in the building knew their true identities except for Mother and me. Had they been discovered, it would have meant certain death for them and probably for my mother as well.

Having two live-in boarders provided Mother additional income but also brought two more mouths to feed. Strict rationing made food hard to find, even with sufficient money. Controlled food items included bread, sugar, milk, meat, egg, and flour. Dairy products were restricted to children under 14 and pregnant women. We had only two sets of ration tickets to provide food for four people.

The two men who stayed with us could not risk registering as apartment residents. A simple phone call by the authorities to Székesfehérvár would have revealed that the men with those names had already died.

Mother devised a scheme to buy food from the countryside through the black market. With plenty of money in her purse, an empty suitcase in one hand, and me in tow, she took the train to the village where Aunt Rózsi lived. Her husband had been away on the Eastern Front with the army for two years, and she worked as a cook at the nearby oil refinery to provide for her three children. She helped Mom find local people who sold food illegally. Our trip was a triumph; we returned to Budapest with a suitcase full of food, including two geese, bread, cheese, eggs, sausages, and other delicacies. Mother was nervous about passing scrutiny at the Budapest train station where customs inspectors looked for black marketers, but we did not encounter any problems.

The success of our trip encouraged Mother to repeat it several more times. We ate well in those days and even sold food to some of Mother's friends. Then, during our return trip just before Christmas in 1944, the train was attacked by two Soviet fighter bombers. The train stopped abruptly when its locomotive was disabled by machine gun fire, and the conductor yelled to the passengers to leave the train. We scattered into the snow-covered field, leaving our suitcase inside the train. We could see the planes diving toward the train. Two ear-shattering explosions followed, and the train was engulfed in flames.

Several Messerschmitt fighters appeared on the horizon and attacked the Soviet planes. People around us cheered, and we watched breathlessly as the planes tried to outmaneuver each other. One of the Soviet planes began to emit smoke. A large white parachute opened in the sky and floated effortlessly toward the ground. The smoking plane eventually crashed some distance away, and the other planes flew out of sight.

The passengers gathered around the conductor, wanting to know what would happen to us. Our suitcase, with its precious contents and overcoats, was burning on the train. Mother still had her purse and some money, but money was useless. The train was wrecked, and it took the rest of the day to find transportation for us. Finally, in the evening, soldiers guided us to the highway, and military trucks took us back to the Southern Railroad Station in Budapest. The streetcars did not operate that late, so we had a long walk home. Halfway there, an air raid forced us to take refuge in a subway station for a while.

We arrived home late, empty-handed, cold, and hungry, without the food planned for Christmas. That was our last trip to the country, ending our short-lived black-market career. Our holiday meal was ordinary without the roast duck we had expected to eat. Although we

again decorated a Christmas tree, we had no traditional *szaloncukor*. However, our boarders gave me a shiny *pengő* coin on Christmas Eve. That was the most money I'd ever had.

The floating parachute I had seen during that disastrous train ride fascinated me, and after telling Albert about it, we were eager to experience parachuting. One day, the two of us headed to the nearby park to become parachutists, carrying Mother's large umbrella. The park had a play structure with a platform about ten feet above the ground, and we selected it to test our "parachute." We both wanted to jump first, but since it was my idea and my umbrella, I would go before Albert. I climbed up to the platform, and he handed me the umbrella. I opened it, stepped to the edge, and jumped off. Whom!

In a split second, I had a painful lesson about the force of gravity. Instead of floating like the Soviet airman, I immediately crashed into the snow-covered ground. Not expecting such a quick landing, I fell awkwardly and twisted my ankle. Albert wisely decided not to follow my example. He climbed off the structure and helped me limp home. Mother was not there, but *Sziklai bácsi*, a dentist, tried to comfort me. *Laufer bácsi* explained that a parachute is much larger than an umbrella, so it slows a person's fall through the air. The air battle we had witnessed near the railroad track was far away, so I hadn't realized how large the parachute was.

By the time Mother came home, my ankle was severely swollen. Sympathizing with my pain, she only gave me a scolding. I assured her I would not try this kind of new experience in the future without first talking it over with an adult. I kept my promise until I came across explosives after the war ended.

By December, the Soviet Army had encircled Budapest and attempted to offer the Germans an opportunity to surrender. Two peace emissaries carrying white flags approached the German lines but did not complete their mission. What happened to them is still being disputed. Some feel that the Germans killed the two officers, while others believe that they became victims of land mines. The fact is that one way or the other, they were killed. The enraged Soviets began a furious shelling of the city, to be followed by one of the bloodiest battles of World War II.

In addition to the artillery shelling, the air raids became almost continuous as the New Year began. One day, during a raid, three passing strangers wearing Arrowcross uniforms took refuge in our shelter. They stood near the entrance, only a few steps away from my mother and me. One even began conversing with us, asking how old I was and whether I wanted to be a soldier. I was too scared to reply, but Mother talked to him for some time. After that, we stayed in the apartment during air raids instead of going down to the shelter to avoid any chance of our guests being caught.

On the afternoon of January 6, 1945, as I was removing the decorations from our Christmas tree during an air raid, we heard the ominous whistle of a bomb falling from the sky. A large thud followed—with no explosion. When the dust settled, we learned that the opposite side of our building had been hit. The bomb had crashed through the attic and the top floor's ceiling, but fortunately, it had not detonated. At that point, my badly shaken mother decided that it was time to leave the apartment. A permanent stay at the bomb shelter, however, represented too much risk for our guests. Having no choice, the four of us relocated to our coal cellar.

Life in the Coal Cellar

During the next four weeks, the four of us lived in the 8 x 10-foot rat-infested, dirt-floor cellar. We tried to make a home out of our dark basement by shoving the coal and firewood into one corner. Then, we carried two mattresses from the apartment and set them atop burlap bags on the dingy dirt floor of the cellar. A box in the center of the space served as a table; a kerosene lamp provided light. Later, when the public water service stopped working, we melted snow for water. I have no recollection of how we took care of our toilet needs.

January and February of 1945 brought record-cold weather to Hungary. The Danube froze solid. The basement where we stayed was constantly cold and damp. To survive the freezing temperatures, with the help of a trusted neighbor, Mother had our small bedroom stove from upstairs brought down and set up. She shoved its pipe through a vent hole that led up to the rear courtyard. We kept the fire lit almost around the clock. Although the small stove had provided enough heat to keep our upstairs apartment warm, it was insufficient to maintain a comfortable temperature in the open space of the basement. Even though I wore double or triple layers of clothing, I suffered greatly from the cold that winter.

The neighbor who helped move our stove told me to watch out for rats because they loved to eat the toes of little boys. His jesting petrified me, and I prayed to St. Anthony nightly to keep the rats away from me. I took my shoes off every morning after awakening and counted my toes. To my great relief, all ten remained throughout our entire stay.

Our food supply had dwindled to a sack of dry corn and potatoes. Our daily menu offered two options: potatoes or dry corn, served either boiled or mashed. We all liked the potatoes better, so our supply diminished quickly. That left us with only corn for the remaining days of our stay. I hated having cooked ground corn daily, and even now, I refuse to eat tamales. One day, news arrived that a horse had been killed on our street. Mother immediately took off with a large knife and a basket. She returned with a chunk of meat; the corn mush tasted much better that evening.

The foundations separating the basements of adjoining buildings had been cut through, creating continuous pathways underneath the city. One evening, two Hungarian soldiers passed by our cellar; they were carrying an unconscious, wounded comrade-in-arms on a makeshift stretcher. They rested for a short time by our stove. While I examined their rifles with great curiosity, the soldiers informed us that they wanted to avoid the Russian troops who had already taken over much of our neighborhood. Angered by the large number of losses suffered, the Russians were rumored to have killed all captured prisoners who were unable to walk. Our soldiers hoped to reach a nearby hospital to leave their comrade there. After inspecting the bleeding soldier, *Sziklai bácsi* felt that the man had little chance of reaching the hospital alive because a bullet had passed through his lungs. Hearing the bad news, the grim-faced soldiers picked up the stretcher, said goodbye, and continued their journey. We never heard of them again, but the chalk-white face of the wounded soldier haunted me for some time.



Pictures taken in 2008 show the coal cellar section of the basement with its entrance from the rear stairway of the building. In 1944, the basement did not have electrical wiring or water outlets. Each apartment had one unit assigned, primarily to store firewood and coal.

The day after the soldiers passed through, neighbors in the shelter confirmed that the Soviet Army occupied our district after pushing the defenders toward the Danube. Our street was full of Russian supply trucks, and we heard that their soldiers did not appear to be hostile to Hungarian children. I was curious to see what Russians looked like because I pictured them as weird creatures. *Laufer bácsi's* family emigrated to Hungary in 1917 after the Bolshevik revolution. He still spoke some Russian and taught me the sentence, “*Товарищ, дает мне меньший хлеб,*” meaning, “Comrade, give me a little bread.” Armed with my new knowledge, I bravely walked out of our building and headed toward the nearest truck. Although I heard shooting and explosions in the distance, our street was quiet.

A soldier stood in the open back end of the vehicle, wearing a strange uniform and an even stranger hat³. Other than his outfit, he looked like a regular human. I approached him carefully and asked for some bread. My knowledge of Russian caught him by surprise, and he stared at me for a few seconds. Then he laughed, reached into a burlap sack, and threw a loaf of bread to me. I dropped the bread into the snow but quickly picked it up. Not knowing how to say “thank you” in Russian, I waved at the soldier and rushed back to our building, holding the bread in my hands. Everyone who saw me was impressed with my bravery, except Mother, who told me never to go to the street by myself again. We celebrated that day by adding bread to the corn mush. Although the bread was dark and hard, it tasted wonderful, and I was thankful to that good-hearted soldier.

The fighting in our neighborhood ended, but the battle continued for several weeks throughout other parts of the city. Some of the districts changed hands several times. The German Army, including Hungarian conscripts, was heavily outnumbered by the Soviets and was gradually pushed west toward the hilly Buda side. After the Germans retreated from the Pest side, they blew up all the bridges behind them to block the path of the pursuing Soviet troops. Setting up heavy guns at a higher elevation provided an obvious advantage to the Germans; they could see the attackers' movements. The Soviet gunners on the Pest side took up positions inside apartments and on top of the buildings facing the Danube. Despite being under concentrated fire, they established a temporary bridge to carry their military equipment across the river.



Soviet soldiers taking a break during the battle for Budapest. About 80,000 of them were killed and 240,000 wounded by the time they had fully captured the city. The photo shows two buildings located only three blocks from where we lived.

Eventually, the Nazi defenders were surrounded on the Buda side in two strongholds: the Castle Hill complex and the heavily fortified, rock-covered Citadel on top of Mount Gellért. The latter was defended by Hitler’s elite *Waffen SS* troops, who held out the longest. Their supplies, however, were limited, and the Soviets repelled attempts to reinforce by other German units. One night, some German troops attempted to break through the encirclement to no avail. The Russians somehow knew about the plan, and the escapees were either captured or killed. By

³ Ushanka, a Russian military fur hat with earflaps, was made for their extremely cold winters.

the end of February, all shooting finally ceased. The victorious Red Army fully occupied the city.

The Siege of Budapest was the most prolonged battle among the major European cities—102 days—much longer than it took the Red Army to conquer Vienna or Berlin. Hitler had declared that Budapest was of utmost strategic importance and ordered his troops to defend it at all costs. By the time the hostilities ended, 80 percent of our capital's buildings had been damaged or destroyed. Virtually every glass window had been shattered by the explosions. Debris, overturned streetcars, burned-out busses, disabled military vehicles, and dead people and horses covered the streets. The bitter cold prevented the epidemic that the decaying bodies would have otherwise caused. Budapest lay in ruins, and its half-starved population faced uncertain times.



The former Royal Palace on top of Castle Hill can be seen behind the ruins of the Chain Bridge. The Palace was one of the last two strongholds of the defenders of Budapest.



Recent photos show the Citadel on top of Mount Gellert. Large segments of the three-foot-thick walls, sprinkled with the marks of large-caliber bullets, held up even during the heaviest ground and air assaults. Eventually the defenders ran out of food and ammunition.

The three Hungarian armies had already been split into two opposing groups. After Regent Horthy's announcement in October 1944, the First Army immediately surrendered to the Soviets near the Romanian border. The Second and Third Armies still fought on the German side—even after the fall of Budapest—trying to defend Hungary's central and western regions. However, Many disillusioned soldiers had had enough of the war, and desertion was rampant. The Arrowcross members constantly looked for deserters and immediately executed them.

Along with our neighbors, we emerged from our underground hideouts. Then, the uncertainties of our future began to set in. Adults asked, “*Is it safe to be on the streets? Where do we find food, and how do we pay for it? Who rules our country—a new Hungarian government or the Soviet Army? When will the utilities be restored? When will our soldiers come home?*” My questions were much simpler: “*When will school start again? When do we eat something other than corn mush? Where could I find a real handgun and play soldiers?*” Being curious about the shooting, I wanted to find out how it would feel to fire a real gun.

We quickly learned the answers to some questions, but others took much longer. Although it would take two more months for the Red Army to drive the Germans out of Hungary, a new provisional government had been formed in the part of the country already occupied by the Soviets. In December 1944, the Soviet High Command appointed General Miklós Dálnoki, the former head of the Hungarian First Army, to assemble representatives from six political parties: *Communist, Social Democrat, Smallholders, Radical, Polgári Demokrata*, and the *Peasant Party*. After the siege of Budapest ended, the new government relocated to the capital.

The Hungarian Communist Party, outlawed since the late 1930s, came alive in two distinctly different groups: the so-called “Muscovites” who quickly returned from their exile in the Soviet Union and those Hungarians who had remained underground during the war. In addition, new members included poor peasants and workers who looked for better lives, intellectuals who had previously opposed the Nazi regime, and some who looked for potential career advancement.

Mátyás Rákosi, the most prominent Muscovite, soon became the leader of the Party. Even though their goal was to have a Soviet-type society, initially, the Communists did not openly advocate it. At first, they settled for land reform and nationalizing prominent institutes and companies. They also accepted the concept of a democratic country with good relationships with all its neighbors and the Western nations. As the Communists became more established and accepted, their approach became clear—following Stalin’s long-term plan to develop a protective buffer zone around the Soviet Union.

Hungary suffered staggering losses from the war—over 800,000 dead and nearly a million kept in Soviet prisoner-of-war camps. The fighting damaged or destroyed all bridges, 90 percent of the nation’s factories, and almost half of all the railroad lines. An estimated 40 percent of Hungary’s gold reserves were removed from the country. In addition, the Soviets demanded 300 million dollars for war reparation.

We were better off than many Budapest residents because our apartment was in relatively good shape. To our surprise, even the glass in our bedroom window remained intact. The unexploded bomb had been removed from the fourth floor, and the gaping hole in the roof had been boarded up. Although a mortar shell had struck the courtyard earlier, heavily damaging the ground-floor apartments, it did not harm ours. We enjoyed seeing daylight after being cooped up in the dark basement for so long. However, our supply of coal and firewood was nearly gone. Mother and I took my sled to the nearby park and dragged home tree branches, bushes, and anything else we could find to keep the fire burning.

Our lives during the next few months continued to be miserable, and I have little recollection of how we survived. Even after our two Jewish guests moved out, we did not have enough food for the two of us. Severe malnutrition and the lack of personal hygiene eventually took its toll.

My skinny body was covered with sores, my gums hurt, and I had lice in my hair. At the first opportunity, Mother took me to see a doctor. After a brief examination, he gave her some bad news. I was infected with mange—a contagious skin disease caused by tiny parasites. Medication was not available; Mother used kerosene to kill the lice.

Finding food was challenging because it was risky for adults to be on the streets. Many of the men were still away with the army. Those who had managed to return were often picked up and deported to the Soviet Union to repair war damage. Women were open targets to satisfy Russian soldiers' sexual appetites. The soldiers frequently came to buildings to take women "to peel potatoes." The only safe way for women to walk on the street was by holding a small child's hand. Sometimes, neighbor women "borrowed" me when they had to leave the building.

Our early joy about the Soviet Army chasing away the Nazis quickly turned sour. Our liberators immediately took most of the industrial machinery that the retreating Germans had not removed from the country. However, there was a significant difference between the two groups. The Germans generally did not steal the personal property of the Hungarian population, but Soviet soldiers, particularly those who came from Asia, frequently looted stores and apartments. Many of them had not been exposed to what they considered to be European luxury items, such as wristwatches and flush toilets. One of the after-war jokes I heard went as follows:

Question: What is the quickest way to determine your direction if you are lost in Budapest?

Answer: Close your eyes, stretch out both arms and slowly rotate your body. When your wristwatch disappears, your arms are pointing toward the Soviet Union.

Mother heard stories of people traveling to the eastern side of Hungary to bring back food. Inflation had made our minute savings worth much less, and bartering was the practical way to pay for food. After gathering some of our clothing, household items, and bedding, she teamed up with Albert's mother and left for an uncertain journey to the country. I was left alone in the apartment, although Albert's grandmother offered assistance if I needed help. Even though I was afraid in the dark night, my new freedom provided the perfect opportunity to look for the handgun I so eagerly wanted.

During the previous week, we had heard that heavy fighting took place around the Citadel, and I thought that would be an excellent place to search for a weapon. Albert was also interested, so the two of us took off to the Citadel on the Buda side of the city. When we reached the Danube, we realized the bridges were destroyed; we could not cross to the other side. Civilians were not allowed to use the small temporary bridge that the Soviets had previously built to transport military supplies. We were stuck on the Pest side.

The Soviet soldiers had used the buildings facing the Danube for protection against the German fortification on the other side of the river. Most of those buildings were either completely demolished or heavily damaged. We thought they might have some leftover military hardware and began to search through the deserted structures. It did not take us long to find exciting items—not the handgun I had hoped for, but many live cartridges of various sizes. We

filled our pockets with this treasure and headed home. I hid everything in my apartment to protect our haul from Albert's grandmother's prying eyes.

The following day, we showed the cartridges to Tibi Asszonyi, who lived above us on the fourth floor. He was already a sixth grader and knew more about everything—so we thought. Normally, he would not degrade himself to play with us, but our possession captured his interest.

"The small ones are for submachine guns, the middle-sized ones for rifles, and the big ones for heavy machine guns," he informed us. Albert and I were very impressed by his wealth of knowledge.

"What can we do with them?"

"Having cartridges without a gun is of no use to you. However, if we take the gunpowder out, we could have some fun," said Tibi.

"How do we take them apart? We don't have tools."

"By repeatedly throwing them against the brick wall until they become loose" was his simple solution.

The idea that the ammunition might explode never entered our minds, and we unthinkingly followed his advice. Carefully checking the cartridges after each throw, we discovered that the bullet casing gradually loosened. With the help of rocks, we took them apart and collected the black gunpowder into our handkerchiefs. Tibi ran upstairs and brought back a matchbox. We were ready for our first experience with explosives. Never in my eight years had I been filled with so much excitement.

We chose our building's rear courtyard for the trial and ensured nobody watched our activities. Tibi had previously seen a newsreel where the army detonated a bomb through a long fuse line. He thought that would be easy to duplicate. We poured a narrow layer of gunpowder for a distance and terminated it with a pile of the remaining powder. Tibi placed a rock on the top of the heap. Next, he lit a match and touched it to the beginning of the powder line.

Emitting sparkles and crackles, the fire rapidly progressed along the line. Then, with a loud puff, the rock flew into the air. Our experiment was a total success! We decided to repeat it with more gunpowder. The next day, the three of us returned to the shore of the Danube carrying a small sack. We found a couple of very large cartridges. Even Tibi did not know what type of weapon they were used in. We figured they would contain large amounts of gunpowder, so we tossed them into our bag.

Our search was interrupted by loud voices in a foreign language. Peeking down into the courtyard, we saw several staggering Soviet soldiers pushing a woman into the building. Tibi whispered to us, "They will force themselves on her." Although I did not know what that meant, I sensed it wasn't good. We dropped the ammunition bag, ran downstairs, and dashed outside. The soldiers laughed when they saw how fearful we were. Not knowing how long they would be there, we decided to return the next day. Nobody interfered with our task then, and we took many cartridges with us.

At home, we followed the same procedure to extract the gunpowder. However, the first toss of the large cartridge made so much noise that we thought someone might come to investigate our activities. Tibi suggested we hold on to the casing and hit the bullet against the wall. Neither

Albert nor I were brave enough to do that, so Tibi had to finish the task himself. When he succeeded, we found a different form of explosive inside the case; instead of powder, it contained thin rods, and we were eager to find out how those would burn. Concerned that an even louder explosion might occur, we decided to perform our test the next day at the nearby park. Thinking my mom was still away, I planned to return the sack with the explosives to our apartment.

Walking upstairs, I noticed that our kitchen door was partially open. Mother appeared at the door with a big smile on her face. I instantly hid the sack behind me, but she noticed it.

After kissing me, she wanted to know what I held behind my back. Not knowing what to say, I hesitated before answering. She took the sack from me and looked inside. Her face became very angry. "Where did you find these?" she asked.

"We took them from a deserted building," I explained, without mentioning our previous experiment. She bound the bag with a string, took it down to Mrs. Blazsek, our housemaster's wife, and asked her to dispose of its contents. They told me about the danger of playing with explosives. Several children in our neighborhood had been seriously hurt when they tried to set off fireworks using anti-aircraft cartridges. I had to promise Mother never to touch such things again. She also informed the other mothers about our collection; our short-lived explosives experiments ended forever.

Our Lives After the War

Mother's trip to the country to barter our household items for food was successful, and we ate well for a week. This helped offset my unhappiness about her confiscating my ammunition. Her description of the trip she took with Albert's mom fascinated me. They had had many exciting experiences, and I wished I could have been with them.

To remain safe from the Soviet soldiers, before their departure the two women had carefully made themselves look unattractive. Albert's mom stuffed a pillow in front of her tummy to look pregnant. Mother worked to appear much older than she was by wearing sloppy, bulky clothing, covering her head with a black scarf, and hunching forward while walking. Their disguises had worked perfectly, and nobody harassed them.

Passenger trains were not running, but freight trains loaded with goods stolen by our liberators frequently headed east to the Soviet Union. On the return trip, the trains carried military supplies for their troops. The two women managed to secure seats in the caboose of an eastbound transport. Although they originally planned to ride the train to Debrecen, a railroad official shooed them off the caboose at a nearby checkpoint. They walked into the nearest village, Hajdúszoboszló, and began to barter their goods, going door to door. Some of the peasants showed interest and even put them up for the night. The next day, the ladies were ready to return to Budapest after trading all their "city goods" for food items, such as eggs, sausage, cheese, and bread.

Their 125-mile return trip, however, took two days because the westbound trains did not stop at Hajdúszoboszló. With all their baggage, the women had to walk ten miles to the train station in Debrecen, but even there, they could not find available transportation that day. The following morning, after sleeping on benches at the station, they were allowed to climb aboard

and sit on top of a freight car. Holding on to whatever they could grab, they arrived in Budapest shivering from the prolonged exposure to the cold wind. Their faces were covered with soot from the coal-burning locomotive engine. Before the train passed through tunnels, the engineer blew the whistle to warn people not to stand up.



In 1945, the rails followed a path along the road marked with arrows. The village of Hajdúszoboszló, where Mother did her bartering, is located about ten miles southwest of their original destination of Debrecen.

Life was still difficult for us in the months following Mother’s bartering expedition. On April 4, 1945, the war finally ended for us, although it continued throughout Austria and Germany until May 9, when the German high command formally capitulated. By then, the new Hungarian provisional government had signed an armistice with the Allies. The agreement once again gave up all the territories initially lost at Trianon, which had been regained so triumphantly for a few years after the outbreak of World War II. The new government also ordered every Hungarian adult to go through a “clearing process” officiated by a local committee, at which they had to explain their activities during the Nazi era. Those who failed the process were sent to labor camps in the country, deported to the Soviet Union, imprisoned, or executed—depending on the severity of their deeds. Former capitalists, large landowners, Arrowcross Party members, and Nazi sympathizers were routinely given harsh sentences. Classified to be a “worker” and having helped to save Jewish lives during the Nazi era, Mother passed the process with flying colors.

Mandatory food rationing was reintroduced, this time by the new government. Residents the local committees already cleared received coupons for vital food items: flour, sugar, bread, and lard. Daily allowances were extremely small; for example, four ounces of bread or three ounces of flour per person. However, even with valid coupons, finding a store with supplies on hand was difficult. Long lines of people waited outside the stores, and frequently, the food was gone by the time one reached the door. The black market flourished, although sellers and buyers faced immediate relocation to a labor camp in the country if they were caught.

In addition to food, clothing was also in short supply. The war had destroyed entire apartments with all their contents, and factories to produce new goods were not operating. A crisis always brings out opportunists who attempt to profit by satisfying a demand. A new type of crime was born, called “*vetköztetés*” (undressing). Roving gangs held up people on the streets at night, took all their clothing, and then released them. The stolen clothing items were generally traded for food,

cigarettes, or other products in short supply. Public safety was non-existent. Obviously, in a short time, nobody wanted to be on the streets at night.

The new Soviet-backed Hungarian government acted swiftly and declared martial law. Special police squads hunted down some of the thugs; they faced immediate trial and were hanged the following day. Newspapers printed articles about their cases in a ledger format. One column listed the gangs' earnings: shoes, suits, overcoats, etc. The other column showed what they paid for them—their lives. After only a few days, the novel crime wave stopped.

My mother managed to keep us clothed. She used whatever material was available to sew outfits for us. However, shoes were a problem because leather goods were not available. A practical solution was to use wooden sandals during the summer. It took us a while to become accustomed to their clattering noise when we walked, but they were cheap. For the winter, Mother found second-hand boots for us at the flea market.

After the war in Europe ended, the provisional government formally requested that the Western Allies extradite nearly 500 Hungarian individuals who had been declared war criminals. Most of those people had left Hungary with the retreating Germans in an attempt to surrender to the Americans or the British instead of the Soviets. Although not all of them were returned, most notably Regent Horthy, virtually all those brought back from the West faced trials, followed by either the hangman or a firing squad. Among those executed were the most recent Prime Minister, Szálasi, and several cabinet members. Horthy's life was spared only because Stalin remembered the Regent's effort to take Hungary out of the war. He lived in exile for another 15 years.

Mr. Bakk, one of the two Nazis in our building, was sent by the clearing committee to face trial. He was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor. The other Arrowcross member in our building also received a lengthy prison sentence. Bakk's two female relatives remained free, but they had to give up half of their apartment to two elderly Jewish ladies who had survived in the Budapest *Getto*. One of the elderly women was Tomi's grandmother. It is not hard to imagine the deep mutual hatred festering among the four women—two Jews and two pro-Nazis—while coexisting in two adjoining bedrooms. To make matters worse, they had to share the kitchen!

Tomi was brought home from a safe house by his father. Both of his parents had been taken to Auschwitz, and only his father survived. Tomi's behavior changed as a result of the losses he endured during the Nazi era. He became withdrawn and frequently cried about the loss of his mother. Albert and I tried to console him as best we could and usually let him be the leader of the games we played.

Tomi and I have stayed in contact throughout the years. He now lives in Los Angeles, and we talk with each other regularly.

Aunt Mari's husband was killed in action at the Eastern Front. Because his parents' restaurant had frequently hosted German Army and SS officers, the government confiscated it. Both parents, as well as *Aunt Mari*, were tried and received prison sentences. Mother was allowed to visit her incarcerated sister a few times and told me that the once beautiful singer looked terribly mistreated. A few years later, after contracting a severe case of tuberculosis, she was released from the prison. Soon after, she had one of her lungs removed and spent several years in a sanatorium.

Although *Aunt Mari* survived, she was labeled a "class enemy" and was unable to work again as a singer after she was released from the sanatorium. She did not have any other employable

skills. Desperate, she finally joined a group of prostitutes who worked in a district not far from where we lived. Walking to the farmers' market, I occasionally saw her standing on the street corner, always wearing lovely bright-colored dresses. It took a while for me to understand her new "business."

Schools reopened in April 1945, so my third grade was a short academic year. Miss Lekner welcomed her returning students and several newcomers to our class. I was glad I retained my status as the second tallest among the boys. Several of us from low-income families received free school lunches provided by the Swedish government. They often served cereal with canned milk, something I had never had before.

By the time school began, my skin scabs had healed, and the kerosene treatment had killed the head lice. Unfortunately, we faced a new problem at home—bedbugs had invaded our apartment. Mother theorized that she inadvertently brought some back from the country because we had never had those little creatures in our apartment. They attacked at night and left itchy bumps on our bodies after sucking our blood. We tried various ways to eradicate them without success. By summer, commercial extermination finally became available. We moved to Albert's place for two days while an exterminator pumped poisonous gas inside our apartment. When we returned home, the bedbugs were gone forever.

Mother again began to provide laundry and housecleaning services, asking to be paid with items she could trade for food in the country. Albert's mother did not want to go with her on another trip, so I accompanied her. My teacher permitted me to miss school for a few days. We headed to the Eastern Railroad Station early on a May morning, carrying a suitcase and a basket. Because she had me along as her protector from the Soviet soldiers, she did not try to disguise her appearance.

I don't recall much about our travels; we stood among many people in a freight car. After a while, I fell asleep while standing. Occasionally, I woke up from the jerking motion of the train. Somehow, we arrived at Hajdúszoboszló and visited the family where Mother had done business on her previous trip. Their house resembled my country cousin's, with a dirt floor and no electricity or indoor plumbing. Their children walked around barefoot, wearing shabby clothing. However, they had lots of food and shared a fabulous dinner with us.

The next day, Mother bartered for food everything we brought with us. Her trading partners included our host and several of their neighbors. Their children were not in school, so we exchanged war stories with each other. They were somewhat skeptical when I told them about the blown-up bridges across the Danube. Hajdúszoboszló had no large river nearby, and the kids could not visualize the huge destroyed structures clogging up the Danube. When I told them about our stay in the coal cellar, they showed me the primitive underground bunkers where they had remained hidden during the war. I realized then that even our coal cellar was better than theirs.

Once again, going home was a more difficult trip. The stationmaster in Hajdúszoboszló informed us that we were unlikely to board a train there. Since there was no way that we could carry our baggage to Debrecen on foot, he suggested we try *Autostop* (hitchhiking) on the road near the station. He felt that a mother with a child would not have trouble finding a ride.

We stood on the road for some time, holding our right hands high⁴ every time a vehicle approached, but none of the drivers stopped to pick us up. Then, after the sun had gone down, a large gasoline tanker truck stopped a short distance from where we stood. We gladly ran over but recoiled upon seeing the occupants of the cab—three Russian soldiers. Wearing an officer's hat, one of them stepped outside and pointed to a narrow wooden seat behind the cab. He spoke in Russian, but we understood only one word, "Budapest." His manner was amicable, so we nodded and repeated the word "Budapest." He placed our luggage underneath the seat and gestured for us to step up. Mother helped me up first, and then she followed. The officer returned to the cab, and the tanker took off toward Budapest.

The seat was comfortable, and the cab protected us from the wind while we traveled. However, recalling the rumors about Russians taking people to Siberia, I was terrified. I kept praying for a safe return home while Mother tried to reassure me that they would not harm us. The fact that we were headed toward Budapest instead of the Soviet Union was my only comfort.

Then, just as we reached the outskirts of Budapest, the vehicle suddenly stopped, and we panicked. We had no idea what would happen next. The officer gestured for Mother to switch places with one of the soldiers. At first, she was reluctant, but eventually, she complied. The soldier slid in next to me, taking up most of the seat, and the truck took off again. Occasionally, the Russian talked to me, but I had no idea what he said. I was scared of him but tried to act politely; I nodded a few times and smiled bravely. When we passed through familiar neighborhoods, I gradually felt more relaxed. It looked like they were taking us home instead of to Siberia.

The tanker pulled up to the front of our building late that evening. Apparently, they had needed Mother inside the cab to guide them to our house. The Russians carried our bags to the gate, and the officer asked Mother to write down her name on a piece of paper. He told us his name, Alexander. After saying, *До свидания* (see you again), the soldiers left us. One of our neighbors saw us stepping out of the Soviet vehicle. The next day, everyone in our building wanted to hear the story of our adventure.

Budapest views in 1945 and 2005:



⁴ Hungarian way to ask for a ride.



Chapter 6: Expanding our Family

Mother wanted to find a new bed-renter to sleep on our kitchen daybed, but she could not locate our former tenant, Ilonka néni. Because so many dwellings had been destroyed, several people expressed an interest in sharing our tiny apartment. Mother finally selected a middle-aged man, Mr. Molnár, who had moved to Budapest from a small village to become a taxi driver. His wife had returned home to their village, Jásztelek, to care for the house and a small piece of land they owned. As part of his rent, Mr. Molnár promised to bring us food from monthly visits to his village. He moved in with us immediately and introduced me to his taxi by driving me around the block. Some neighborhood kids saw me exiting the car, and I felt very important. I believe that was the first time I sat inside an actual automobile.

Our short academic year ended, and once again, I received straight A grades in all subjects. Mother was extremely proud and bragged to the neighbors about my performance. After I begged incessantly, she agreed reluctantly to let me participate in physical education in the coming year. Concerned about my frail physique, she worried that running around the gym and burning lots of energy would make me even skinnier. But I looked forward to playing with my classmates instead of sitting on the bench. In addition, I figured learning to play a team sport would enable me to join the other boys in the park after school. I had tried to play soccer with the neighbor kids once, but when they found out I had not played before, they did not pick me for their teams.

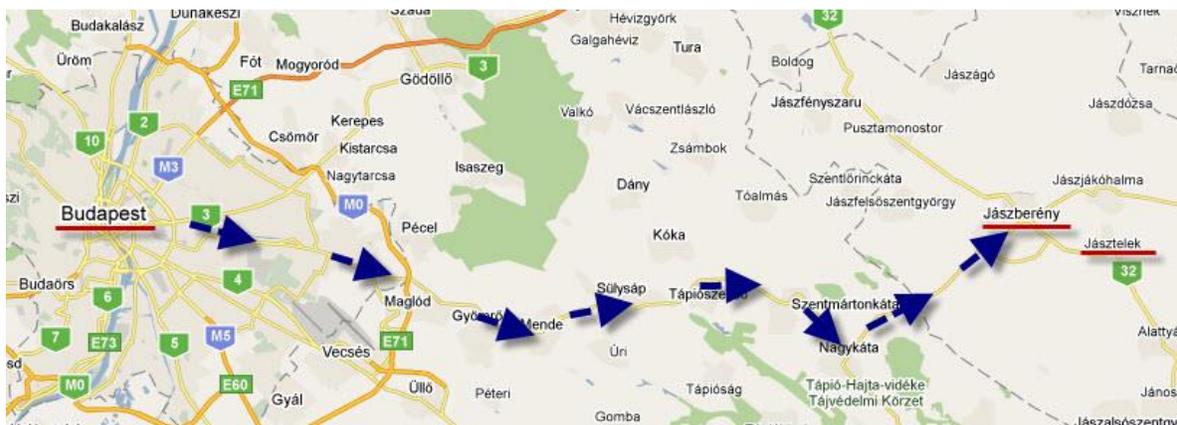
Mother shared her concern about my scrawny appearance with Mr. Molnár, and he offered to let me stay with his wife in the country for two weeks. “Good food and clean air will help him gain weight and look better,” he said. Mother agreed to send me to Jásztelek via the passenger train that had just begun to operate. A few days later, equipped with a backpack and directions to the Molnárs’ house, I was ready to go. Mother took me to the train station and bought me a round-trip ticket. With a mixture of fear and excitement, I headed out alone—an exciting new adventure for a nine-year-old.

The train did not go directly to Jásztelek. First, I traveled to the nearest town with a station called Jászberény, about 40 miles from Budapest. From there, a road led to Jásztelek—four or five miles away. I found a ride on an ox cart to my final destination, so I did not have to walk. Mrs. Molnár, who had no children, received me amicably and showed me the small room where I would sleep. She fed me dinner and put me to bed. I followed the Hungarian superstition of counting the number of corners in the room before falling asleep¹, but I could not remember my dream from that night the following day.

Being in the country this time was more fun than when I went to visit my cousins. *Molnár néni* let me participate in activities Mother generally did not allow. I especially liked going with new friends to splash in a creek and catch frogs. We fed the live frogs to the storks that nested on the chimneys of the village houses. The giant birds were surprisingly tame and

¹ A Hungarian superstition: If one counts the corners of a room before sleeping there for the first time, the dream of that night is supposed to come true.

seemed to appreciate our tasty meals. The country boys also enlightened me about how babies came into the world. Until then, I had believed that storks brought babies, but the boys told me they grew in their mother's tummies. It did not make sense to me, but I did not inquire further about the subject since my "know-it-all-city-boy" image was already tarnished. Later, Albert's older sister explained the process to me.



Map with arrows showing the direction of the train from Budapest to Jászberény. The underlined town southeast is Jásztelek, where the Molnárs lived.

In addition to playing with the neighbor kids, I had chores that included fetching water and feeding Komisz, *Molnár néni's* dog. Drinking water came from a designated well in the village, operated by a hand pump. I carried two large rattan-covered glass jugs to the well and filled them with water. Bringing them home required several stops because they were heavy. Molnár néni checked my biceps every time I came home and complimented me for growing stronger.

Dogs in Hungary ate leftover people's food, including all types of bones. Komisz and I became instant buddies from the first time I fed him. He was not allowed to enter the house, so he roamed freely around their property during the day. At dinnertime, however, he would lie at the front door and wait patiently for his turn to eat. After we finished our meal, Molnár néni gave me the dog's portion, and I passed it on to Komisz. If the leftovers included bones, I always stayed and watched his powerful jaws grind them up.

While I carried the water one morning, a small white female dog approached me, wagging her tail. I put down the jugs and petted her silky hair. She licked my hand. When I continued my trip, the dog followed me to the house. Molnár néni noticed the dog and told me not to feed it. She added that this stray dog, Csöpi, once belonged to the daughter of the village judge. The young girl had lost interest in her pet, and the dog became the food beggar of the village. Csöpi could not provide any useful service around the house, so nobody wanted to keep her.

I felt sorry for the little dog and secretly began hoarding food to keep her around. One day, I noticed Komisz was playing a new game with her by placing his front paws on Csöpi's back. Then, the two of them danced around for a while. They repeated the play a couple of times and became close friends. Komisz even let the small dog into his dog house, and they

spent the nights together. Molnár néni finally noticed that I also fed Csöpi but did not object. She probably wanted to give me the pleasure of keeping the abandoned dog happy.

As the days passed, I became more and more attached to Csöpi and began to formulate a plan to take her home with me. On the morning of my departure, I took my backpack and put it outside the front door. Molnár néni had a visitor, so I said goodbye to her inside the house. As I walked through the door, the two dogs greeted me. I gave each a piece of bread, then grabbed Csöpi and put her inside my backpack. After moving quickly through the village without creating any suspicion, I continued walking on the road leading to Jászberény. I let Csöpi out to pee near the train station, then returned her to the backpack. We boarded the train for Budapest.

Inside the train, I placed my backpack under the seat and anxiously settled in for the trip home. I did not know how Mother would react to Csöpi, but I hoped she would allow me to keep the pet. Then, just as the conductor entered our packed car to punch our tickets, Csöpi yelped. The conductor asked, "Is there a dog in this car?" Nobody replied, and I was holding my breath, fearing what might happen. The conductor became suspicious and began to look through the luggage. After pulling mine out, he discovered Csöpi, who happily jumped out of the bag. Of course, she came to me, leaving no doubt about who had smuggled her onto the train.

The conductor wanted to put Csöpi and me off at the next stop. I began to cry. The other passengers sympathized and eventually convinced the conductor to let Csöpi stay. They donated the ticket price and the fine for the dog, and we arrived in Budapest without any more trouble. Only one question remained—what would my mother's reaction be?

Before walking into our building, I let Csöpi out to take care of her business. She did not have a collar, nor did I have a leash. I was concerned she might decide to run away, but there was no problem. She was scared by the city noise and stayed near me. I put her back into the backpack and walked upstairs to our apartment. Mother was away, and I introduced Csöpi to our place. Putting some rags underneath the kitchen sink, I showed her where she would sleep. First, she sniffed around the apartment and settled down on her new bed.

When Mother arrived home, she immediately noticed Csöpi and demanded an explanation. I described how I found the dog and why I took her. She did not want to keep the dog at first. After Molnár bácsi came home and confirmed the hardship Csöpi faced in the village, she finally relented—on the condition that I would take full responsibility for walking and feeding the dog. Of course, I agreed.

Shortly after my return from the country, two unexpected visitors came to our door: Cousin Éva and her stepfather, Ferenc Szilvási. They brought bad news about Éva's mother, my aunt Rózsi néni. Mr. Szilvási had had no contact with his family for nearly three years while serving as a soldier with the Hungarian Army. He had only learned about the family's fate after his recent return. Mother and I listened to him quietly.

Before the Red Army took Budapest, vicious fighting occurred between the Soviet and German troops in the region lying between Budapest and Székesfehérvár. Rózsi néni, with her three children—Éva (ten), Zsuzsi (seven), and Feri (five)—had been staying in a large underground wine cellar that had been converted into a bunker. They shared the bunker with an elderly couple and a young woman who worked with Rózsi néni at the refinery. During a

lull in the fighting, the two women returned to the house to cook. While they were away, the two armies began a sudden artillery duel. Large explosions shook the bunker, terrifying the occupants. When the cannons finally fell silent, one of the men went outside to look for the two women. He came back a few moments later, white-faced, and announced that a shell had hit the building and destroyed the kitchen. They were able to pull the two mangled bodies from the ruins, but Rózsi néni was already dead. The other woman was barely alive. After dragging the unconscious woman into the bunker, the children listened to her moaning for some time until she also passed away. Still in shock from losing their mother, Éva and her siblings huddled through the cold night with the elderly occupants, who promised to look after the three of them until their father's return.

The following day, the noise of the guns moved farther away, and the occupants of the shelter heard people talking in a strange language outside the bunker. Overcoming their fear, they stepped outside to see Russian soldiers searching the area for remaining Germans. Once the Soviets controlled the village, their commander ordered the population to provide food and housing for his troops. The next day, the soldiers left to push the Germans farther north, and the village people tried to repair their shattered lives. Éva's mother and several other dead civilians were buried in a mass grave.

The Soviets had won that first significant battle near Székesfehérvár. They then moved north rapidly until they reached the outskirts of the capital. However, a powerful counteroffensive, *Operation Konrad*, led by six elite Waffen SS panzer divisions, had allowed the German troops to regain the entire region. During their attack, the villagers once again took cover in the bunkers. The two elderly couples and the three motherless children survived by eating raw potatoes and bacon. Although the remains of their building were not damaged further, many of the other homes in the villages were destroyed, this time by the house-to-house fighting. The pro-Nazi mayor, who had escaped earlier with the retreating Germans, returned and announced that the *Wehrmacht* was on its way to force the invading Soviet troops out of Hungary. His hopeful prediction proved inaccurate; the Red Army retook the area two weeks later.

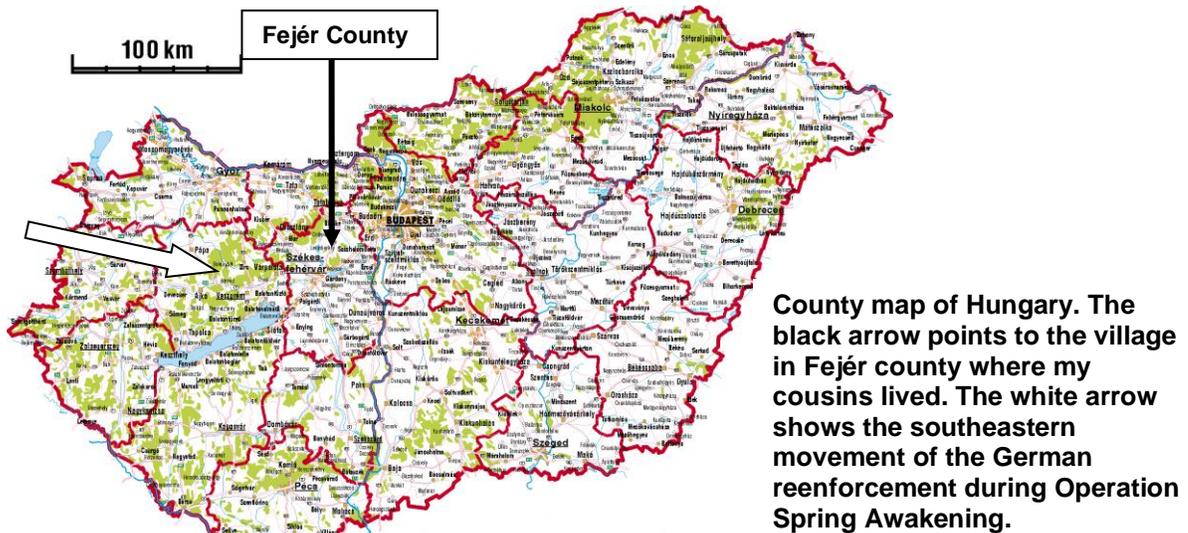
During the ongoing savage combat, the occupying forces of the region alternated several times, leading to even more loss of lives and property. My three motherless cousins became the foster children of the community. Nobody could take all of them together, so they stayed with various families, occasionally seeing each other. After the siege of Budapest ended, the Soviets solidified their holding of the entire Fejér County and planned their next move west, toward Pozsony (now called Bratislava) and Vienna. A desperate Hitler, who was still waiting for his scientists to develop new wonder weapons, wanted to delay further Soviet advancement toward Germany. He transferred a significant part of his army reserves to Hungary for another major counterattack.

Operation *Frühlingserwachen* (Spring Awakening), supported by many heavy tanks and armor-piercing artillery, began in early March 1945. The German attack force, with an added contingency of Hungarian Army divisions, punched through the Soviet defenses and recaptured a large part of Fejér county, including its district capital, Székesfehérvár. A frustrated Stalin replaced his top military commander in Hungary, assigning Field Marshall Malinowski to control the region. With the help of most of its available reserves, the Red Army

mounted counterattacks and gradually regained the southeastern half of the county. Then, the two huge opposing armies were ready for a major showdown—with my cousin's village between them.

The German command warned the remaining residents of the village about the forthcoming tank battle and instructed them to vacate the area. Eleven-year-old Cousin Éva brought her siblings together from different homes. During a foggy afternoon, they prepared to leave the village. Carrying blankets and pillows, the three children joined the long line of people walking toward the safety of the hills several miles away. Unable to keep up with the pace of the adults, the children became tired and gradually fell behind as darkness set in. Eventually, they completely lost contact with the group and rested. Not knowing where the others had gone, the kids decided to head back to the deserted village and stay in the bunker. Arriving at the bunker late at night, exhausted, they huddled together and went to sleep.

The ensuing heavy fighting lasted several days, shaking the ground under the terrified children. When it ended, the cellar door was suddenly ripped open by a Soviet soldier, his submachine gun ready to fire. He saw only three frightened children. After giving them food, he motioned them to stay in the bunker. The next day, the residents began to return to their destroyed village. Virtually all the houses had been blown apart or demolished by the tanks. Worse, their future was completely unknown. Would the Germans return to continue the fighting?



Fortunately for the locals, the Red Army firmly established control, and the residents slowly began to rebuild their lives. A Soviet major, the ranking officer of the area, found out about the three motherless children and wanted to adopt them. His entire family had been killed during the German invasion, and he offered to send the children back to his hometown near the Caspian Sea. However, some of the village elders assured him that they would take care of the kids until their father returned from the war. Of course, there was no way of knowing his fate, but they hoped he was still alive. Reluctantly, the major agreed, and soon, he moved west with his troops toward Austria.

Éva's stepfather had served in a Hungarian Army unit that had fought on the German side. Their combined armies eventually retreated to Austria. The morale of the Hungarian troops was extremely low—they had seen their country devastated by a war Germany could not win. At the first opportunity, Szilvási deserted and returned to his village. Arriving home after the war ended, he learned about the death of his wife and the destruction of the village, including the house where they had lived. Only the children's survival gave him a reason to face the future.

The three children, staying with different families, were glad to see him alive and well. His son had developed disabling pains in one leg and had trouble walking. He was diagnosed with bone tuberculosis. The two girls did not have any serious problems, though they were malnourished and had head lice. Their father's first action was to look for a suitable place to stay with them, but virtually all the buildings in the village had been rendered uninhabitable after the last tank battle.

Not finding any means to keep the children together, he had decided to bring Éva to Budapest. He asked my mother to look after the girl for a few weeks until he found work and a way to rebuild their home. Still in shock after learning of her sister's death, Mother agreed to keep Éva with us temporarily.

I had mixed feelings about the arrangement. Having another child at home—although a girl—sounded interesting. I had always envied Albert for having a big sister who knew more than he did. On the other hand, we would have to share the little food we had. Also, where would she sleep? Our apartment only had three beds, and Molnár bácsi already used the one in the kitchen. That meant Mother, Éva, and I would have to share the two beds in our bedroom. After having my bed for some time, I wanted to keep it. Also, a frightful thought occurred to me: *What if she brings bedbugs or head lice from the country?* I still remembered how much trouble we had gone through to eradicate those pests and hoped our apartment would not become infested again.

Mother must have read my mind. She checked Éva's hair carefully with a fine comb but found no lice. To be sure that neither bedbugs nor their eggs would find their way into our apartment, she soaked Éva's hair with kerosene. Then, she washed all the clothes Éva brought in boiling water. As for the sleeping arrangements, once again, we managed by laying like sardines, head to toe—but this time, the three of us crammed into two adjacent twin beds. Mother temporarily registered my cousin as another resident in our apartment to receive additional food-rationing coupons.

Because the basic necessities available with rationing coupons were still in short supply, Mother decided to take another trip to the eastern part of the country to bring back food. She had collected various clothing and household items suitable for bartering from her employers. Since Éva was physically stronger than I, she was selected to go with Mother on the trip. A few days later, the two of them left for Hajduszoboszló. Molnár bácsi also left for the country on one of his monthly trips to see his wife. I was left home alone.

As before, my liberation from parental supervision proved quite agreeable. Immediately after Mom's departure, I invited several neighborhood friends for a Cowboys' and Indians' battle royal. The two-room layout of our apartment was perfect for establishing headquarters for the opposing sides—one in the kitchen and one in the

bedroom. We discussed strategies and carried out war plans throughout our four-story building. The war lasted several hours, but I do not remember which side won.

After we “smoked a peace pipe,” my friend Albert told me about the back door at a nearby movie theater. On hot days like this, the door was often propped open for ventilation. An original Frankenstein movie was playing, and Albert dared me to sneak into the next show with him—the only approach, considering our impoverished state. A few minutes later, we both slipped into the theater unobserved.

The movie utterly petrified me. When the monster climbed up a creaky wooden staircase on his way to kill someone, my eyes were shut tight, but I could still hear the footsteps moving closer and closer to the victim. Leaving the theater, Albert and I boasted bravely about how little we were affected by the movie. Still, we held hands all the way home.

Entering our apartment, I faced the chaos of our recent battle. Fortunately for me, nothing was broken. After straightening up a bit, I looked for our rationing coupons so I could stand in line for our daily allowance of four ounces of bread. My mother kept the coupons on the kitchen table in a small, beautifully turned crystal bowl, our single prized family treasure. Now, however, the bowl stood empty. I knew that a month’s worth of coupons had been in there when my mother had left—she had told me to guard them carefully. I had to find those coupons. Otherwise, I could not buy bread, and my stomach indicated it was time to eat.

An exhaustive search of the apartment did not turn up the coupons; questioning all the friends who had played with me that day also proved fruitless. The coupons were gone, and I could not bear the thought of my mother’s reaction upon her return. In addition, I was already hungry, and visualizing several breadless days ahead of me made it even worse. Desperate, I knelt and prayed to St. Anthony, remembering he was always helpful to children. Perhaps he could ask God to help me find the coupons. As I prayed to St. Anthony, I told him I would offer to teach Tomi’s illiterate grandmother how to read. She was a sweet elderly lady who had asked me for help several times before, but I had always found some excuse not to. I figured a few sessions with Grandma were a reasonable trade with St. Anthony. After my prayers were said, the next order of business was to find something to eat.

The most likely place for free food was Albert’s. Hoping to be invited for an evening meal, I knocked on their door and asked if Albert could play with me. His grandmother served dinner—bean soup—and kindly offered me some. I did not refuse. After eating, I played with Albert for a while and headed home. Opening the front door, I snapped on the single light bulb which hung over our kitchen table. A rush of adrenaline flushed my cheeks as I saw that the crystal bowl was no longer empty. Rushing to the table, I seized the contents—the lost coupons! Overwhelming joy coursed through my veins as I offered relief thanks to the merciful St. Anthony.

To this day, I have no explanation of how those coupons found their way back into that bowl. I had scoured our apartment several times, gazing wistfully at the empty bowl every time I passed it. Although I'm not deeply religious, I am convinced that a miracle occurred that day.

After turning out the lights and climbing into bed, the Frankenstein movie suddenly popped back into my mind. *What if the monster finds me alone in the dark? No way! I will leave the light on and keep my clothes on if I need to escape.*

My slumber was disrupted by our house master, Blazsek bácsi, yelling through the bedroom window. "Your mother works hard, and you are wasting electricity! You better turn the lights off NOW *or else...*" Blazsek bácsi was a former boxer and military policeman who weighed about 300 pounds; he could lift a large, fully loaded garbage container. All the kids in our building feared him, although we frequently mocked his Slovak accent behind his back. I wasn't about to wait around to find out what "or else" meant, so I immediately switched off the light and returned to bed.

The wooden floors of our bedroom creaked in the total darkness. It sounded like the noise originated at my window and crept directly toward me. *The monster had come, seeking me as its next victim!* There was no other explanation. Panic rose in my throat as my mind raced to find an escape. But there was none! I was trapped! The monster's twisted face and massive shoulders loomed in my mind. *Why did I have to see that movie? How could I possibly escape?* Pulling the covers over my head, I held my breath. This seemed like a good solution until I ran out of air. The thought of pleading to St. Anthony again also occurred to me, but since I had still not paid off the first favor, I hesitated to ask for a second. *What was that one thing that scared away Frankenstein's monster? Was it fire?* Running to the kitchen for matches, however, meant leaving the safety of my bed, so I rapidly discarded that idea.

I finally decided that singing loudly would give the monster the impression that I was not afraid, and he would leave me alone. Lifting the covers slightly to allow my voice to be heard, I began singing a marching song we had learned in elementary school. The more I sang, the more confident and loud my voice became, convincing me that the monster would have no choice but to leave and find another victim.

Not surprisingly, the monster was not the only one listening to my marching song. Blazsek bácsi came upstairs again, wondering if I had completely lost my mind. For once, I was happy to hear his voice. Rushing to the window, I poured my heart out about Frankenstein and the monster. To my surprise, he answered me with kindness, something I had not suspected existed in that massive body. He led me down to his apartment, where he wrote on a sheet of paper, "No Monsters Allowed in This Building!!!" The three exclamation marks at the end emphasized that he meant business. He even signed his name underneath. He then posted the sign at the entrance to the building, led me back to my apartment, and waited until I fell asleep. The monster must also have feared *Blazsek bácsi* because it did not give me any more trouble after that.

Fearing punishment for allowing my friends to make a mess in our apartment and sneaking into the movies, I never revealed these events to my mother. Mr. Blazsek

eventually removed the sign from the gate, and as far as I know, he kept my secret about the monster. After that, I respected him a great deal. Occasionally, I would listen to his war stories and even help him shovel snow from our sidewalks. When a heart attack took his life a decade later, I attended the funeral and cried sincerely for my lost friend.

My First Teaching Experience

I went to see Tomi's grandmother to honor my promise to St. Anthony. Calling on Grandma Goldenweig was not easy due to the layout of the apartment she shared with the two Nazi women. I hoped that the two Nazi ladies would not be at home because a mutual dislike existed between my family and those two. After the war ended, they found out that we had protected Jewish men from the fascists. Their man—Mr. Bakk—had been imprisoned for his anti-Semitic activities, so naturally, his wife and sister considered us enemies. We never said hello when we passed by each other.

Unfortunately, the two women were in their room, and one of them came to the door after I knocked. She peeked through the window but would not let me in. Instead, she yelled to Tomi's grandmother in the inner bedroom, "Someone is at the door for you." Grandma walked through the Nazi ladies' room and let me in. I told her I was ready to teach her to read and write. She was delighted and offered to pay me for my time. I felt somewhat guilty about taking her money because of my promise to St. Anthony, but I didn't refuse her offer. We began our sessions the next day, using my first-grade textbook.

Naively, I thought that a grownup would learn faster than a child. After all, if I could learn to read as a kid, an adult should have no problem. As it turned out, teaching a 65-year-old lady to read was much more complicated than I had expected.

As I write this, now that I am even older than she was then, I have great empathy for what she tried to do. At this age, learning new things is not so easy.

At first, we met daily to learn the lengthy Hungarian alphabet, and in a few weeks, she could sound out most of it. But putting together letters and reading their combinations did not go well. To make matters worse, she could not do her homework most of the time without help. By the end of the summer, we both realized that our mission would never be completed, and we gave up the effort. I was disappointed, but she remained nice to me for the rest of her life. She paid me generously, and except for one time, I always gave the money to my mother, feeling very proud for contributing to our existence.

Before beginning fourth grade, where I would participate in physical education for the first time, I wanted to learn how to play soccer. I decided to learn soccer from a book because kids who did not know how to play were not picked for the teams. With the money from my teaching job, I bought a coaching manual that explained basic soccer techniques. I didn't have a real soccer ball, so I asked my mother to sew one. She stuffed rags into a bag and formed it into a ball. I was ready for action and went to

the usually deserted rear courtyard where nobody would see me. My heavy wooden sandals were unsuitable for kicking, so I began practicing barefoot.

The first thing the book emphasized was never to kick with the toes. After scraping my foot on the asphalt several times, I gradually learned how to kick correctly. By the time school began, I knew most of the fundamental movements. Although I knew we would not play soccer in the PE classes, I felt more confident about my ability to participate in the other games.

Life in our city slowly began to normalize, though there were significant alterations from our life before the war. Some of the men whom the Soviet forces had captured returned, but others were kept in work camps for several years. Women stepped in and took over jobs traditionally held by men. The new government promoted the idea of women doing physical jobs such as driving tractors and laying bricks on construction sites. Wages were low, and the value of the money was eroded by inflation.

At the same time, we were worrying about the shrinking value of our money; Csöpi, the dog I brought home from the country, grew bigger and more prominent in the tummy. I was puzzled because we did not feed her very much. Then, one day, my mother announced that Csöpi would soon have puppies. Later, I realized something else was happening when I thought she was playing a game with Molnár néni's black dog in the country. One evening, a few weeks later, Mother told me to go outside and wait for the puppies to arrive. She and Éva stayed in the kitchen with Csöpi, and after a while, they asked me to come back inside.

I could not believe my eyes. Three little black-and-white, rat-sized creatures—with their eyes shut—snuggled under the tummy of their weary mommy. Csöpi let me pick up her babies, but she licked them thoroughly after I put them back. It was too late that night to tell my friends the news, but I brought several of them into our kitchen the following day and showed off the puppies. Although Csöpi displayed some concern about all the fuss the visitors made, she allowed the kids to touch the puppies. My friends envied me for having so many pets, but Mother warned me we would not keep them long. A month later, she placed the puppies in a basket, and we went to the nearby boulevard to sell them. People crowded around us, and the puppies were sold quickly. Thinking Csöpi would be very lonely without her puppies, I let her sleep with me in my bed for some time. Mother didn't like this, but she grudgingly allowed it.

The beginning of the school year approached, but Éva's stepfather did not come to take her back to their village. The few weeks of boarding he had asked for was nearly two months. Mother wrote to him but received no reply. Finally, her patience ran out, and she sent Éva home by train. A day later, Éva sheepishly returned with a brief note from Szilvási, "She is your niece, and you are her closest living relative. She is not my child, and I cannot look after her. Don't send her back to me again!"

Mother was stunned, but there wasn't much she could do. The legal system was too involved with the war criminals' cases to look after custody issues. She could not afford a lawyer anyway. She resigned, adopted Éva, and registered her as a permanent resident in our apartment. At that point, 11-year-old Cousin Éva became my sister. Mother gave notice to our bed-renter, and after he moved out, Éva slept in the kitchen bed.

Losing the extra revenue and food provided by Molnár bácsi and feeding and clothing another child made Mother's life even harder. She worked long days, doing whatever odd jobs she could to provide for us. Our success in selling Csöpi's puppies also gave her two entrepreneurial ideas. First, after every bartering trip to the country where she obtained flour, she prepared doughnuts and sold them on the streets. She asked Éva and me to promote the sales by yelling, "Fresh doughnuts—delicious doughnuts—buy them before they are gone!" I was too embarrassed about sounding like a peddler and always pushed Éva to shout. Surprisingly, she had no reservations about being a "barker" and always attracted customers.

Mother's second business idea was to mate Csöpi every year with a purebred male and sell the puppies. The four or five puppies in each litter were pure white. One dog always went to the owner of the stud, and the others sold quickly. Our dog became a regular little breadwinner.

Having a sister was a new experience for me. Initially, I wouldn't say I liked sharing everything with Éva, but we became true siblings as time passed. One thing, however, remained hard for me to accept: even though she was a girl, she was stronger than I was. If we disagreed, she could quickly wrestle me to the ground and sit on my chest. That experience humiliated me, and I was cautious so no one would see my defeat in public. Once, however, after a long period of continuous defeats, Albert witnessed my disgrace. The next time we were alone, he offered me some advice. "Instead of wrestling, why don't you punch her in the stomach?"



Left: Csöpi's black-and-white puppies. Right: Photo taken about two years later, showing Éva and me with Csöpi.

The idea of hitting a girl seemed unfair. However, Albert assured me that it would earn her respect. He had once used it against his sister, and she stopped picking on him. Encouraged, I was ready to try the new approach. I practiced secretly, punching my mattress to know how to do it.

The next time Éva and I argued, she was ready to pounce on me again. Before she could grab me, however, I delivered a punch straight into her belly. The surprise on her face brought satisfaction for all the times she had sat on me. Then she began to cry and walked away. That was the last time we had a physical fight.

At the start of September 1945, Éva began attending the girls' public school a block from where we lived. Because she came from a small village school, the principal automatically held her back in the fifth grade. She found the school in Budapest far more academically demanding than her previous school. She struggled at first, but her performance gradually improved. Even though she did not know anyone in the class, making friends came naturally to her. Being somewhat shy myself, I envied her outgoing personality.

My fourth-grade class had a new teacher, Miss Szebeni—a middle-aged woman with a large red scar running through one side of her face from ear to mouth. She was probably used to others staring at her because, after the roll call, she explained the cause of her injury. To our surprise, it was not a result of the war but instead, a boiler-room explosion that sent a metal fragment ripping into her face. Plastic surgery was not available in those days, and she had to live with the results. We all felt sorry for her because she was a lovely lady with a disfigured face. That school year, even the usual troublemakers did their best to behave in her class.

One afternoon, as I left school, I was surprised to hear a familiar voice behind me saying, "*Lacika, hazajöttem!*" (I'm back). When I turned around, I could hardly believe my eyes. A frail version of *Braun bácsi*—my mother's former employer and my early father figure—stood there, his arms outstretched. I ran to him excitedly; he hugged me and kissed my face. It was great to feel his mustache rub against my cheeks.

"How long have you been back?" I asked.

"For a couple of weeks, but it took me some time to regain my apartment and make it livable again."

"Please come to our place. Mama will be so glad to see you. I also want you to meet my new sister Éva and our dog, Csöpi."

It only took a minute for us to reach our apartment. Mother was ironing in the kitchen when we went in, and I thought she would faint upon seeing him. She was glad to know he was alive; we had given up hope of ever seeing him again! Excitedly, she began to cry joyfully and immediately commented on how thin he was. Then, she offered him a seat and began to prepare scrambled eggs.

When Éva came home from school, she was surprised to find a stranger sitting at our table. That was the first time she met *Braun bácsi*, although she had often heard Mother and I speak of him. Mother asked *Braun bácsi* where he had been for the past three years. His story made us hate the Nazis even more.

After we had moved out of his house, located at the edge of Budapest, his divorced sister and niece took our place in his home. However, the government evicted them within a few months, and the apartment was given to an Arrowcross Party member's family. *Braun bácsi*, whose name had already changed to Brassai, shared a room with another Jewish man for the next several months. His sister and her daughter found a place in a different part of the city. After Hungary entered World War II, those characterized as untrustworthy to join the army and carry weapons—Jews and Gypsies as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, who refused to bear arms—had to serve in labor camps. Beginning in late 1942, he had served in a special labor detachment, constructing new railroad tracks. He reported for work every morning and returned home at night. Initially, his group was treated humanely.

In mid-1943, his unit was transported to a labor camp in Bor, Serbia, due to a trade agreement with Germany. The local mine provided half of Germany's copper for its war efforts. In Bor, their living conditions deteriorated rapidly. Large, prominent yellow stars were painted on the front and back of their clothes. The guards took away the men's shoes so they couldn't escape, and they had to wear self-made wooden sandals. Harsh punishments followed even minor infractions. Working 12 hours a day in the mine, living under cramped conditions in cold barracks, and receiving only subsistence-level food soon took their toll. Only those temperatures over 104 degrees were allowed to move into the sick bay.

As the Soviet army approached Bor, the SS ordered the evacuation of the camp. The internees formed a long line, five abreast, and marched to Cservenka, Serbia. The guards shot those who could not keep up with the 25-mile-per-day pace during their 150-mile trip. After a day's rest, the exhausted survivors began work in a brick factory. They were housed in an empty factory building, and *Braun bácsi* was selected as the overseer of one group. Although his "promotion" increased his daily food allowance, he soon paid the price for it.

Early one morning, a surprise SS inspection of his unit uncovered a small bag containing sewing needles and thread hidden in a haystack. The owner, a former tailor, was told to stand in front at the morning roll call. His overseer—*Braun bácsi*—was commanded to punch the man into submission. When he refused, the Camp Commander ordered Braun to undress. Two guards held him on the ground. The commander held his gun to the head of the tailor, handing him a sewing needle with black thread. The commander instructed the tailor to sew *Braun bácsi's* buttocks together with seven stitches. Although a doctor later treated his wounds, the resulting infection led to complications that lasted for the rest of his life.

As the Red Army pushed further northwest, the brutality of the SS, as well as the Serbian and Hungarian guards, increased. Selected groups of workers were taken away to dig large ditches. As soon as their work was completed, they were machine-gunned into the fresh graves. To be sure that nobody remained alive, the guards often tossed hand grenades on top of the bodies. Amazingly, a few victims survived, climbed out of the trenches, and found refuge with civilian residents who hated the Nazi occupiers.

Near the end of 1944, the German forces pulled out of the region. Before leaving, they wanted to destroy the evidence of mass murder, but Serb guerillas disrupted the plan with a surprise attack. The 400 men (out of the original 6,000 workers) who survived the torments were freed, but when the Soviet troops occupied the city, the workers were temporarily detained. After clearing up their status, most of them were released. However, those with office experience were shipped to the Hungarian city of Szeged to work in a military hospital as clerks. *Braun bácsi* was included in that group.



Left: *Braun bácsi*, in a picture taken in Budapest in late 1942, wears an army hat and a yellow armband. Right: A caricature drawn by one of the occupants of the Bor camp shows the guards, typical punishment for misbehavior, and work details in the copper mine.

The scale in the hospital showed his body weight had dropped from 75 kg to 55 kg (175 lbs to 120 lbs). Not having access to antibiotics, the infection he contracted in Cservenka lingered in his body, causing severe pain during bathroom visits. However, his strong will to live helped him survive and maintain his compassion for the Hungarian patients.

By order of the Soviet Commander, as soon as the wounded Hungarian soldiers recovered, they were to be transported to a prisoner-of-war camp in the Soviet Union. Knowing that the probability of returning from there was extremely low, the hospital staff tried to prevent such moves. Collaborating with doctors three times, Braun bácsi reported the sudden death of a patient who was, in reality, ready for discharge. The “dead bodies” were transferred to the mortuary and freed during the night. Fake papers were given to them by the local officials.

After learning that the Red Army had freed Budapest from the Germans, Braun bácsi decided to end his work assignment. Sneaking out of the hospital one night, he walked toward the capital. With the release document he had received when Cservenka was liberated, he passed through checkpoints and, in a week, reached Budapest. Going to the building he formerly owned, he found his apartment deserted. One of the rooms had a large hole in the wall caused by an artillery shell. Most of the furniture had been destroyed by the explosion and from water damage.

After reuniting with his sister and niece, he heard how my mother’s help saved his niece's life. They could reclaim his residence and attempt to make the place livable again. To do that, however, he needed money and skilled labor.

Before he had been ordered to move out of his apartment in 1942, he had sold the building and had invested part of the proceeds in optical supplies. After the war, he and an optician friend planned to open an eyeglass store. Fearing that the fascists might confiscate all valuable property owned by Jews, they filled three large trunks with the optical goods and buried them in the garden behind his house. When he returned after the war, he learned that his friend had perished in one of the labor camps. Recovering the trunks by himself, Braun bácsi found out that optical lenses were in high demand. Selling and bartering part of his supply allowed him to rebuild his apartment building.

The first day he tried to sell his optical supplies at an eyeglass store, he met the owner's daughter. She made such an impression that he wanted to see her more often. It seemed that his life was heading in the right direction.

After telling his story, Braun bácsi listened as we described how we had survived the siege of Budapest. I wanted to tell him more—about my school, new friends, and my desire to play soccer—but he needed to leave for a date with the lady from the optical store. Mother asked if he might consider ending his bachelorhood, and he answered with a sly smile, “Who knows?” He left, promising to visit us regularly. I looked forward to being together again, playing chess, solving his math puzzles, and hearing more of his story. He had saved our lives when my mother was in a desperate situation. He had been like a father to me—the dearest man in my life and the only man who had ever hugged me.



Braun bácsi's return travels included 1) the Bor labor camp, 2) Cservenka's brick factory, 3) the military hospital in Szeged, and 4) Budapest.

Chapter 7: Finding Joy in Sports

Fourth grade meant something new and exciting—I finally had my mother’s permission to participate in physical education classes. Everybody liked our PE teacher, Mr. Vadas, a former sprinter and a Hungarian National 4 x 400-meter relay team member that reached the finals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. I looked forward to my first PE class, but without the experience the other kids already had, I did not perform well on the gym equipment. Although Mr. Vadas was very patient and never made fun of me, I received a “C” at the end of the first semester, ruining my otherwise straight “A” grades. A “C” automatically lowered my overall grade¹ to “B.” This distressed me. I tried extra hard in the second semester, and when Mr. Vadas had time after school, I asked for his help. He appreciated my effort and, for the second semester, gave me a “B.” I wanted to do even better in PE, but I had no options for extra help. We did not have the money for private instruction, and Braun bácsi had no athletic experience. I often tried to join the other boys playing soccer, but they only wanted kids who knew how to play. Determined, however, I tried again and again to join a team.

One day, while I was watching a soccer game at the park nearby, a ball hit one of the goalies in the face. Blood gushed from his nose, and he abruptly left. None of the players wanted to take his place. They played on dirt rather than grass, and being a goalie required frequent diving for the ball. Without any protective gear, each dive could lead to bruises, and the kids did not want to hurt themselves. The boys crowded around the two captains, trying to figure out what to do. After a short discussion, one of the captains asked me, “Do you want to be our goalie?”

“Yes,” I replied quickly and stepped between the two bundles of clothes on the ground that served as goalposts. I removed my wooden sandals—many boys played barefoot—and waited for the action. They played with a large rubber ball rather than a genuine leather one. It was much heavier than the rag ball I used at home to practice kicking. The captain gave me the ball, and with my barefoot, I kicked it into play.

Fortunately, my team was the better, so the other team did not have too many shots at my goal. Whenever they did have an opportunity, I did my best to prevent their scoring by diving courageously right and left. Because I wore only a short-sleeved shirt and short pants, each dive left scrapes and bruises on my arms and legs, but I did not mind. My determination to be accepted by the boys was much stronger than the pain. I did well, letting only two balls go by me. At the end of the game, my team captain asked me if I would play with them until their regular goalie came back. Of course, I gladly agreed and limped home with excitement. *They wanted me—I will be a soccer player after all.*

Éva was already home from school and helped to clean up my wounds. Knowing that iodine killed germs, she dabbed my scratches, causing me to grit my teeth with pain. The iodine left brown spots on my elbows and knees, and when Mother came home, she demanded an

¹ In those days the grade average was not computed in Hungarian elementary schools. Instead, an “overall” grade was given, depending on all the grades.

explanation. Fearing that she might forbid me to play again, I hesitated to tell the truth, but Éva blurted out proudly, “He is on a soccer team.”

“How did that happen?” asked Mother.

“They let me play goalie and asked me to come back again.”

Mother had never seen a soccer game. “How did you cut your arms and legs? I don’t want you to play again,” she said firmly.

“Perhaps you could sew some guards for my elbows and knees to protect me. Please let me play,” I begged.

Éva came to my defense and pleaded with my mother. “*Panni néni*, I will also help you. It’d make Laci so happy,” she added.

“Their goalie was injured; this is my chance to play,” I continued.

At that point, I began to cry, and Mother finally gave in. After dinner, she and Éva found a worn-out flannel skirt and used it to make the protectors. They stuffed them with extra skirt layers and attached strings to each side. The guards did not look very professional, but that did not concern me. *I’ll play again tomorrow, and the flannel guards will protect me.* In bed, I prayed to Saint Anthony and asked him to help me become a soccer player. Although I had never seen a real game, I heard people talking about them frequently. In our district, most men rooted for a team named *Fradi*, and I already envisioned myself on their team.

Time seemed to move slowly the next day, and I could hardly wait to play again. At school, I proudly showed my scrapes to the kids and announced that I was a goalie. They looked doubtful until one classmate, who had seen me play the previous day, verified my claim. After school, I put on my protectors and went to the park. At first, the players stared at my arms and legs and wanted to know why I wore those polka-dot covers. When I explained the reason, the other goalie thought it was a good idea, and the boys accepted my strange appearance. The guards worked well, and my second game added no new scratches.

I played with the boys for several days, hoping their regular goalie would not return, but he showed up one day. I was ready to be sent away. To my surprise, our team captain remarked that I was a fearless goalie and kept me in that position. He asked the other goalie to play on the field. I had a spot on the team!

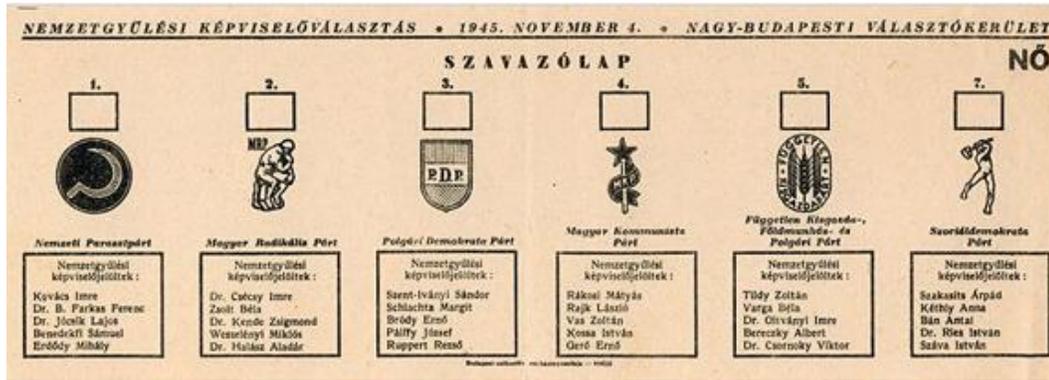
We had games almost every day except when it rained heavily. Playing soccer and participating in PE significantly improved my coordination. I was no longer the clumsiest boy in my PE class. Mr. Vadas complimented my progress by praising me in front of the class. His recognition meant more to me than any present I had received before.

Democratic Election After World War II

In the fall, I began fourth grade. In November 1945, Hungary held its first postwar election. Ninety-three percent of the eligible voters cast ballots. A significant philosophical difference existed among the three major parties. The Smallholders wanted limited land and social reforms and to maintain connections with the Catholic Church. The Communists demanded far more radical changes and opposed religion. The Social Democrats were positioned between those two but leaned closer to the Communists.

The results delivered a significant disappointment to the Kremlin. Instead of winning, the Communist Party came in third place:

Smallholders	57.0%
Social Democrats	17.5%
Communists	16.9%
All others	8.6%



The official ballot from the 1945 election shows six parties. Voters could choose any one of them. The Communist Party is third from the right.

Zoltán Tildy, the head of the Smallholders Party, became Prime Minister. However, even though the Smallholders received an absolute majority, the Soviet command did not allow them to govern alone. Marshall Voroshilov, head of *SZEB*², ordered the forming of a coalition government with key cabinet seats occupied by the Communists and Social Democrats. **Mátyás Rákosi**, the leader of the Communist Party, became a member of the Cabinet. Being a faithful Muscovite, he continued his long-term plan of transforming Hungary into a Soviet-style society.

The election did nothing to aid the economy. Hungary had the dubious honor of setting a world record for its inflation rate. For the first few months after the war ended, the monthly—not yearly—rate was “only” a few hundredth percent. After that, it escalated rapidly. For example, the cost of a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of bread was:

- 2 pengő in June 1945
- 27 in September 1945
- 310 in December 1945
- 7,000 in February 1946
- 8,000,000 in April 1946
- 360,000,000 in May 1946, and
- 5,850,000,000 in June 1946.

By the summer of 1946, prices doubled every 13 hours. Everyone tried to spend money as fast as they received it. In August 1946, the Parliament changed the country's name from the

² Allied Control Committee. Technically, it also included British, French, and U.S. representatives, but in reality the Soviets made all its decisions.

Kingdom of Hungary to the People's Democracy of Hungary. It announced a new constitution modeled on what the Soviet Union had in 1936. The government ended the skyrocketing inflation by creating a new currency—the *forint*. Fixed prices were set and maintained under strict control for all essential food items. After living with the rapidly decreasing value of the *pengő*, everyone welcomed the new money and hoped to see the end of inflation. The exchange rate for the *forint* was set to one *forint* equaling 4×10^{29} *pengő* (29 zeros after the number four).



Pictures of some Hungarian bills during the 1945–46 inflation. On the left: Top, one trillion; Center, one trillion million; Bottom, one trillion billion. On the right: Street littered with worthless money.

To protect the new Hungarian society from “bourgeois and anti-progressive” activities, the government formed a new organization called *Államvédelmi Osztály* (State Security Agency), commonly referred to as the *ÁVO*. Using procedures similar to the Gestapo and the KGB, the *ÁVO* quickly became feared by the citizens. *ÁVO*'s head office, located at Andrassy Street 60, had belonged to the Arrowcross Party during the fascist era. After updating the torture equipment in the basement, *ÁVO* used the building to interrogate thousands of people during the next decade³.

³ After the Cold War ended in 1989, the building became a museum called the House of Terror. An entire floor was dedicated to the victims, and another one to the Communist perpetrators.

In one of the first publicized *ÁVO* investigations, two former Boy Scouts faced charges of murdering a Soviet officer. After lengthy interrogations, the two defendants admitted their crimes and received death sentences. Several other Scout leaders—including Catholic priests—charged with collaboration were sent to Soviet forced labor camps. After the case ended, the enraged Soviet Command claimed a conspiracy and ordered that the entire Scout organization be abolished. A year later, when I was 11 years old, a socialist version was created, only to be forcibly merged into the Soviet-style Pioneer Youth organization sometime later.

One of my classmates, Tomi Kozma, talked about his Boy Scout activities in fourth grade. I asked Mother to let me join the organization. The Hungarian government had already established the Pioneers, but I liked the Scout uniform much better. Mother's immediate concern was the uniform's cost, so she refused to let me join. I was heartbroken, but knowing our dire financial situation, I did not complain. The next time Braun bácsi visited us, I told him how much I wanted to join the Scouts, and he offered to pay for the uniform. He even found me a pair of shoes to put away my wooden sandals. I was initiated into the local Scout group a few weeks before their two-week summer camp. Shortly after the school year ended, our troop went off to camp.

About a hundred of us rode the train to the city of Szolnok. From there, horse carriages took us to the campsite on the shore of the Tisza River. After the Danube, the Tisza is the second-largest river in Hungary. According to legend, when **Attila the Hun** died in the year 453, his body was buried at a secret location under the Tisza. The river was temporarily diverted, and after his burial, the slaves who did the work were killed by Attila's soldiers. When the guards returned to their camp, they were also executed to protect the secret location. I had heard the story before and was excited to be at that famous river.

The scoutmaster split us into groups of 10 to 15 kids to stay in each tent. After we settled in, they called us for dinner. It was cornmeal—perhaps the only food I did not like because it reminded me of my wartime meals. I did not eat it and went to bed hungry.

The sound of the bugle woke us up early each morning. After roll call and a meager breakfast, we had to cut back the bushes around the camp and collect firewood for the evening campfire. Next, we had playtime at the river. Some older boys were going into the water in two rowboats, and I wanted to join them. "Do you know how to swim?" asked one boy.

"Yes," I lied, not wanting to be left out.

My answer was only a half-lie because I knew how to swim underwater. During visits to my country cousins, we often walked to their nearby Lake Velence. There, I had learned the breaststroke movements and could propel myself—I just could not stay on the surface of the water. So, I did not feel guilty about giving a false statement.

We each had an oar to paddle with, and I enjoyed the new experience until the other boat approached, and its team challenged us to a water fight. Each side splashed water into the opposing boat, trying to sink it. Several of us stood up in the excitement of the war, and our boat capsized. I sank into the deep water and panicked. Instead of trying to reach the boat, I instinctively headed toward the shore. Kicking myself to the surface, I took a deep breath and swam under the water. Repeating the process once or twice, I realized I had reached shallow water. Shaking and scared, I walked out of the water and stayed on the shore for some time.

The other boys recovered the boat and the paddles and laughingly recited the details of the water fight. I did not want to return to the river after my scary experience.

At lunchtime, our leader announced that every boy had to help with kitchen duties at least one day during our stay. He read the names of those assigned to work during the first afternoon. My last name, Besser, put me into the first group. Our task of removing the kernels off dry corncobs turned out to be a difficult one. We began picking off kernels by hand from one end of the cob and scraped it with another cob from which the kernels had already been stripped. Although I had often helped my mom cook, I did not enjoy this tedious job. Playing soccer with my friends at home would have been much more fun.

By the end of the day, I was severely sunburned after spending so much time outside wearing only swim trunks. By bedtime, I had had enough outdoor living and wanted to go home. I began to devise an escape plan.

The next day, I learned from one of the Scout leaders that our camp was located ten kilometers (about six miles) from the Szolnok railroad station. The road to Szolnok passed by our campsite. My plan took shape; I would sneak out at night and walk to the station. I did not have money to buy a train ticket, but I hoped to find a ride home. Another challenge would be passing by the two large dogs guarding the camp. I spent most of the day befriending them and even sacrificed part of my lunch to cement our relationship. I also saved part of my dinner that night to buy their silence during my departure.

With the campfire extinguished, we all headed to our tents. We said good night to each other and went to bed. The sunburn bothered me and helped me to stay awake. I stepped outside when I was sure all the boys were sleeping. Holding some leftover dinner in my hand, I headed toward the outhouse to be sure no one was still out there. The dogs greeted me immediately and gladly took the food from me. The camp was completely peaceful. I returned to the tent, quietly put on my clothes, grabbed my backpack, and walked away. So far, so good!

The bright moonlight helped me to find the dirt road leading to Szolnok. After walking some distance, I became tired and decided to take a short nap. Lying on the soft roadside grass, I fell asleep.

"Wake up, wake up!" I heard and felt someone shaking me. Opening my eyes, I stared into the angry face of one of our Scout leaders. The sun was already up. I must have slept a long time. "Stand up! I'm taking you back to the camp!"

He put me in front of him on a bicycle, and we rode back to our camp. Everybody became aware of my escape when I did not attend the morning roll call. As I learned later, when the leaders realized I was missing, one of them remembered my asking about the distance to Szolnok. He jumped on a bicycle, heading to the city. About halfway there, he saw a little boy sleeping by the roadside. End of my escape!

In a court-martial environment, with the highest-ranking scoutmaster presiding, my sentence was pronounced: I would be sent to the Girl Scout camp to stay until my mother could be notified to pick me up. They would decide later if I could remain a Boy Scout. After that, the Scout leader took me to the other camp on his bicycle. The boys who saw us leaving waved and laughed at me. "Enjoy being with the girls, ha-ha-ha." I felt disgraced. Trying to hide my embarrassment, I did not look at them.

Actually, the other camp was much nicer and had better food. The girls stayed in a school building near Szolnok. I was placed in the room of the head priest. He asked me if I wanted a confession, and I felt much better after clearing my soul. The girls also heard about my adventure, and many of them wanted to know the details. I became somewhat of a celebrity and hoped Mother would not come soon. However, she showed up only a few days later to take me home. She was not in a good mood and told me I would be dismissed from the Scouts. In addition, she reprimanded me at home—the old-fashioned way.



Changes to the Hungarian national emblem during 50 years: 1. Before World War II in 1939. 2. Under the Nazi Arrowcross regime in 1944. 3. After World War II in 1945. 4. The first socialist emblem with the Red Star and worker-peasant symbol was in 1948. 5. During the 1956 revolution, the same as after World War II. 6. A new socialist version two years after the Revolution in 1958. 7. Back to the original form when the Cold War ended in 1989.

The rest of my summer went by without camp. My aunt, Mari néni, visited us regularly. She was unable to find meaningful employment due to her political black mark, so she became a prostitute in a district near us, offering special services to men. She talked about the agonizing time she had spent in prison. Her description of the interrogators and the guards left us with a hatred of those who ran the new regime. They did not sound any different than the fascists we were so glad to be rid of at the end of the war.

In September 1946, I entered fifth grade at the same all-boys school. A single teacher taught all courses except PE and religion during the first four grades. Beginning with the fifth grade, we had different teachers for every course. In addition, we had an *Osztályfőnök* (Class Chief) who also taught Hungarian language and literature. Male teachers taught most courses. Each Monday morning, the Class Chief dedicated the first period to discussing special topics specific to our class.

During the first session, Mr. Hered, our Class Chief, read through the roster and recorded personal information about every student, including the parents' earnings. The two boys ahead of me announced their fathers' income as two to three times higher than my mother's. Not wanting to sound poor, I made up a number in the same ballpark, thinking my mom would never find out what I told him.

When I lined up for the customary free lunch provided by the Swedish government, the teacher on guard looked at his list and turned me away. I told Mother what had happened, and she came to see our Class Chief the next day. After introducing herself as my mother, she asked, "Why didn't my son receive lunch yesterday?"

"He is not qualified because you make too much money," replied Mr. Hered after checking the books.

"I barely earn enough to live on, doing laundry and housework for others."

"Your son gave me a figure of 800 *forint* for last month."

“How could he say that? I made only 300 *forint*.”

They walked to my classroom, and Mr. Hered called me into the hallway. In front of my mother, he asked me to repeat the amount I gave him. Without looking at them, I told him the higher amount. Mother angrily shook me.

“Why would you make up such a lie?” she asked.

“So the other boys would not hear how poor we are,” I whimpered.

“Being poor is nothing to be ashamed about. Being a liar is,” said Mr. Hered.

Then, he told us how he also came from a low-income family. Because he did well in school, he received a full scholarship for university study. “Perhaps you will have similar help one day,” he added. “Now, go back to your class!” I felt a special connection with him after hearing what he revealed about his background.

That night, I received a long lecture from Mother. She pointed out that in the new socialist system, poor workers had the same rights as everyone else. The former rich became the pariahs. The other boys would respect me if I received good grades. Although I promised her not to be ashamed of our financial situation, throughout my childhood, it always bothered me. I became even more determined not to be poor for the rest of my life.

Our math teacher, Mr. Bordás, had an imposing large body, curly bushy hair, and a booming voice. The first day, when someone displeased him by giving the wrong answer to his question, he yelled, “You’re lucky not to be born in early-day Greece. They would have tossed you over the rocks of Taygetos.” Seeing our puzzled expressions, he explained, “According to Greek mythology, ancient Spartans disposed of imperfect newborns by throwing them from the mountain of Taygetos onto a rocky cliff below.” From that day, every student feared him.

Thanks to Braun bácsi’s early tutoring, math had always been easy for me. As a result, I quickly became our new math teacher’s favorite. During the first week of school, he appointed me to be the homework checker. I inspected every student’s notebook daily and reported anyone not completing the assignment. I felt honored to be selected, but at the same time, I had concerns that the boys might feel I was a snitch. However, they understood my task and never held it against me.

All students in Hungarian schools stood up when the teacher entered the room. After they were seated, the teacher would randomly call on three to four students to verbally review the material covered in the previous class period. In addition, they might also be asked to show their homework assignment. Then, the teacher lectured for the rest of the period. Students rarely asked questions. Unannounced written tests could come any day on everything we covered during the semester.

Reading books became one of my favorite hobbies. When I could borrow a good book from a friend or take one home from the library, I read it as fast as possible. My friend Kozma lent me the story of the Apache Chief Winnetou; it became one of my all-time favorites. The adventures of Winnetou and his white friend Old Shatterhand—his name came from his ability to knock a person out with a single blow—fascinated me. Kozma and I frequently played in his family’s large apartment, impersonating those two characters. We made our script as we played and always had lots of fun.

After the first week of school, Mr. Hered asked us to elect four class officers—a president and three councilmen. He handed out slips of paper and asked each of us to write the name of

one boy for office. After collecting our votes, he wrote the results on the blackboard. To my surprise, I saw my name listed on the board. I became a councilman! I could hardly wait to tell Mother and Braun bácsi the news the next time he visited us. They were both very proud of me.

Mr. Hered also selected me to be a *Vigyázó* (Class Monitor). My task was maintaining order when a teacher could not be in class. If any of the boys misbehaved, I would report it to Mr. Hered so he could discipline them later. On the first such occasion, several boys began to clown around. They would not remain in their seats. I did not want to start my *Vigyázó* career by ratting on so many classmates, so I offered to tell them a Cowboys and Indians story. The idea worked; they sat down and listened. I repeated some of the adventures Kozma and I made up during our war games—with lots of added color. With one exception, they all calmed down. The strongest boy in our class promptly silenced the lone troublemaker. After that, I had a perfect audience.

The next day, Mr. Hered asked for the names of the boys who had not behaved.

"Nobody, sir. No problem during the entire period," I replied proudly.

"Did they threaten you if you reported them?"

"No, I told them a story, and they all listened."

"What kind of story?"

"About Winnetou and Old Shatterhand."

Knowing that we had a couple of troublemakers, my teacher did not look convinced but accepted my explanation. However, during my subsequent supervision, he stepped into the class briefly. Seeing the boys sitting quietly, he was assured that I had told the truth. My job was safe, and I enjoyed the additional prestige it gave me.



**The book about my American heroes:
Winnetou and Old Shatterhand.**

A few weeks later, I became sick and did not go to school for several days. During my stay at home, I made up new Indian stories to tell the boys. At the first open class period after my return, just as I began to talk, one boy interrupted me. "We want Antall to tell us a story instead of you!"

I was flabbergasted. Antall's family had recently moved from the country to Budapest, and he spoke with a heavy dialect. *How would a country boy have something interesting to tell?*

Antall courteously asked me if it was all right for him to tell his story. I reluctantly nodded and watched as he confidently walked to the front of the class. He proceeded to tell about *Kácsa the Gypsy*. To my surprise, his story was hilarious. The boys laughed while listening to the misadventures of the clumsy half-witted gypsy. I realized sadly that I was outclassed. Antall became the new storyteller and kept that privilege for the rest of the year. My brief storytelling career was over.

One of my friends, Gyuri Rottman, lived in the building next to ours. Gyuri and I attended the same school. One day, walking home, he asked, "Do you want to play Ping-Pong with me?"

In those days, Hungary had some of the best players in the world. However, I had never seen anyone play the game. "I don't know how to play," I said.

"Don't worry. I'll teach you. It's easy to learn."

"Where would we play?"

"My big brother is a waiter at Emke⁴. They have Ping-Pong tables in their billiard room. They are not used in the afternoons."

"OK, I'll go."

We dropped off our school bags at home and headed to Emke. After entering the restaurant, Gyuri led me through a side door into a large hall. Next to several billiard tables stood two green tables with nets strung across their centers. Gyuri picked up two rubber-covered paddles and handed me one. He explained the rules of the game, and we began to play.

Gradually, I learned how to return the ball to the other side. Gyuri was a patient teacher, and I enjoyed playing with him. Our fun lasted for several weeks. One day, his brother Feri joined us after finishing his afternoon shift. "Let me show you how this game should be played," he said, taking the paddle from Gyuri.

Playing with Feri was no fun at all. He served the ball with a wicked spin. When I managed to return it, he would smash it back so hard that I had no chance to touch it. He beat me 21-0.

"You are just like my brother. I could beat even you with my left hand," he boasted after his victory. With that, he left us. I developed an instant dislike of him.

"He is such a show-off," said Gyuri after his brother left. "I would love to beat him one day, but he is so much better."

A few days later, Gyuri came to see me at school. "I know someone who plays Ping-Pong in a club. He told me that we could join and learn to play well."

/NOTE: The Socialist system subsidized sports, providing free equipment and coaching./

I was excited to hear the news. "Perhaps then we could beat your brother. Let's go there."

Gyuri learned when the boys' team practiced, and we went to the club. Many Ping-Pong tables were set up in the basement; most were occupied by young boys and girls playing. After finding the coach, we told him about our desire to join. He hit a few balls against each of us first. Then, he assigned us to one of his associates for practice.

After several months of coaching, Gyuri and I had our first opportunity to play doubles in a tournament. We made it through several rounds until a superior team eliminated us. Despite the loss, we left happily, discussing the details of our victories.

One day, I saw Feri on the street. "I heard about you and my little brother playing Ping-Pong in a club. Perhaps now you could even score a point or two against me," he said condescendingly.

"Let's find out," was my brave reply.

⁴ A prestigious restaurant located at the corner of two major boulevards, only a few blocks from where we lived.

We went to his restaurant the next day, with Gyuri tagging along. When Feri and I hit some warm-up shots, I realized he was no longer the better player. After we began the game and I took the lead, Feri's confident smirk faded. Near the end of our first set, when I led by several points, he suddenly put down his paddle, saying, "I have to go to work now." He handed the paddle to Gyuri, saying, "You can finish the game." With that, he left the room.

Gyuri and I began to laugh. Obviously, his big brother would not tolerate a loss of face. After that day, Feri would not play against either of us again.

Ping-pong had been interesting, but it did not measure up to playing soccer. After beating Feri, my interest in Ping-Pong began to fade. At the end of the winter, I told Gyuri and the coach that I would leave the team at the end of the season⁵.

Mother continued working long hours and never seemed to have time to enjoy herself. Éva and I tried to make my mom's life easier by doing household chores. We also thought that if Mother could meet a suitable man and marry him, she would not have to work so much. We kept our eyes open for likely prospects. Our apartment building did not have any suitable candidates. Braun bácsi had already met a lady who had captured his heart.

During our after-school walk with Csöpi, a man carrying a camera approached us. He asked if he could take a picture of our dog. We agreed and went to the park with him, where he photographed Csöpi. Because Éva and I asked so many questions about his camera, he invited us to his apartment to see how pictures were developed. He switched on a dim red light in his small, messy kitchen and processed the film. We had not seen anything like that before. He gave us several prints and offered to take more pictures on another day. We were impressed! On our way home, we decided to become matchmakers. Our new friend seemed to be perfect for our purpose.

We could hardly wait until evening to tell Mother about the wonderful man we had met. We asked her to come with us to take a picture of the three of us together. To our surprise, she agreed. A few days later, we called on the man. He received us warmly and had us pose in front of his camera. After complimenting Mother on her nice children, he made tea for us and developed the pictures. It turned out that he came from a village near where my mother was born. The two of them had a good conversation about that part of the country. The visit turned out much better than Éva and I had expected. Our hopes were running high.

Before leaving, Éva commented on how much neater his kitchen would look if he had a wife. The man laughed and said, "I was married, but my wife left me. However, I still hope she will return one day." That answer was not what my sister and I hoped to hear.

On our way home, Éva revealed our scheme to Mother. She laughed, "I'll never marry. It is hard enough to take care of the two of you!" she said. "Please don't try to fix me up anymore."

In fifth grade, our grading method changed to copy the Soviet system. We now had seven levels: "1" represented failure, and "7" was the best. The students' grade averages were continuously posted on our class bulletin board. I had the third-highest average in the class. Freehand drawing and history were my weak points. I admired the boys with the talent to draw

⁵ Although my Ping-Pong skills have gradually become rusty, I still like the game. When the opportunity arises, I am always ready to play.

almost any object or people's faces! No matter how hard I tried, my drawings always looked crude compared to theirs. History turned me off because our teacher spoke in a monotone and demanded that we memorize many dates. My mother was not very impressed with my grades until she saw my ranking in the class. Then she accepted my performance.



Three pictures taken by the photographer with whom Éva and I tried to “fix up” Mother in 1946.

A well-to-do Jewish man helped by Mother during the Nazi era had opened a fancy boys' sports camp soon after the war. As a gesture of appreciation, he invited me for a two-week stay after the school year ended in June 1947. Recalling my unfavorable Boy Scout camping experience, I was reluctant to go. After Mother heard about the high cost others had to pay to attend, she convinced me it would be a good place. She took me to the camp on the *Sváb* mountain of Budapest.

The *Fodor Sports Camp* turned out to be a genuinely high-class operation. Although we all slept in tents, we had comfortable cots and a small closet to stow our belongings. The food was plentiful and excellent. The camp provided all types of entertainment and physical recreation. We played soccer on grass instead of dirt. They had a nice pool, and I learned to swim on the water's surface. In the evenings, we could participate in talent shows. I sang a solo in one of the songs I knew. The others liked it.

When I first reported to the soccer field and the coach saw that I did not have gym shoes, he gave me a pair to keep. I told him about my desire to become a soccer player.

"What position do you play?" he asked.

"I've always played goalie, but I'd love to play forward."

"There is only one goalie on the team but ten other players. You have a better chance to make a team by playing on the field," he advised me.

I began to play the forward position. By the end of the second week, I could dribble and shoot the ball quite well, although I tried to avoid heading it. Then, the coach showed me how to hit the ball with my forehead instead of letting the ball hit my head. It made a big difference, and I had no problem after that.

I loved the camp and wished to stay there the entire summer like the other kids from well-to-do families. But with sadness at the end of the second week, I had to leave all my new friends.



At the end of my stay at the Fodor Camp, Éva came with Mother to take me home.

Two tailors who lived in our building plied their trade from their apartment, so interaction with them was convenient. They were avid sports fans and frequently attended live sports events. The three of us rooted for the same soccer team, so they informed me about some of the games they watched. They sometimes played chess outside their front door at lunchtime during the summer. One day, when I walked by their place, I asked if they would let me watch. They agreed, and I observed them making their moves.

The tailors were not very good players. Being only 13 years old, I did not know that chess spectator etiquette required utmost silence. The first time one of them made a careless mistake that led to losing a piece, I cried, "Oh no!" At first, they ignored my comments. However, after several similar unsolicited disapprovals, one of the tailors asked me, "Do you play chess?"

"Yes, I do," I replied.

"When we finish, do you want to play one of us?"

"Yes, I'd like to."

After their game, I took the loser's place, and we began a new game. It did not take me too long to checkmate my opponent. When the other tailor stepped in for the next game, he also lost. They asked if I would come back to play again on the following day. I agreed. My ego was riding sky-high. I had beaten two grownups! I had won chess games for the first time—something I could never achieve when playing against *Braun bácsi*.

During the next week, I played with each of them repeatedly and always won. Then, one day, they told me they were too busy to play. I tried several times again later, but the answer was always "No." Eventually, I gave up, figuring they could not tolerate losing to a kid. I would still see them occasionally to hear the details of recent soccer games.

The second postwar election

That same summer, the Soviet-trained Muscovites stepped up their efforts to grab power. The Secretary of the Communist Party, Rákosi, began implementing his "salami technique" by slicing away all foes—and occasionally potential rivals⁶. One of the leaders of the Smallholders Party was accused, tried, and convicted for reactionary activities. Two others managed to

⁶ A long-time Hungarian Communist, László Rajk—a former Cabinet member and organizer of the *ÁVO*—received a death sentence in 1949 after being charged with being a Western spy. He was hanged and buried in an unmarked grave. In October 1956, his reputation was restored. He was cleared of all charges and reburied in the presence of 100,000 Hungarian mourners.

escape to the West. The weakened Smallholders then broke into several smaller factions (FKgP, DNP, MFP, and FMDP, marked with asterisks in the list below.)

The Prime Minister dissolved the Parliament, and a new election was held in August 1947. After disqualifying many formerly eligible voters, the Soviet-backed Communists introduced a new election rule: voters could place ballots at any location outside their residential district. On election day, a large number of Communists were allegedly transported by trains and trucks to many different places to vote repeatedly. After counting the votes, their party won over the fragmented former Smallholders (22.5 percent vs. 15.3 percent). Could the Smallholders remain together, they would have received over 50 percent of the votes, similar to the 1945 election results—despite the Communists’ stuffing of the ballot boxes.

Party	Percentage of votes
Communists (MKP)	22.5
Democratic Folks (DNP)	16.5*
Smallholders (FKgP)	15.3*
Social Democrats (MSzDP)	14.8
Hungarian Independents (MFP)	13.4*
Peasants (NPP)	8.3
Independent Hungarian Democrats (FMDP)	5.3*
All others	3.9

Following the election, the Communists and one of the Smallholders fragment parties charged each other with voter fraud. Predictably, the Communists prevailed, and the other party’s votes were excluded entirely. As a result, the three socialist parties—Communists, Social Democrats, and Peasants—reached an absolute majority. No longer requiring support from the Smallholders, the socialist group formed a new government effectively controlled by the Communists.

Shortly after the 1947 election, the new government nationalized all businesses with over 100 employees, including mines, banks, and transportation. When the United States established the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe’s war damage, the Hungarian government followed Moscow’s instruction and refused to accept the Plan’s conditions⁷. The Soviet Union did not want to allow any economic connection with the West. Instead of relying on capitalist aid, the Communist Party created its own Three-Year Plan, introducing central planning in Hungary. Ignoring market demands, government economists would decide what and how much to produce.

The Three-Year Plan emphasized the development of heavy industries, such as steel and shipbuilding, rather than consumer goods. In the following years, shortages of everyday necessities became prevalent. Recognizing those needs, small businesses began to flourish by providing the population with goods ignored by the central planners. The parents of one of my sixth-grade classmates, Várnai, belonged to this new entrepreneurial group. They

⁷ Huge long-term, low-interest aids were only offered to countries without any external political or economical control. Sixteen Western European countries benefited by participating in the Plan.

manufactured baby carriages in a shop near our house. Their well-built product outclassed the state-produced strollers.

Várnai was a big boy with a playful spirit. He did not like to study and had already repeated fifth grade. In the sixth grade, he was still doing poorly. One day, our Class Chief asked me if I would be willing to tutor Várnai because his two previous adult tutors had quit.

“If you do homework with him every afternoon, his father will pay you. You can also have snacks with him,” he told me.

“He is stronger than I am. What can I do if he only wants to goof around?” I asked, knowing Várnai’s behavior only too well. During my storytelling in the previous year, he was the only one who would not sit quietly.

“You go to their shop and tell his father. He will take care of it.”

The offer—having free food and some money—sounded tempting. At the same time, I did not want to give up my regular afternoon soccer games. After I came home from the Fodor camp, the other boys in our park allowed me to play field positions. Occasionally, I even scored goals! Perhaps in a year or two, I would be good enough to try out for *Fradi*’s youth team—I hoped.

“Could I just spend the early part of the afternoon with him? If he behaves, we could finish our homework in about two hours,” I bargained.

“Well, try it for two weeks and let me know how it works.” With that, he dismissed me.

Várnai knew about the plan because he was not surprised when I told him we would walk to his place the next day after school. Trying to convince him to do homework, however, was not easy. Eventually, we reached a compromise—work 15 minutes and play 15 minutes—and completed our work. Our recreation time focused on *gombfoci* (*button soccer*), a unique, inexpensive Hungarian table game played with clothes buttons. We constructed “players” by gluing progressively smaller buttons on top of a large one. Instead of a ball, we used shirt buttons. Filing down one side of each player at an angle allowed us to shoot the ball over the heads of the opponent’s players. The game could be played on any smooth surface. Initially, the two teams were lined up in soccer formation, just like in a live game on a soccer field. The two “coaches” took turns snapping their players in an attempt to strike the “ball.” The object was to shoot the ball past the goalie—made up of four or five large buttons glued together.

Várnai excelled at *gombfoci* and played it regularly against other kids. He had access to his father’s workshop and built two small goal cages with backs covered with hairnets. He named his team after *Vasas*, one of the top soccer teams in the country. In a few days, he helped me build a team of eleven players. I called my team *Fradi*, after my favorite club. Next, he took me to the workshop to fabricate two goals. After that, we matched our two teams against each other. Initially, his team clobbered mine, but after I gained some experience, we became more evenly matched.

Through this shared interest, Várnai and I developed a mutual respect. He no longer looked at me as a study policeman. I realized that rather than being a big dummy, he had special abilities; he was very handy with tools and could draw freehand far better than I could. Our afternoon study sessions became more productive, and his class performance gradually improved. His father paid me well for my work. In exchange, I had to give up my regular

afternoon soccer games. Because we had school Mondays through Saturdays, I could play only on Sundays.



Since the 1980s, Gombfoci has become an international competitive game. Instead of the buttons we used during my childhood, colored plastic disks are the players. Twenty nations participated in the last World Championship in 2009, where Hungary won both the individual and team championships.

Right after Christmas vacation, Várnai told me that his father's business had outgrown the shop they owned. Their operation had already moved to another building on the outskirts of Budapest. The family was relocating to a house near their small factory, and he would switch to a school near their new home. We both felt sad about the change, and I promised to visit him after he moved.

Our school custodian flooded the building's small courtyard each winter, turning it into an ice-skating rink. Albert had skates that clamped to the bottom of his shoes. He already knew how to skate and invited me to go with him one afternoon. "You may borrow my skates while I rest," he offered. "I'll also show you how to use them."

I could not resist his offer and went along with him. Inside the school hallway, he clamped the skates on his shoes and walked into the courtyard. I watched him through the window with amazement. Albert was not very good at sports but seemed to float around effortlessly when he stepped on the ice. After a while, he came in to rest. I told him how impressed I was to see him skate so well.

"I learned a long time ago when we lived in Belgium. Now it is your turn," he said while removing the skates from his shoes. He showed me how to clamp them on. "Now, stand up and try to walk," was his instruction.

What had looked so easy turned out to be more difficult than I imagined. Unlike Albert's boot-like high shoes, my regular street shoes did not offer any support at the ankles. I had trouble keeping my feet from twisting. Eventually, I managed to walk through the door and step on the ice. That is when I learned how slippery ice is.

After several falls, two of my classmates came to my rescue. They each held one of my hands and helped me to stay on my feet. They showed me the basic movements and then let me go independently. I gradually made some progress, yet by the time I returned the skates to Albert, I had probably spent more time sitting or lying on the ice than standing. Still, it was an enjoyable experience. By the end of the winter, I could skate reasonably well.

When spring arrived, I stopped by the tailors' place to inquire about a soccer game. One said casually, "We haven't played chess for a long time. Do you have time to play?"

Here is my chance to show off again, I thought. "Of course, I'd like to."

I sat down with one of them to play. In a short time, I found myself in deep trouble. He was making surprisingly clever moves and took my queen. Soon, the game was over. My loss confused me. Next, the other tailor asked for a game. He also beat me easily. The first defeat I could accept, but losing two games in a row to people I could always beat before was too much. I felt astonished and demoralized.

"How did you learn to play so well?" I finally asked.

They laughed and told me that during the previous fall, they had watched several games of the World Grand Masters tournament held in Budapest. After that, they joined a chess team where they analyzed games and studied the different strategies used by the Masters. They named various openings and moves that I had never heard about.

I considered joining a chess club to improve my game. However, choosing between becoming a champion soccer player or a Master chess player was easy; I continued putting my time and energy into playing soccer.

When Várnai moved, in addition to losing a friend, I also lost my steady income from tutoring. Although I gave most of my earnings to Mother, the amount I kept enabled me to buy a real soccer ball and occasionally watch movies. My favorites were Westerns and adventures like *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I had to give up such luxuries. As a consolation, owning a real ball increased my status among the other boys on the playground. The ball's owner always set the game rules and decided who plays. That spring, my ball helped me play any position I wanted.

While I was concentrating on soccer, the 1948 Summer Olympics took place in London. Once again, the Hungarian team did well, tying for the third-highest number of gold medals among all nations. We did not have a radio at home to hear the news. When one of our neighbors, Galambos bácsi, saw me carrying a soccer ball, he asked if I would want to listen to the evening news broadcast from the Olympics on his radio. Of course, I gladly accepted his offer.

Rank	Nation	Gold	Silver	Bronze
1	 United States	38	27	19
2	 Sweden	16	11	17
3	 France	10	6	13
4	 Hungary	10	5	12
5	 Italy	8	11	8
6	 Finland	8	7	5
7	 Turkey	6	4	2
8	 Czechoslovakia	6	2	3
9	 Switzerland	5	10	5
10	 Denmark	5	7	8

Medal standings of the 1948 London Olympics. The most notable Hungarian winner was Károly Takács in pistol target shooting. He was an international competitor prior to World War II, when he lost his right arm in a grenade explosion. After the war he learned to shoot with his left hand and became an Olympic champion.

József Galambos lived in an apartment across the courtyard from us. Entering his bedroom, I saw an enormous china cabinet full of huge trophies. In addition to pictures showing runners, the walls were covered with framed medals. I thought I'd entered a sports museum.

Seeing my stunned expression, he revealed he had been a world-class marathon runner in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He was a four-time winner of the annual Kassa⁸ Marathon, the oldest race in Europe and the second oldest in the world (after the Boston Marathon). When I asked how he could run 42 kilometers without stopping, he smiled and said, "It required lots of practice." After hearing of my desire to become a soccer player, he told me, "Becoming a good runner will help you to do better in any sport." I listened to his advice and started running regularly that evening.

The perimeter of our apartment building's inner walkway was 80 meters long. I began to train by running one kilometer (1,000 meters, or 0.62 miles) distances. I ran twelve and a half hours around the walkway every night before bed and timed myself using our alarm clock. As the months went by, Galambos bácsi was very pleased with my progress and encouraged me to keep up my training. Neither he nor I knew then how his simple advice would change my life later. Among other benefits, becoming a runner enabled me to attend college!



A



B

Inner courtyard of the building where I had lived from 1942 through 1956. Our small apartment on the third floor, having only a kitchen and a bedroom, is marked with a square pointed by arrow "A." We lived there until 1949. Then we moved into the larger unit shown in the right picture. The kitchen door entry of the larger apartment on the third floor is also shown by arrow "B."

⁸ A former Hungarian city that became part of Czechoslovakia under the name of Košice after the Trianon Peace treaty of World War I. After the Cold War ended in 1989, Czechoslovakia split into two parts: The Czech Republic and Slovakia. Košice is now part of Slovakia.

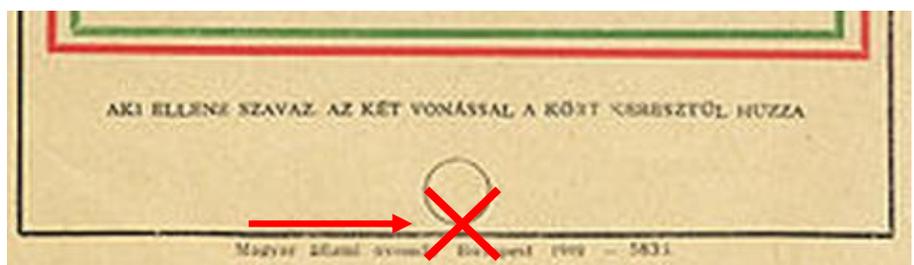
Chapter 8: The Second Postwar Election

During the summer of 1948, the Communist leaders announced that too many political parties slowed the country's rebuilding process. They forced the Social Democrats to merge with the Communist Party to create the Hungarian Workers' Party (*Magyar Dolgozók Pártja*, or *MDP*). Although some of the former Social Democrat leaders received titles in the new party, the actual power remained in the hands of the top Muskovites: Rákosi, Gerő, Kádár, and Marosán. Next, two other parties—Smallholders and Peasants—were invited to team with the *MDP* to form the "Independent Coalition."

In the 1949 election, ballots were cast in a unique form: If a voter approved the Coalition's candidates—running without any opposition—he or she would simply drop the ballot into a ballot box. To oppose the Coalition, the voter must mark the ballot in a designated place (see below) and then drop it into the ballot box. Not surprisingly, the Coalition received 95.6 percent approval. All significant posts in the new government remained in the hands of the Communists.

The Three-Year Plan placed prime importance on the development of heavy industries, creating a need for a labor force. Workers were resettled from villages to the new cities constructed next to huge steel and cement factory complexes. Wages were kept low by continuously increasing production quotas. Selected factory workers who developed improved production methods received national commendations and became the new heroes of the Party.

Following Soviet agriculture, the government launched a campaign to create collective farms. Although the land reform provided acreage to many new owners, they could not produce crops efficiently without machines. Their only alternative was to join the collective farms. Because so many men had moved to factory centers, women played an increasingly important role in agriculture. Their work was glorified in the socialist songs we often heard on the radio.



Actual ballot from the 1949 election, showing the names of Rákosi, Gerő, and Marosán, along with other Communist candidates. The picture on the right side shows the enlarged bottom section. The instruction states, "To vote against the candidates, cross two lines through the circle."

Of course, asking for a pen instead of dropping the ballot into the designated box was a dead giveaway of the voter's political standing—not a safe practice in those times.

The next step in establishing a new order was to diminish the role of the Catholic Church by nationalizing religious schools and eliminating religious classes in public schools. Priests who presented opposition quickly found themselves in serious trouble. The most notable church leader of Hungary, Cardinal Mindszenty, was arrested and tortured into signing a paper confessing his crimes—owning Western currency and conspiring against the State. Instead of the defense attorney he requested, the Party assigned a Communist lawyer to him for his “window trial” that could be heard through the public broadcast system. Rather than make a martyr of him, the judge sentenced him to life imprisonment. He remained in confinement until the 1956 revolution.

During the first week of seventh grade, our Class Chief informed us that our history teacher was being replaced. Because I had never liked the former teacher, who spoke in monotones, I looked forward to having a new person teaching the class.

The new teacher lectured much better, but he was a devoted Communist — determined to shape us into future Party members. On his first day, he wanted to know who had joined the Pioneers. He congratulated those who put up their hands. Then, he sternly lectured the non-members about the importance of participating in rebuilding our country. As he explained, we must all go through three progressive steps: Pioneers, Working Youth Association (*DISZ*), and the ultimate — becoming a member of the Communist Party! He proudly displayed his Party membership book, which he had received in the early 1920s. For the remainder of the class period, he talked about the hardship he had faced during the Horthy regime, including imprisonment for his beliefs.

Although his adventures sounded interesting, I disliked being pressured to join the Pioneer group. Yes, there were definite benefits of joining, such as participating in popular group activities with girls in the parks and on Margaret Island. Selected Pioneers could also work as conductors of the *Úttörő Vasút* (Pioneer Cog Rail) operated on one of the Buda hills. Perhaps if they had had a soccer team, I would have considered joining, but I decided to stay away from the group. Instead, I spent my free time playing soccer on our playground.

Our math teacher, Mr. Bordás, also taught physics in the seventh grade. One of our projects was for every student to create a crystal-detector radio. The simple receiver had only a few parts: two capacitors (one fixed and one variable), a coil, a crystal detector, a headphone, and wires to connect the parts. Such a radio had no electrical power supply and could only generate low-volume sounds to be heard through headphones. Usually, it could only pick up the strongest local radio station.

We did not have electronic parts stores like Radio Shack, so I obtained all the components at the flea market. Then, I searched for a suitable small box to assemble the radio. Although Mother doubted I could build something that would receive radio programs, she suggested using a wooden cigar box. The tobacco store owner laughed when he heard my intended purpose but gave me an empty cigar box. The next task was to punch holes into the box to mount the components.

Since I had no tools besides one screwdriver and a hammer, I headed to Cousin Pista’s place, knowing that his father had fabricated his fishing poles and owned various hand tools.

Pista told me he also needed to build a radio for his physics class. We exchanged our design ideas. He planned to construct the circuit on a piece of wood so the wiring would be visible to impress everybody. My idea was to hide the wires inside the box. We each followed our plan. He helped me drill holes into the top of my cigar box and attach the components. I took my project home and completed the wiring there, eager to try it out.

The last task was to erect an antenna. Ideally, it should have been stretched outside our apartment. Radio owners in Hungary, however, had to pay license fees. The existence of an antenna wire could be detected by the mailman, whose duties included the collection of monthly payments. Therefore, I hung my antenna across the ceiling in our bedroom to hide it from prying eyes.

I finally had everything together. After putting on the earphones—my heart pounding with excitement—I began to tune the variable capacitor until I heard the faint sound of a man talking. Reception in a steel and cement building was limited, but I could listen to the broadcast of Budapest-1. My radio worked!!!

I quickly passed the earphones to Éva, who was amazed. We switched the earphones back and forth for a while. Then I ran over to *Galambos bácsi* to brag about my success. He looked at my radio but was not nearly as impressed as Éva. Still, he commented that perhaps I could even build a set like his one day.



Example of a crystal detector radio.

Was amazed at the miracle I had produced. She opened a bottle of canned fruit at dinner as a special treat. Every summer, she bottled fruit for the winter. This fruit was to be opened only on special occasions.

Mother never found out that occasionally, Éva and I secretly pricked tiny pinholes into the jar's cellophane covers near the edge to keep them undetectable. The presence of air led to a spoiling process. During occasional inspections, to Mother's dismay, she would find the contents starting to spoil. While saying to herself, "I don't understand why this is happening," she discarded the top layer and served us the rest. We always acted very sympathetically while eating the special treats. I only hope Mother will forgive me when she looks down from heaven and learns what dirty tricks we played on her.

One day in school, after Mr. Bordás listened to my homework report, he said jokingly, "You should eat more because you look like a *halálmadár* (death bird)." The class broke out in laughter, but I was highly embarrassed. One of the boys, Müller, whom I frequently reported for having incorrect answers on his homework, began to bug me by calling me *halálmadár*. I hated that name and asked him to stop it. My request made it worse—he would do it even

more. After taking it for a couple of days, I had had enough. When he began to torment me again, I tackled him in the hallway and pushed him to the ground. Although he was much bigger, my surprise attack allowed me to pin him down. The boys immediately surrounded us, shouting, "Fight, fight!" Müller tried to free himself, but I managed to hold him down.

The shouting stopped suddenly. As I proudly looked up to receive an acknowledgment of my victory, I saw our Class Chief staring at me. He pulled me away from Müller and had us write notes to our parents about the fight. At home, I explained to Mother what had happened, including the name-calling. Although she scolded me for starting a fight, she went to see Mr. Hered the next day to explain the circumstances. I don't know what happened after their meeting, but Müller stopped harassing me.

Another exciting part of seventh grade was listening to our PE teacher, a former Olympic runner, tell thrilling stories about his running career. "Competing at the Olympics is the highest honor any athlete can reach," he said. "I wish we had a track so I could teach all of you how to run properly. Next year, however, I will introduce you to high jumping since we can do that in our gym."

Hearing his Olympic tales fired me up. If I could make the Hungarian soccer team one day, I would have a chance to be at the Olympics. Our national team was one of the best in the world, so I could come home with a gold medal. The vision of our team listening to the Hungarian National Anthem from the top of the victory stand inspired me to play as often as possible. One of my classmates, Gábor Benedek, and I usually played on the same team. Gábor played center forward, and my position was right-inside-forward¹. We frequently passed the ball between us while dodging around the opposing team's defenders. With time, we became a high-scoring forward combination.

Cousin Pista began to swim competitively, and within a few months, he won the 100-meter breaststroke at a meet. His father was very proud of Pista's accomplishment and asked me, "Are you part of a sports team?"

Embarrassed, I replied, "Not yet, but I will be playing on the *Fradí* soccer team one day."

He laughed at me, "Your legs are too skinny to play soccer. You'll never be a good player. An athlete must be strong—like my son."

I did not have a good comeback, but I was determined to disprove him one day. Pista invited me to join his swim club, but the coach only wanted kids who already knew how to swim well. Trying to help me, Pista taught me both the breaststroke and the front crawl. But after my near-drowning experience at the Boy Scout camp, I never felt comfortable in water. I decided to stay with soccer.

Tomi's elderly Jewish grandmother, to whom I had attempted to teach reading, continued to share an apartment in our building with her sister and two Nazi women. After her sister passed away, Grandma usually locked herself in her bedroom because she was afraid of being alone with the Nazis. At times, however, she needed access to the kitchen. To reach the kitchen, she

¹ Originally, soccer teams used offense-oriented 1-2-3-5 formations: one goalie, two fullbacks, three center-halfbacks, and five forwards. In the 1990s, the game became more defensive, leading to the 1-4-4-2 form: a goalie, four defense, four midfielders, and only two forwards, often leading to low-scoring games.

had to walk through the living room that served as the bedroom for the other two women. Fearing for her safety, she asked my mother if Éva could stay with her during the summer for protection. Grandma explained that due to her heart problem, she probably had only a few months to live, but she did not want to die in a hospital. By legally registering Éva as a resident of the other apartment, Mother would be able to claim half of it after Grandma's death.

My mother fully understood Grandma's concern and had Éva move to the other apartment after finishing the eighth grade. The arrangement worked fine for about two months. One morning, however, Éva ran to our apartment screaming hysterically, "Come quick, Grandma died!" Rushing to the bedroom, we found Grandma in bed, motionless and cold. Mother ran to a neighbor who had a telephone and called for an ambulance. When help arrived, they informed us that the elderly lady had been dead for several hours.

Although I had seen dead bodies during the war, this time was different. For the first time, I knew the person who had died. I was numb with disbelief because we had just talked the day before. She had always been very kind to me, and I felt a special attachment to her. I wondered if Jewish people would go to heaven after they died. A sobbing Éva told us that during the night, Grandma had complained about chest pain and asked for her heart medication. After Éva placed the pills under her tongue, the pain had subsided. Similar incidents had happened previously, and Éva had gone back to sleep. That morning, however, the lack of Grandma's snoring alarmed her. Her fears were confirmed when she reached over and touched the motionless, cold body.

After the funeral, Mother approached the government housing bureau and asked them to allow the three of us to move into the larger bedroom-living room apartment. In exchange, the Nazi sisters could move into our one-bedroom place. Her request received a surprisingly fast approval. We were happy to move into the larger unit the next day. The sisters were not speaking with us but probably liked the new arrangement. Even though our former apartment had only one small bedroom next to the kitchen, it gave them total privacy without anyone walking through their room.

The entrance to our new apartment opened into the kitchen. At the other end, we entered the living room and continued through the bedroom. On the other side of the bedroom, two additional doors led to a WC and a small storage area. Altogether, we had about twice the floor space of the previous apartment. I slept on the daybed in the living room while Éva and Mother used our two beds in the bedroom. We placed the small stove from the old apartment in the living room, hoping it would heat all the rooms. As in our previous place, we did not have a water heater or facilities to bathe. Nevertheless, the three of us felt like we had moved into a mansion!

In addition to having more space, I especially appreciated our indoor toilet. No longer would I have to walk a hundred feet and share the smelly public stall in a dark, dingy room with our neighbors. I particularly hated those long walks during cold winters.

Both of our rooms had two double windows looking into the rear courtyard. When I first stuck my head out one of the windows from our living room, I could see my friend, Gyuri Rottman, in the building next to ours. Although Gyuri and I no longer played Ping-Pong regularly, we occasionally played *gombfoci* in their apartment.

"Szervusz Gyuri! Looks like we are neighbors," I shouted.

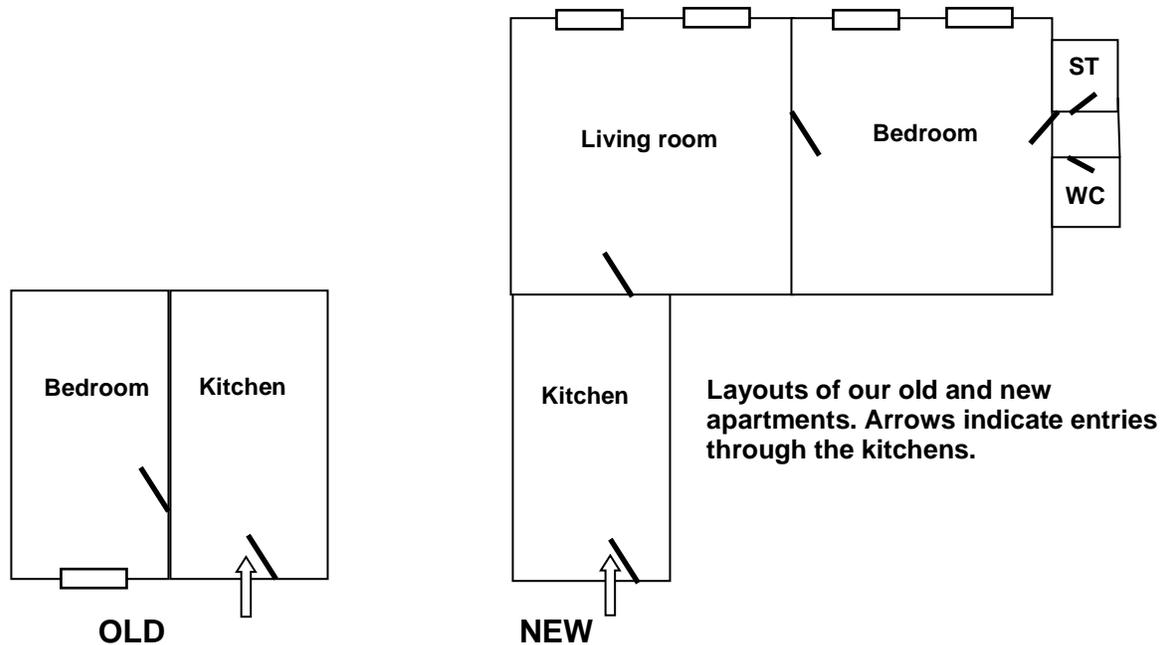
He looked around and eventually saw me. "I didn't know you lived there."

"We just moved into this apartment. Looks like you and I can talk to each other this way."

Éva heard our shouting and came to the window. "Who's down there?"

"My friend Gyuri, in the next building. Take a look."

Éva stood beside me and stuck her head out the window just as Gyuri's older brother exited their apartment. Éva had not met Feri before, so I introduced them to each other. We chatted with the Rottmans for a little longer and finally said goodbye.



"Gyuri has a good-looking brother," commented Éva as we closed the window. "How old is he?"

"He's about seventeen; he works as a waiter at the Emke restaurant." I decided not to tell her about my dislike of Feri.

A few days later, Éva told me that she had accidentally met Feri on the street, and they had walked together to the park. He worked split shifts during lunch and dinner, giving him free time in the early mornings and late afternoons. The two of them began to see each other at our apartment while Éva ironed the clothes brought home by Mother. Most of those times, I went out to play soccer.

One evening, before Mother came home, Éva made me swear to keep the secret she would tell me. I agreed, ready to hear her news.

"Feri kissed me this afternoon."

"How did that happen?"

"He brought over a foreign magazine to show me. Then, he leaned over and kissed me on the mouth."

Kissing someone in the mouth did not sound very appealing to me. I occasionally saw men and women in movies kissing each other and could not understand what was so special about

it. Zsuzsi néni, my country aunt, always gave me many wet kisses on my cheeks when we visited her. I did not like those and quickly wiped my face off when she was not looking.

"How did it feel?" I asked.

"Not what I expected," said Éva. "Could it be because we aren't in love yet?"

Her statement made no sense, but I did not want to appear too ignorant. "You are probably right," I replied, quickly changing the subject. A few days later, however, she told me that Feri had stopped meeting her. He felt she was too young for him. The news made me happy because I had never liked his condescending attitude toward me. Éva's ego was hurt, but she took the breakup well.

In the years after 1948, occasional changes in Communist ideology affected the lives of everyone in the country. Even our school textbooks had to be rewritten occasionally, depending on our leaders' current views. For example, after World War II, Marshal Tito, the head of Yugoslavia, was praised as a former Communist guerilla who successfully fought against the Nazis. In 1948, he decided to follow a different path from the Moscow-dictated socialism. Overnight, he became a hated enemy—a "chained dog of the Western Imperialists." Textbooks had to be replaced immediately to reflect his new status.

Braun bácsi, who ran a promising small business in optometry from 1945 to 1948, was afraid to keep the business going under the Communist regime. He risked being relocated to the country for being a "Capitalist." He closed the business and took a low-paying job as a bookkeeper in a factory. Even though the Nazis had persecuted him during World War II, the regime knew that previously he had owned an apartment building. Such property immediately labeled him as a former capitalist. Perhaps if he, like some others, had pretended to be a devoted Party member, his past sins would have been overlooked. Instead, he decided to learn to live on a limited income.

On my 13th birthday, he visited us and brought me a present. "Although you aren't Jewish, in my eyes, you're becoming a man today. I want to give you something special which has greatly helped me in my life," he said. Inside his package, I found an old used book with an inscription, "With this science, you will always be able to evaluate people through their handwriting." The book's title, *A Grafológia Tankönyve (The Textbook of Graphology)*, did not tell me much because I did not know what it meant.

"What does *Grafológia* mean?" I asked.

"It is a scientific way to learn about people's personalities by looking at their handwriting."

"How can I learn anything about a person by looking at their writing?"

"Let me show you something first before I answer you. Please give me a sheet of plain paper," he replied.

He took the paper from me and, with his fountain pen, wrote two sentences on two separate lines. Then he showed me the paper and asked, "If these two sentences were written by two boys, who would be the stronger?"

I stared at the writing without knowing what to look for. The first line had thick, heavy pen marks, while the second was faint. "Probably the first one," I said.

"Why did you pick that one?"

"It looks like he pushed the pen hard, so he must have a strong hand."

“Very good, but that was easy. Let me ask a harder question. With which of the two boys would it be easier to become friends?”

After a while, I had no idea and admitted, “I don’t know how you could tell that.”

“Look how close the letters are in the words of the second sentence compared to the first one. That kind of writer is generally timid and does not make friends easily. The first boy is more outgoing.”

I was impressed. “Are there other things you can tell about a person?” I asked him.

“Yes, much more. Read the book first, and we’ll discuss it next time I see you.” He hugged me while departing and said, “Laci, I have always loved you like a son, and from now on, you may call me *Józsi bácsi*.”

I felt honored because that form of addressing an adult was customarily used only by family members. “Thank you, *Józsi bácsi*, and I hope to see you again soon.”

After he left, I began reading the book and learning about handwriting analysis. The wealth of information was overwhelming. The size of the letters, the slope of the lines, and the initial and ending strokes, among other stylistic features, were all connected to some personality trait. The next day in school, I showed the book to our Class Chief, who encouraged me to study it. At the same time, he warned me not to judge my friends by their writing alone. “Young people’s handwriting continuously changes until they are 16 to 18. It will take time before you can rely on what their writing tells you,” he advised.

Later, I found other books on the subject in the library. During my visits with *Józsi bácsi*, we played chess—I hoped to beat him one day but never could—and he also tutored me more on graphology. I have found that skill extremely helpful throughout my life. Every time I analyze someone’s writing, my mind lovingly flashes back to the man who first introduced me to it.

Two boys in my eighth-grade class proudly announced that they had girlfriends. The boys even knew how to dance and showed us some steps. One of them, Jancsi Götz, lived only a few buildings away from us, and we often played soccer together. If we walked home together after a game, he often talked about his fun times with Mici, his girlfriend.

I thought it would be nice to have a girlfriend, but where would I find one? Our school did not have girls. The Pioneers had mixed groups for boys and girls, but I was not a member. Girls did not play soccer. The ones in our building were either too young or too old. I decided to ask Götz for help.

“Does Mici have a friend I could meet?” I asked him during recess, trying to appear very casual.

“I’ll ask her and let you know.”

The next several days seemed like an eternity. I did not want to appear overly eager by asking about her response. Finally, he had good news for me. “We’re set for a double date Sunday afternoon. We’ll meet the girls at their apartment building.”

“Who’s the other girl?”

“All I know is that she’s Mici’s classmate.”

At home, I considered telling Éva about my upcoming date. Then, I decided to wait for the outcome first. If nothing worked out, I would not have to lose face. After all, I had no idea what to do or how to behave on a date. The only thing clear to me was that I did not want to kiss her.

Sunday arrived, and I walked to Götz's apartment. To my surprise, his mother knew about our plans. "Jancsi told me the two of you are going on a date," she greeted me. "Where will you take the young ladies?"

I did not know what to say. Götz and I had not made any plans. He quickly came to my rescue. "We will walk to *Városliget* (City Park) to watch a bicycle race."

"I didn't know there was a bike race today," I told him after we left his apartment.

"There isn't, but now my mother won't have to worry about what Mici and I are doing," he said, looking at me with a sly smile.

I did not see any reason why his mom would have to be worried, but he didn't offer any further explanation. In a few minutes, I saw two young girls standing at the front of a building. One of them waved at us. I guessed she must be Mici.

Götz led me over and kissed her on the cheek. "Laci, this is Mici."

I had never shaken hands with a girl, but I thought it would be proper. I reached out my hand to her. "Besser László," I said, using the traditional Hungarian way of introducing myself.

"Glad to meet you. This is my friend, Kati."

I turned to Kati to shake her hand. She smiled at me, and I instantly liked her.

"What shall we all do?" asked Kati.

"Let's split up," said Götz.

"Oh, no! Let's stay together," I suggested in a panicked tone. *What would I do without watching how my experienced friend handled himself?*

Götz was not interested in helping me. "Have fun," he said, walking away with Mici, holding her hand. I stood there feeling helpless and gave Kati a quick glance. She looked at me and stepped closer.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked after a long silence.

"Perhaps we could walk around the block," was the best I could say. We strolled slowly as I tried desperately to think of something to say.

"Which's your favorite soccer team?" I said, trying to start a conversation.

"I'm not interested in soccer."

After a few minutes of silence, I made a second attempt. "I built a crystal detector radio for my physics class last year. Do you know how it works?"

"I hate physics. Our teacher always talks about things I don't understand."

Strike two! "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"A psychologist, like my dad."

I had no idea what a psychologist did and was too embarrassed to admit it. I kept trying to think of another question I could ask. Fortunately, Kati helped me out. "I just remembered some homework I must finish. Let's go home."

We walked to her house in silence. She said goodbye, leaving me feeling pretty low. *Girls are different!* I wished I'd never asked Götz to fix me up. However, I was happy I hadn't mentioned anything to Éva.

A short while after my birthday, Éva suggested that we go to watch the rehearsals of the Budapest Circus. "Anyone can watch for free on weekday mornings."

Her idea sounded great. The following day, I would have my history class with the teacher I didn't like. Skipping school then would be perfect. "How about tomorrow?" I asked. "Mother will be away most of the day, so we won't even have to carry our schoolbags."

"Let's do it!"

Mother left for an all-day laundry job early in the morning. Éva and I waited until after the other kids had gone to school. Then, we boarded a streetcar for City Park (*Városliget*), where the circus was located. Éva climbed inside the car, but I took my special seat—the rear coupling—to avoid paying the fare. In a short time, we reached our destination and walked inside the huge dome without buying a ticket. Several other people already sat in the bleachers, watching the various artists rehearsing their acts.

This was the first time we had been to a circus, and we did not know what to expect. What we saw there was amazing. An animal trainer stepped inside the cage of giant tigers and ordered them to follow his instructions. Trapeze artists flew through the air and caught each other during flight. Men and women stood on the backs of galloping horses. Another performer practiced throwing knives onto a large board covered with the outline of a human body. Someone sitting next to us said a live woman stood before the board during the evening performance. We could not believe that anyone would be brave enough to face those large knives.

We stayed there for several hours, enjoying the show. As we headed home, we carefully rehearsed what to tell Mother about our school day in case she asked. Because we did not expect her home until late, Éva and I prepared dinner that evening. Before she arrived, however, we had an unexpected visitor.

It was Mari néni, stopping by on her way to work. She greeted us in her usual friendly way and then casually asked me, "How was school today?"

I was prepared for that question. "Nothing unusual, except one of our teachers was sick," I replied.

Pow! I saw stars flashing in front of my eyes and felt a burning pain on my left cheek. Then I realized Mari néni had slapped me. "How was school today?" she repeated.

Mother had always spanked me with a wooden spoon, and this was the first time anyone had slapped my face. Confused, I mumbled, "I've already said it was OK."

Pow! This time, I felt the pain on my right cheek and realized she must know the truth. There was no point lying to her any longer. "I did not go to school today." I looked at Éva, who was cowering in the middle of the kitchen, and wondered how much Mari néni knew.

"I was standing inside a streetcar, and through the front window, I saw you sitting on the rear coupling of the streetcar ahead of us. Don't you realize how dangerous that is?" she screamed. To emphasize her point, she slapped me two more times. "I wanted to grab you, but my streetcar stopped at a traffic light and didn't catch up with yours."

It sounded like she had not seen Éva standing inside the car, so there was no point in letting her know we skipped school together. I quietly told her how much I wanted to see the circus, and mornings were the only time to watch the performers without paying. Eventually, she calmed down, but she told Mother the entire story as soon as she came home. The wooden spoon saw more action, and I had to go to bed without supper. The only good part of the evening was that Éva told me how much she appreciated my not ratting on her.

The next day, Mother told my Class Chief about the incident. To set an example, on the following Monday, the Class Chief stripped me of my class council seat. Interestingly, I became more popular among my classmates after they found out about my mischievous act. The strongest boy in our class shook my hand and let me know he was impressed. He also added that I could count on him if anyone bothered me. My circus adventure did not turn out so badly after all.

I would have to decide on my future education soon. The compulsory minimum education in Hungary after World War II was completing eighth grade. After that, students could choose one of the following paths:

1. One of two types of four-year *gimnázium* (high school) to study either humanities or science. After graduation, the top students could enter university.
2. A four-year *technikum* (technical high school) to earn a technician degree. Schools specialized in heavy electrical machinery, electronics, mechanics, chemistry, architecture, agriculture, mining, forestry, and energy.
3. A two-year commerce school to learn office skills.
4. An apprenticeship program to learn a trade.
5. Manual labor.

Éva finished eighth grade at age fifteen. She entered a two-year commerce program in September 1949. In addition to classroom studies, she spent long hours practicing on a typewriter and other office equipment. Her school was located several streetcar stops away from our apartment. She always left home before I did. Generally, I only saw her in the evenings and on Sundays. She met new girlfriends at school, and her interest in boys increased.

One evening during her second year at the commerce school, she came home excited and told me, "A college student asked me for a date."

"How did you meet him?" I asked.

"Our school went to the University track for the 60-meter run of the *Munkára Harcra Kész* (*MHK*², Ready for Work and Combat). He was one of the timers; he complimented me on my running and asked me out. "

"When did that happen?"

"About two weeks ago. His name is Karcsi, and he is very handsome. He has been walking me home every night after school."

My first reaction was that Karcsi would fade away soon, just like her first boyfriend. This time, I was wrong, and Éva brought him home the weekend to introduce him to our family. Even though he was a college student, he did not treat me like a kid. I approved of Éva's choice.

A few months later, Éva asked Mother if she could go to Karcsi's place for a New Year's Eve party. His parents were going to visit relatives in the country, and Karcsi invited several of his

² A socialist sports movement to encourage physical activities for the masses, based on an existing Soviet campaign. Participants received pins at three levels—bronze, silver and gold—after reaching standards set in various sporting events that emphasized speed, strength, endurance, and agility. Required sporting events included track and field, swimming, gymnastics, and bicycling.

friends over to celebrate the end of the year. Mother agreed—on the condition that I would also go with her. Éva did not look happy, but she had no other choice. I was excited and looked forward to being at a party.

On the last night of 1949, we took the streetcar to Karcsi's apartment. He greeted us and introduced me to his friends. Due to the age difference, I used the “formal you” pronoun (*magázás*). When Karcsi heard that, he placed a glass of wine in my hand and told me, “Drink a *'per-tu'* with everyone and use the “informal you” after (*tegezés*).”

I was impressed. Talking to these older boys and girls with the “informal you” made me feel grown up. They were all so friendly to me. I made the circle, toasting everyone. Whenever I emptied my glass, they filled it up again. In a short time, I met everybody at the party.

Gradually, I began to feel strange. The words I wanted to say became slurred. The room started to spin. Karcsi noticed my condition and suggested I might need some fresh air. He escorted me into the courtyard and asked me to sit for a while, but it was too cold outside. He then took me into his bedroom and had me lie down. I fell asleep.

“Wake up! We must go home,” I heard Éva saying. She stood beside me when I opened my eyes, holding my overcoat. “It's almost 1 a.m. We'll be in trouble going home late.”

When I stood up, my stomach felt agitated. “I must go to the bathroom. Where is it?”

She walked me there quickly. I entered and closed the door behind me, just in time to empty my stomach into the toilet bowl. My mouth tasted sour afterward, but I felt somewhat better.



At age 16, Éva was already a beautiful young woman. She turned men's heads whenever we walked on the street.

The streetcars ran infrequently at night, and we arrived home quite late. Our housemaster let us into the building, grumbling that young people should not stay out so late. Mother gave us a solemn lecture for being so late. Although she could most likely smell the alcohol on my breath, she did not say anything. However, the next day, she scolded Éva for letting me drink. The unpleasant memory of being drunk stayed with me, and I have avoided overindulging with alcohol ever since.

Coming home from school one day, I saw my sister smoking a cigarette on the street—surrounded by several neighborhood kids! I could not believe my eyes.

“I didn't know you smoked,” I said with disbelief.

“There is a lot about me that you don't know. Do you want to try it?”

“Oh, no! What if Mother finds out?”

“She doesn't have to know. Try it,” she said while putting the cigarette in my hand.

I had no desire to put that burning stick into my mouth. However, if I turned it down, I'd lose face in front of the other kids. So, I took a small puff and blew the smoke out.

She laughed, "You are such a little boy, even too afraid to inhale it."

I felt that my manhood was being challenged and took a deep breath of the cigarette. As soon as the smoke entered my lungs, I began to cough violently. Everyone was laughing as I quietly handed the cigarette back to her.

"Perhaps in a few years, you'll be old enough to try it again," she said as I walked away, embarrassed.

I did not discuss the incident with her at home that evening. However, I was determined to prove her wrong about my being a little boy. The following day, I faked having stomach pain and did not eat breakfast. Mother reluctantly agreed I could stay home from school. As soon as everybody left, I went to the tobacco store and bought five Hungarian cigarettes. After returning to our apartment, I locked the front door, opened the bedroom windows, and lit the first cigarette.

I do not remember how many of the five cigarettes I managed to finish. All I know is that I became nauseous. Not having any food in my stomach, I could not throw up much, but an awful sour taste remained in my mouth. Mother stopped by at noon to check on me, and how I looked convinced her that I was sick. She took me to the doctor, who diagnosed me with *gyomorrontás* (stomach upset). In those days, the cure for that ailment was a medication called *Ricinus* (a strong laxative) and no food. After taking the medicine, I was so weak that I had to stay home from school the next day.

Thanks to my sister, never in my life have I touched another cigarette!

Another important event of my eighth grade happened in PE class. Mr. Vadas, our former Olympian, kept his word and introduced us to a basic high-jumping technique called scissors. At the center of our gym, he set up two vertical posts with pegs sticking out from their back sides. He placed a narrow horizontal wooden bar on the pegs, about five feet above the ground. Next, he told two boys to drag a mat over and lay it on the far side of the poles. He moved back about 30 feet. From a sharp angle, he ran toward the bar, kicked one leg high, and effortlessly cleared the bar by making a scissor-like movement with his other leg. He landed smoothly on his feet on the mat. "That was a scissor-style jump. There is a much more effective technique called the Western Roll, but it requires soft sand or sawdust for the landing," he told us.

He lowered the bar, and we practiced jumping for the rest of the class. Several of the kids had trouble clearing the bar. Perhaps my previous soccer goalie experience helped me because I easily jumped over it. Landing on the other side without touching the bar gave me a feeling of accomplishment. We practiced daily for several weeks, gradually setting the bar higher. Finally, I was the only one still clearing the height.



The evolution of high jumping techniques is shown here in four steps. From left to right: 1. Scissors form, introduced in the early 1900s, 2. Western Roll that brought victory at the 1936 Olympics, 3. Straddle, which won the 1956 Olympics, and 4. Fosbury Flop, which won the 1968 Olympics. The men's world record, set in 1994, remains at 245 cm (8 feet). The women's record is even older, established in 1987 at 209 cm (nearly 7 feet).

"You're the best high jumper in the school," Mr. Vadas told me. "I'll enter you into the Budapest Pioneer Championship to be held next month at the Pioneer Stadium."

"They won't let me go there because I am not a Pioneer."

"You better join," was his firm reply. "You have a good chance to win."

As soon as I left the gym, I went to see our Class Chief. "Mr. Vadas told me to join the Pioneers."

He smiled and said, "I wondered how long you would hold out," as he entered my name into the roster.

Mother was not happy hearing that I had joined what she considered to be a Communist group. Grudgingly, she bought me the white shirt worn by the Pioneers. One of her laundry clients gave her a piece of red cloth, which she cut to the required square to make a necktie. I became a Pioneer!

A few days later, with a group of boys and girls from our district, I marched to the Pioneer Stadium on Margaret Island for the track and field meet. Attila Ónodi, the strongest boy in our school, and I represented our school. Attila was to compete in the hand grenade toss³. Although we had only practiced throwing small balls in our gym, Mr. Vadas felt he would also do well with the heavier grenades.

As we reached the entry of Margaret Island from Margaret Bridge, I saw Cousin Pista stepping off the streetcar with a couple of his swim teammates. I turned my head away quickly, hoping he would not see me. He and I had agreed not to join the Pioneers earlier, and I had not told him about selling out for the sake of the high jump competition. Fortunately, he was busy talking to his friends and did not notice our group.

At the stadium, we merged into the large crowd of boys and girls who had already gathered on the soccer field. The officials then called the competitors to group for the specific events at various locations. About 30 to 40 of us gathered around the high jumping area. Attila went to the other side of the field with the other hand-grenade throwers. Spectators sat in the stands on both sides of the field, shouting encouragement when the competitions began.

Other than Attila, I did not know anyone in the stadium. Mr. Vadas could not attend, but he had prepared me strategically. "The competition may last for several hours. You need to save your strength. Begin to jump only at 120 cm (nearly four feet)," he had told me the previous day.

³ One of the field events of the *MHK* campaign was the throwing of fake hand grenades to prepare kids for combat situations. The grenades had wood handles and were different from those used by the American soldiers.

I followed his advice and waited patiently for that height before I entered. Several boys began to jump at lower heights. Some boys had already dropped out when the bar was raised to 120 cm. I was ready for my first jump when the judge called my name.

When we practiced at school, only my classmates watched me jump. Hundreds of people looked at the field from the stands in the Pioneer Stadium. Suddenly, I became very nervous. Slowly running toward the bar, I jumped—and knocked it down.

What happened? I cleared that height easily back in our gym. Only two more tries left. My next jump had to be successful! I became even more nervous.

My second try wasn't a good one either. As I approached the bar, the noise of the starter's gun distracted me. I ran into the bar without even jumping. The judge reminded me I had only one more chance at that height.

I sat down and wished Mr. Vadas was at my side. My legs began to tremble, and I felt very lonely. Just then, Attila ran over with good news—he had won the hand-grenade throw. "Now it is your turn. I will sit here to root for you," he told me.

His presence helped me to concentrate on my third jump, and I succeeded! Attila told me that I jumped well above the bar. His observation encouraged me. I felt confident and cleared the following several heights on my first try. As the heights increased, more of the boys were eliminated.

Only two of us remained in the competition when the judge raised the bar to 145 cm (four feet ten inches). The other boy used the Western Roll and cleared the height on his second trial. I only made it over on my third. Neither of us could clear the next height. Since he had fewer misses, he won. I came in second.

At first, I felt like a loser until Attila reminded me how many other kids I beat. He also added, "If you knew the Western Roll technique, you could have out-jumped the other boy."

"Yes, I think I could have," I agreed with Attila.

At the end of the track meet, the top three in each event received a medal attached to a ribbon. Proudly, I showed my silver to Mother and Éva when I arrived home. Then, I ran to Galambos bácsi to brag about my performance. "I told you it is better to compete in individual events instead of playing on a team," he reminded me. "Remember that it is your individual achievement when you are a runner or a jumper." His statement reverberated in my head after I left. Perhaps I should become a high jumper. After long deliberation, however, I decided to stay with soccer. I wanted to be a soccer player more than anything else.

During one of our eighth-grade PE classes, Mr. Vadas placed two low benches across the gym floor. He lined us up on one side of the gym and told us to sprint over the benches to the other side. Being one of the tallest in the class, I stood near the end of the line.

One by one, the boys ran toward the bench, slowed to jump over it, and continued running to the other wall. When it came to my run, instead of slowing down at the bench, I took a long stride over the bench and continued running. Mr. Vadas immediately called me over. "You are a natural hurdler. Join a track club!" he told me. After class, he recommended that I see the track team of a leading sports club, *MTK*. I did not want to hurt his feelings by telling him that soccer was higher on my list, but I promised to look up the club during the summer.



Medal of the Budapest Pioneer Championship shows the picture of a hand-grenade thrower. On the right is the Gold level MHK pin I earned a few years later.

Another memorable teacher, Mr. Tolcsvai, taught music and directed the choir from fifth through eighth grade. Once a week, he wheeled a portable organ into our classroom, wrote the text of a new song on the blackboard, and then played the melody. After hearing the tune, we sang the lyrics while he accompanied us on his organ. We learned several songs each school year—many of them selected by the Party to glorify the socialist-Communist regime and its great leaders. I still remember the words of the "Stalin Cantata," reminding us that the land, the mountains, and the sea all echo the name of the "magnificent Stalin." I enjoyed singing, regardless of what the words meant, and our teacher selected me to join the choir. On special occasions, we sang at the school assemblies.

Our music teacher looked like a typical conductor; he had wavy grayish hair and always wore an elegant black jacket accented by a bow tie. He was a kind man but a very poor disciplinarian. One of the students, Krausz, took advantage of that weakness and often clowned around while Mr. Tolcsvai wrote on the board. We always snickered when that happened. Hearing the commotion, our teacher would turn around with an exasperated expression. "I am warning you for the last time," he would say to Krausz, but he never followed up on his threat.

However, one day, near the end of eighth grade, Krausz went too far. When our teacher had his back to the class, Krausz stepped next to the organ, ruffled his hair, picked up the teacher's baton, and mimicked the conductor's arm movements. The entire class broke out in loud laughter.

When Mr. Tolcsvai turned around and saw the prank, he became furious. "Krausz, I've had enough of you! I am reporting you to your Class Chief!" He stormed out of our classroom, leaving his organ behind. The custodian came later to wheel the instrument away.

Our class was quiet for a while. Then, one of the boys told Krausz, "You'll be in trouble when Mr. Hered hears about this." Krausz smiled and tried to look unconcerned. I had a feeling, however, that he was worried.

The following Monday, as soon as Mr. Hered came into the classroom, he yelled at Krausz, "Come over here!"

Krausz, looking scared, meekly walked to the front and stood near our teacher.

"You idiot! How dare you repeatedly make fun of Mr. Tolcsvai?" cried out Mr. Hered.

I did not hear Krausz's answer, but it made our Class Chief furious. He slapped the boy hard, right and left. Krausz reeled back, trying to avoid further hits.

At that point, Götz jumped out of his seat. "*Tanár Úr!* (Mr. Teacher) We live in a socialist country now. You're no longer allowed to hit students," he said.

A deafening silence followed. I could not believe what I had witnessed. *A student talked back to a teacher like that. What will happen to Götz?*

Mr. Hered also looked surprised and waited a while before answering. His face was red with anger. "Krausz's widowed mother told me she hasn't been able to control her son's behavior. She authorized me to punish him any way I felt appropriate."

Götz sat down quietly, but Mr. Hered became even more agitated. "After this incident, I no longer want to be your Class Chief. The principal will assign someone to replace me," he said, leaving the room. Another teacher took over his classes for the remainder of the semester.

After Mr. Hered's departure, we all stared at Götz. "I still say he had no right to slap Krausz. The Party would disapprove of it," he said defensively. Knowing that his father was an important Party member, none of us dared to argue with him, even though we all liked Mr. Hered.

The story of that day's event spread quickly. The next time Götz showed up at the park to play soccer, we did not select him for our teams. Eventually, he stopped coming by. Shortly after graduation, Götz's father was promoted to an important position at Dunapentele⁴—the site of the first Hungarian socialist city. A newly constructed power plant and steel mill were built beside the settlement. His family moved there, and I never saw the boy who had arranged my first date again.

As I approached the end of the eighth grade, two teachers, Mr. Bordas and Mr. Hered, insisted that I enter high school and continue to university. That path sounded far too long because I was eager to earn money. My sister, Éva, was only in the first year of her two-year commerce school and would not be ready to work for another year. Mother had health problems caused by an overactive thyroid, and the doctor had recommended she ease up on physical labor. I wanted to contribute to our family's financial stability so Mother would not have to work so hard.

Józsi bácsi concurred with my two teachers' recommendation. I reluctantly followed their advice and registered at a high school in the inner city. However, I wasn't considering continuing to college. Cousin Pista decided to become a technician and had already applied to the top technical high school (*Kandó*), which specialized in electronics. His grades were not good enough for that school but were satisfactory for another technical school where he could study high-power electric networks and machinery. Both of our classes were to begin in September 1950.

Working for a Socialized Farm

A few days before the end of the eighth-grade school year, two representatives from a socialized farm gave a talk to the graduates. "We are short of farmhands and need help to harvest cherries. Come to work for us for two weeks. You'll be extremely well paid." They outlined the work—to pick cherries and eat as many as we liked while working. We would stay in a nearby former castle and have free access to all the farm's sports facilities.

⁴ A year later the name of the city changed to Sztálinváros (Stalin City). In 1961, the Soviet government initiated a "de-Stalinization" campaign throughout the Eastern Bloc. Sztálinváros was renamed Dunaújváros.

I loved cherries—the idea of gorging myself while earning money and being free to play soccer after work sounded appealing. I signed up immediately. They instructed us to meet at the Eastern Railroad Station the day after graduation.

Mother was concerned about my doing farm work, but I convinced her it was an easy job and I could also have fun. I reported to the train station at the required time. About 50 other city boys, all eighth-grade graduates, showed up from several schools. A representative of the farm guided us to the train.

At the end of the train ride, a man wearing coveralls took over and directed us to a long open trailer connected to a tractor. We hopped on the trailer, and he drove slowly for about an hour on a dirt road. As the sun set, he stopped beside a large barn in the middle of farmland. He announced, "Here is where you will sleep."

"Your man told us we'd stay in a castle," one boy protested.

The tractor driver laughed, "Oh, he is such a joker. There aren't any castles around here."

"Where is the toilet?" another boy asked.

The man laughed again. "You are not in the city. Do your business behind the barn."

We all grumbled, but the man was not interested in our complaints. "If you are thirsty, a barrel full of water is inside. Better go to sleep now because you'll start working early in the morning," he said.

We did not see a cherry orchard near us. A couple of the boys wanted to go home immediately, but the sun had already set. "They'll probably take us somewhere else tomorrow where the cherry trees are. Let's go to sleep now," someone suggested.

We stepped inside the barn. A kerosene lamp hanging on a pole provided a dim light for us. Fresh hay covered the ground. At first, I thought it would be fun to sleep on it. However, adapting to lying on raw hay without a sheet or blanket under me took some time. After thanking my mother for packing me a sandwich, I ate it and eventually fell asleep.

"Let's go to work," yelled someone. I opened my eyes and saw a husky man standing at the open door. "We have hot soup for you outside," he added.

I stood up, along with all the other boys, and stepped outside the barn. The sun was coming up over the horizon. It was around 5:30 a.m. — much earlier than my usual waking time. Nearby was an open-bed truck with a large steaming pot. A woman stood next to the truck, holding a *csajka* (mess kit) in one hand and a large ladle in the other. "Come to eat your soup," she called to us.

We formed a line to receive our portion. She handed each of us a *csajka*, half filled with broth. At home, I generally had *tejes kávé* (a small amount of ersatz coffee with lots of milk) and a piece of bread for breakfast. Drinking broth was a new experience, but it tasted good and warmed me up. I was ready to pick the cherries.

The man who woke us up introduced himself as one of the leaders of the farm. He divided us into groups of six and led us to the field across from the barn. "Your task is to pull weeds from among the sugar beet plants. You will be paid at the end of each day based on your group's performance," were his instructions.

"We were hired to pick cherries, not to pull weeds," we objected.

"I don't know what you were told, and I don't have time to argue. You'll earn a lot of money if you do a good job," he replied angrily. "Our country needs your help, so don't behave like spoiled city kids. Now, I'll show you what you must do."

He pointed at a small plant with crumbly green leaves, emerging a few inches from the ground. "This is the sugar beet. Don't touch it." Then he reached down, pulled a handful of weeds from the earth, and tossed it to the ground. "That is what you'll have to remove." He assigned each group a 20-meter-wide (nearly 70 feet) segment. "Clear your zones while walking ahead. I'll be back at lunchtime to check your progress," he said. With that, he stepped into the truck and drove away.

My group had a short discussion. "Well, it isn't the promised work, but let's do it anyway. He said we'd be well paid," suggested one of the boys. We all agreed and proceeded to pull the weeds.

The morning went quickly. We began to compete with two neighboring groups and made significant progress. Our group was well ahead of the others when the truck returned with lunch. The food they gave us was not great, but edible. We gulped it down and went back to work.

By mid-afternoon, we began to tire, and our pace slowed. Pulling the weeds by hand was more complicated than I expected. Bending constantly also took its toll. My back ached, and my hands throbbed from the scratches and cuts. When the workday ended, we did not mind that the promised sports facilities did not exist. All of us needed rest.

Dinner was better than lunch. Our boss came back from the field after measuring the area we had cleared. He then told us what we had earned.

"Looks like none of you are used to working hard. Kids from our farm do at least twice as much as your best group did. You'll have to perform much better tomorrow," was his evaluation. After deducting the travel expenses and room and board, our group members made a fraction of what we had expected.

I was utterly disgusted. Being tired and sore added to my frustration. *I'll not put up with this any longer.* When the boss left, I walked away from the barn toward the railroad station. It took me about an hour to reach my target, where I learned that the last train for Budapest had already left. I did not want to risk being taken back—as had happened at the Scout camp—when they discovered my departure. I ran to the highway to hitchhike, and a large truck gave me a ride to Budapest. He supported my running away when I told the driver about my adventure.

Mother was outraged when I told her how the farm officials had tricked us. At the same time, she was concerned about what might happen to me for leaving without permission. We feared possible consequences for the rest of the summer, but nothing happened. When *Józsi bácsi* heard about my farming experience, he felt they probably decided not to follow up, knowing they had lied about the job description.

Despite all the negatives of my short-lived summer job, I developed more respect for people who did farm work. Around this time, I also began to understand the political situation better.

The Hungarian Communist Party Grabs Total Control

It was now 1950. Following the directives issued by Moscow, Hungary was moving firmly on the path to becoming a Soviet-type society. Its Five-Year Plan emphasized heavy industry's

overly ambitious rapid development at the expense of agriculture and consumer goods. The result was that none of these three areas was successfully developed. In this phase, the government nationalized all businesses with more than ten employees and handed the leadership of most organizations over to trusted Party officials. When the top post required a person with special technical skills, a Party watchdog closely monitored the operation.

Fearing a possible attack by the Allies, Stalin wanted a buffer zone along the borders of the Soviet Union. Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania provided the natural protection zone. Stalin's hand-picked Communist leaders supported his master plan.



The huge protective buffer zone formed by the Eastern Bloc countries was created to protect the Soviet Union from a possible surprise attack by the "warmonger capitalist nations."

Mátyás Rákosi's "salami technique" efficiently sliced away his opposition and potential rivals. His motto, "If you are not with us, you are against us," empowered the security organization *ÁVO* to arrest and torture scores of people suspected of opposition. The *ÁVO* had created a network of spies. A significant percentage of the adult population was investigated, and many were subsequently tried in courts. The majority of those convicted ended up in labor camps. By the time I reached the age of 14, I had already become aware of the political pressure imposed by the Party. I learned to be careful about what I said and—more importantly—to whom. The joy of liberation from the fascist regime in 1945 had gradually evaporated. What caused the change in my attitude? I am not sure. It may have been hearing about the rape of Hungarian women by Soviet soldiers at the fall of Budapest. Possibly, it was the brutal treatment my aunt endured during her political imprisonment. Perhaps we did not like the idea that our liberators stayed in our country and imposed their political system on us. Whatever the reason, I did not want to become the kind of person promoted by the Party's guidelines. I continued in school, worked hard to maintain my identity, and became more aware of Mother's hard work to support us.

My Attempt To Join a Sports Club

Near the end of the summer of 1950, my favorite soccer team (*Ferencváros*, nicknamed *Fradí*) announced tryouts for their Under-16 team. I was confident I could make the team and asked the

two tailors in our building if they would come to watch my tryout. They agreed. I also told Mother, Éva, my friends, and Cousin Pista's family that I'd be playing for Fradi by the following week.

The day of the tryouts arrived. Accompanied by the two tailors, I took the streetcar to *Fradi's* stadium. Several people were seated in the stands—presumably the boys' relatives who reported to play. The tailors joined the spectators in the bleachers. I stood in line with 60 to 80 other hopeful players near a locker room.

A man wearing a green-and-white sweatsuit introduced himself as the head coach of the under-16 boys team. "You'll receive shorts, shirts with numbers, socks, and soccer shoes for the game," he announced. "Each of you will play about 20 minutes. At that point, you must return the equipment. After everybody has played, I'll pick about ten boys for our team."

I could hardly control my excitement. The assistant coach put me in the second group to play. Four boys who came together asked the coach to place them in the forward positions because they had been playing together for some time. Granting their request, the coach assigned me to play left wing instead of my usual position—right-inside forward. Although I could dribble and kick with both feet, playing on the left wing was new. Still, I felt confident I could do a good job there.

The coach gave me a jersey with the number 11 for my position as a left-wing forward. After putting on the uniform and shoes, I felt like a real soccer player. It was the first time I had worn soccer shoes with cleats. It was strange to walk in them, but I guessed they would help me to avoid sliding on the grass.

When our turn came, the two teams ran to the field. Walking on the same grass where my soccer idols played regularly and hearing my tailor friends yelling my name gave me a boost of adrenalin. We lined up in formation. I took my place at the left wing—ready to play. Our center forward won the coin toss, and he started the game.

The four buddies on our team played extremely well in their forward positions. Whenever one of them received the ball, they passed it among themselves. They scored a goal during the first minute of the game. Seeing their effectiveness, our defense players kept feeding the ball to them. More goals followed. Unfortunately, they never passed the ball to me. I did not even touch it during the entire game. I walked back to the locker room, fearing the outcome.

At the end of our play period, the assistant coach retrieved our clothing and boots while recording our names. He instructed us to wait until all the games were finished. I asked him if I could go back with another team because I had not had an opportunity to be in the action. He replied, "No, you've had your chance already." My morale sank even lower.

When the last game ended, the head coach came to see all the hopeful players. After identifying the jersey numbers with the names, he announced those selected to come back again. He read the names individually, but, as I feared, mine was not on his list. The four friends from my team were accepted. The coach thanked all of us for coming and reminded us that there would be another opportunity next year.

With tears in my eyes, I exited the locker room. I felt the world was caving in on me. *How could I face those to whom I had confidently boasted that I would be on Fradi's team—now that I had failed? Perhaps I should just run away.*

The tailors waited for me outside of the door. I did not have to say anything; they could see on my face that I had not made the team. "Watching those four forwards playing selfishly without passing you the ball was painful," said one of them. "You never had a chance to show your skills."

I walked quietly, not wanting to talk. They tried, unsuccessfully, to cheer me up. On our way home, however, we stopped at an ice cream shop, and they bought me a triple-scoop treat of my favorite flavors: pineapple, coconut, and raspberry. That helped—somewhat.

Before falling asleep that night, I decided to visit the *MTK* stadium to see the high jump coach. One way or another, I will go to the Olympics!

Chapter 9: Joining a Track Club

Under socialism, Hungary's sports activities centered on clubs rather than schools; large companies and trade unions sponsored most of these sports clubs. Although Western-style, highly paid professional athletes did not exist in the socialist system, by the late 1940s, the top athletes were receiving special recognition and subsidies. After entering the Cold War, socialist countries did everything possible to excel in sports. For political reasons, they wanted to prove that they could do as well—or even better—than the rest of the world.

Most of the clubs offered a wide range of sports. The larger ones covered virtually every Olympic sport. Participation was accessible to everyone. Club members received coaching and all the necessary equipment free of charge. The "Ready for Work and Combat" competitions revealed many talented athletes who later became internationally recognized competitors.

My PE teacher, Mr. Vadas, recommended I try high jumping with *MTK's* coach. My favorite sports club, *Fradí*, did not have a strong track team. *MTK's* stadium was also much closer to where I lived — less than a ten-minute ride on the streetcar. On a sunny Monday afternoon, I headed to their track. The humiliating experience with *Fradí's* soccer team, where I never touched the ball, was still fresh in my mind. I approached my next tryout cautiously, not telling anyone about it.

Stepping off the streetcar at the stadium, I entered the locker room section, following men carrying impressive-looking sports bags. An attendant directed me to the track, where I asked for the high jump coach. A tall, slim man dressed in a sweatsuit bearing the name and logo of MTK overheard my inquiry and approached me.

"I'm sorry, but he is away this week. Come back next Monday," he advised. I stood there in disbelief. *Oh, no—how can I be so unlucky!*

The man must have seen the disappointment on my face. "I'm also a coach, working with the hurdlers. Could I help you?" he asked.

"My PE teacher sent me here to find out if I could become a high jumper on your team," I said with a glimmer of hope. "I finished second in the Budapest Pioneer championship a few months ago," I added proudly.

"How old are you?"

"I'll be fourteen next week."

"You're tall for your age with long legs. Perhaps you would also make a good hurdler."

"Mr. Vadas once called me a natural hurdler," I blurted out.

"Mr. Vadas, the former Olympic runner?"

"Yes, he told us about participating in the Berlin Olympic Games."

"Well, if he thought so, I definitely want to try you before sending you to high jump," he said. "See *Kálmán bácsi* in the locker room. Tell him Coach Agócs sent you, and he'll set you up with a runner's outfit."

His response raised my hope— maybe this was my lucky day after all! As I learned later, Agócs was also the hurdles coach of the Hungarian national team. Had the high jump coach been there that day, my track career might have taken a different path.

In the locker room, I received shorts, a tank top, and two pairs of shoes, one for jogging and the other—with short spikes on the bottom—for sprinting. I was warned not to walk with the spike shoes on hard surfaces. I was eager to learn what running with them would feel like.

Dressed in my new outfit, I reported to Coach Agócs. He led me to a small group of boys and girls and introduced me to one of them. "This is Péter Surányi. He is already our best *serdülő* (Under-16) hurdler, even though he is only a year older than you. Follow his warm-up routine, and I'll see you later."

Tagging along with the group during their four-lap jog, I silently thanked *Galambos bácsi* for his advice to run daily. Péter looked at me with surprise after the third lap. "You are in good shape. Most new kids poop out after the second lap," he commented.

I told Péter about my famous marathon runner neighbor and the distances I ran regularly. He was impressed and told me about his running background. His father, a former long-distance runner, had hoped Péter would become one too. "After joining *MTK*, however, I found distance running boring," he said. "I wasn't fast enough to be a sprinter, so I learned to hurdle. Now my father is happy, and I enjoy running."

Péter continued, "You'll like Coach Agócs. At one time, he was the best high hurdler on the Hungarian team. He taught me to hurdle in a few months. If you follow his advice, you'll learn fast, too."

"I'll do everything he tells me," I said as we finished our fourth lap. Péter showed me various stretching exercises, after which we put on our spike shoes. He led me through "wind sprints" and showed me how to run correctly. Until then, I had not known what an important role the arms played in sprinting. "Work hard with your arms, and your legs will follow," he advised. I listened carefully and did my best to improve my running form.

After the warm-up, the coach asked me to watch the experienced hurdlers doing their specific hurdler stretchings. About twenty runners had gathered in our area, including several adult men and women. Some drills looked scary, particularly when the adult hurdlers jogged and quickly skipped over 106 cm (3 foot 9 inches) high hurdles. However, the fact that Péter could perform the same drill on the lower hurdles encouraged me. *One day, I will also be able to do all that.*

Next came the actual hurdling. I was surprised at how they approached the hurdles while running at full speed. At first, I closed my eyes, expecting a crash. Instead, they gracefully floated over each hurdle and kept running without losing their balance. It was a beautiful sight to watch. I thanked God for leading me to that place.

Perhaps the rejection from *Fradi's* soccer team would open the way for me to do something even better.

It seemed the coach had read my mind because he came over and asked me, "Do you work with us or become a high jumper?"

"I want to jump the hurdles," was my immediate answer, but he looked at me disapprovingly.

"First of all, you ***run, not jump*** over the hurdles," he corrected me. "However, before you run over hurdles, you must learn to run properly. Your form looks very sloppy right now. You won't be ready to run over the hurdles for three or four weeks,"

he continued. "Until then, do all the basic hurdle walking drills with Péter."

That was not what I hoped to hear. "Will I be part of the club?" I asked eagerly.

"If you work hard and follow instructions, yes. See you tomorrow."

His final reply made me very happy. *Of course, I will work hard. Perhaps one day, I will even win a race. I will invite Cousin Pista's father to show him I can be good at some sport.* After continuously hearing him boast about Pista's swimming victories, I wanted to win his approval. *Yes, I will work my heart out!*

After practice, the boys and men undressed in the locker room and entered the shower area. Having a hot shower would have been a rare luxury for me, but I did not have a towel. Péter offered to share his, but I was too embarrassed to accept it. I said goodbye and left. On the streetcar, I hummed happily all the way home. People stared at me, but I did not care. I was going to be a hurdler!!!

Back at home, I told Mother, Éva, the tailors, and Galambos bácsi the good news—I would be a member of *MTK*. They congratulated me on my success, except Mother, who was very concerned about possible injuries. "I've heard about horses jumping over barricades but not people. You might break your leg. I don't want you to jump hurdles!" she objected. She had heard about a horse that needed euthanasia because it broke a leg during a steeplechase race. Although she knew I would not be shot if I broke my leg, she did not want me to participate in what sounded to her like a dangerous activity.

I felt it would not be the right time to correct her by saying *I will run instead of jump* over the hurdles. Because I needed her written permission to join the club, I asked for *Galambos bácsi's* help. He agreed. First, he talked to Mother about the benefits of being an athlete. Then, he told her that the hurdles on the track were not like horse track barricades; they would tip over if they were kicked¹. Eventually, Mother calmed down and reluctantly agreed to my track participation. For my birthday, she even sewed a sports bag for me. While not quite as fancy as the ones the other athletes had, it was still a sports bag. When I carried it, I felt like a real runner.

Following Coach Agocs' advice, I kept a "training diary" detailing every workout. "It'll help you later to review your progress," he told me.

Every two months, he sat with me to review my diary, adjusting my practice to fit my needs best. I felt important and always faithfully followed his instructions.

Meeting My Father

One Sunday, when I came home from church, Mother was ironing shirts in our kitchen. "Your father will be here next Sunday, so you can finally meet him," she said casually.

"My father?" I asked with disbelief. "What does he want with me?"

"You'll be going to high school and must wear better clothing. I asked him in a letter

¹ I learned later, however, that bumping into a hurdle could lead to painful consequences.

to give us some money. He promised to stop by next Sunday to meet you."

The news hit me unexpectedly. I had no memory of ever meeting him. In the past, Mother had told me about us visiting him on my first birthday. She also showed me some photos he had taken while my mother held me. She also showed me photos of him as a lieutenant in the Hungarian Army during World War I.

Whenever I asked my mother about my father, she always gave me the same answer, "He decided to live with someone else." After a while, I stopped asking the question. It bothered me very much that my parents were not married, but eventually, I learned to live with it. If a friend invited me over to play and his parents asked what kind of work my father did, I told them that my father had died in the war.

As Sunday approached, I became increasingly nervous about meeting my father. How would I address him? I certainly did not want to call him "Father" or "Dad." After all, he had not been that to me. On the other hand, if I had used his family name and called him "*Solt bácsi*," he might not have liked it and would have refused to give us any money. I decided to play it safe and avoid addressing him.

Sunday morning, Éva and I carried the smaller of the two wooden washtubs up from the laundry room. Mother made sure I was scrubbed from head to toe and had me dress in my Sunday clothes². My sister and I went to early mass. I prayed to St. Anthony to help me through what I expected to be a very uncomfortable meeting. After the mass, Mother sent Éva to see a friend. Mother and I then waited in the living room for our visitor's arrival. She showed me the army photo of Solt again but warned me that he would not look the same.

The doorbell rang, and Mother motioned for me to answer it. I walked through the kitchen and opened the door. Instead of the handsome young officer in the photo, a balding old man stared at me. He wore a nice suit and tie.

"*Kezít csókolom.*" (I kiss your hand.) I mumbled the usual greeting Hungarian children used when meeting adults.

"*Szervusz.* You're taller than I'd expected," he replied without smiling as he stepped into the kitchen. "Where is your mother?"

"In the living room."

He walked by me, and I followed him. Mother greeted him and offered him a seat at our dining table. She asked me to sit next to her, and I gladly obliged.

"In your letter, you wrote about not feeling well. You look fine to me," said Solt to my mother.

"My thyroid is overactive, and I often feel exhausted," Mother replied defensively. "I can't work as much as I used to," she added.

"You should learn a job like a manicurist that doesn't require standing and lifting. They can earn good money."

"I'm too old to learn something like that. The shops want young women for that kind of work."

² I had two outfits to wear—one for weekdays and another for Sundays.

Solt continued lecturing Mother, and I could tell she didn't like it. Finally, she said, "I will become healthy again soon. We only need your financial help for a few months."

"Well, under the new regime, I no longer have my previous important position in the bank. I have to be careful about spending money." He pulled an envelope out of his pocket. "That is all I can give you now. Maybe I can help again next month, but you'll be on your own after that. Perhaps Laci should find a job after school."

"I run track every afternoon," I said in my defense.

"Is it more important than helping your mother," he snapped back.

I looked at Mother, but she did not want to argue. "Thank you for coming," she said, walking toward the door. Solt stood up and followed her. He nodded goodbye to me and left. Mother came back and hugged me. "We'll manage without his help," she said quietly. I saw tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Instead of attending high school, I'll learn a trade, like my friend Gábor. He already earns money while working in a factory," I offered. "He told me that in a few years, he'll be able to repair electrical test instruments and make even more money."

"Don't ever say that!" she replied firmly. "Nobody in my family finished high school. I want you to be the first one—even if I have to scrub floors every day!"

That night in bed, I wondered how having a father living with us would feel. I did not want to be near the man I had met that day. Still, I had always hoped to have a man like *Józsi bácsi* at home to teach me sports and help when I had problems. I knew Mother loved me and would do anything for me, but it was not the same.

Mother baked my favorite Dobos cake for my fourteenth birthday and invited five close friends to share it, Cousin Pista being one of them. He gave me an unexpected present—a one-month pass to *Sportuszoda* (a large swim complex on Margaret Island) with two Olympic-sized pools. Pista's team practiced there regularly. "Perhaps if you learn to swim faster, we could have a race one day," he said jokingly.

I asked how he could afford such an expensive gift, and he told me that his coach had given one to everyone on his team. Although swimming was not my favorite activity, I promised to use the opportunity, beginning that weekend, to practice becoming a better swimmer.

"Let me go with you," said one of the other boys. "I know a way we could both use the pass."

"How could we do that? It is only good for one person," I replied.

"True, but I'll go in first and sneak the pass back to you through the fence behind the pool."

Another boy joined in. "I want to go too." Before I could protest, all four of them wanted to be part of the scheme.

Pista did not like the idea. "You could be in deep trouble if they catch you."

The rest of us, however, liked the challenge. We agreed to meet at the pool's entrance Saturday morning.

After the party, Mother gave me something special: a store-bought red soccer-style shirt with laces instead of buttons on the top. On the back, she had sewn the number eight to indicate the position I liked to play—*right inside forward*. I loved that shirt so

much that I slept in it that night. The next day, I wore it at the park to play soccer, drawing admiration from all the boys.

Saturday morning, I put on my soccer shirt and wore my short pants over the sports-style swim trunks Mother had sewn for me. Before leaving for work, she gave me money for streetcar tickets and packed my usual lunch—a lard sandwich. She warned me to be careful at the pool. Of course, I did not tell her about our devious plan with the pass.

The boys were already waiting for me at the entrance of the complex. We walked to the far side along the wire fence and agreed on the location to hand back the pass. The first boy then left with the pass and sometime later appeared on the inner side of the fence, wearing his swim trunks. After carefully looking around, he handed the pass to the next boy. We repeated the process two more times. Finally, as I waited anxiously on the outside, my last conspirator appeared. He approached the fence, ready to hand over the pass.

"I'll take that!" said a lifeguard, running toward us. "I was wondering why so many boys came back here," he continued as he yanked the pass out of my friend's hand. "I'll keep this to teach you a lesson about cheating." With that, he walked away.

My friend had no money, and I only had enough for a streetcar fare home. The idea of going away without having fun in the pool was too painful to bear. "I'll hide my clothes under the bushes and climb through the fence," I told my friend. He agreed it was a good solution.

I walked around the perimeter of the complex, looking for a suitable clump of bushes. Carefully, I placed my clothes and sandals under the shrubs, taking only my lunch with me. Then, I climbed through the fence and joined my friends. We had a great time playing in the swimming pools for the rest of the day.

When we decided to leave, I parted from the others and climbed outside the fence. Surprisingly, the clothes and sandals were not where I thought I had left them. Searching through the nearby bushes did not reveal any clothes. I wished it were only a bad dream, but the awful reality slowly sank in—someone had stolen everything! All I had left were the swim trunks I wore.

How am I going to explain this to my mother? She worked hard to buy me clothing, and I lost my entire outfit. My sandals were less than a year old, and I had had that wonderful soccer shirt for only a few days.

What could I do? I began running barefoot home from the island, wearing only my swim trunks. The nearly three-mile run took me across Margaret Bridge, along one of the major circular boulevards, and through the streets of my neighborhood. People stared at me, but I did not care. All I could think of was my mother's reaction to the bad news.

Nobody saw me in our building as I ran upstairs and rang our doorbell. My sister opened the door and stared at me. "Where are your clothes?"

Mother was still working, so I quickly told Éva about my tragedy. She was speechless. I skipped dinner, went to bed, prayed for St. Anthony's help, and contemplated how to break the news to my mother. I decided to tell the truth since I

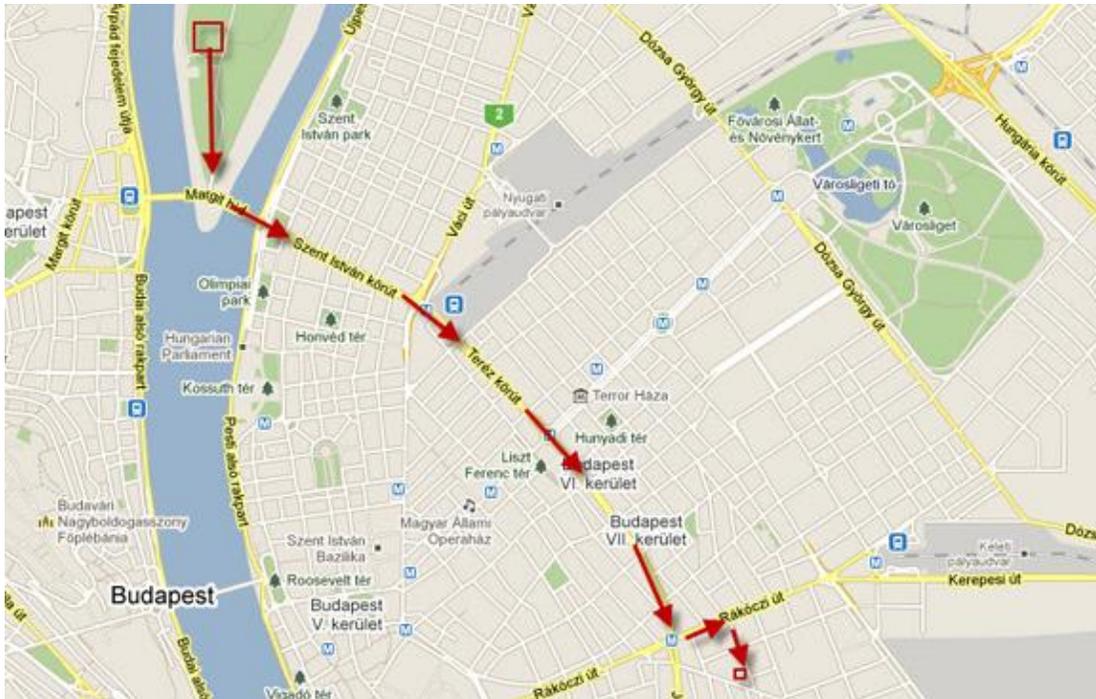
couldn't think of a reasonable story. However, I hoped to postpone her wrath until the morning, so I tried to sleep. Wanting to avoid the storm, Éva also decided to retire early.

"Where did you put your clothes?" I heard as Mother awoke me.

I looked up and saw the lights on. It was still nighttime, not morning as I had hoped. There was no way out, and I told her everything that had taken place at the swim complex.

Mother's reaction was worse than I expected. I had never seen her so angry. She shook me and yelled at me, calling me irresponsible and a cheater, among other things. Finally, she calmed down and said, "We'll continue discussing this tomorrow." She turned off the lights and went to the kitchen.

When I woke up the following day, Mother was away. I had no other shoes to wear other than my sneakers. Knowing she would not allow me to wear those in church, I waited for her to return.



Arrows indicate the nearly three-mile path between the swim complex and our apartment building.

Our kitchen door opened, and Mother walked in with a big smile. She held the clothes I had worn the day before in one hand and my sandals in the other. "Look what I found," she exclaimed.

I was astonished. *Did I look under the wrong bush yesterday? Did she go to Margaret Island and locate everything?* "Where, where did you find them?" I stammered.

She proudly told us about her accomplishments. On her way home from her laundry customer, she saw a boy standing in front of a building, wearing **my red soccer shirt** with the number she had attached. She grabbed the boy and demanded to know how he obtained the shirt.

The scared youth admitted everything. He and a friend had seen me undressing on the island and putting my clothes under a bush. After I climbed the fence, they grabbed my stuff and split it between them. One kept the shirt with the pants, while the other took home my sandals.

Holding on to the boy, Mother had him lead her to the other boy's apartment, where she recovered my sandals and pants. The boys' parents promised to punish them, and thankfully, I had my clothes back. I had no money that day but promised St. Anthony I'd pay my gratitude later.

Just as several years earlier, when I had found the missing rationing coupons, I considered the recovery of my clothes another miracle. Budapest had a population of about one million people in those days. What was the probability of my mother meeting the boy a few blocks from our house wearing my shirt—without divine intervention?

Beginning High School

My first day of high school arrived. It took me about fifteen minutes to walk to the inner part of the city and find my first class. After eight years at the Bezerédi Street Elementary School, where I had many friends, I felt like a stranger in my new classroom. Most students already knew each other; they were busy sharing their summertime experiences.

The first teacher came into the class carrying a large book. We all stood, and he motioned for us to sit. He introduced himself as our Class Chief. He would also teach Latin. When he opened his book, I braced myself for his asking us for family information—as Mr. Hered had done in my elementary school—but it seemed this teacher already had that data. He then told us the school's rules, the types of courses we would have, and the grading system used. Just as in my previous school, the students would remain in the same room, and the various teachers would come there to instruct us in the different subjects. The only exception was physical education, which took place in the gym.

Our Class Chief then told us why Latin was vital to learning additional foreign languages. Although I now know his reasoning had much merit, it was illogical to my fourteen-year-old mind. I did not want to learn a language spoken only by priests.

The next hour, another teacher talked about geography with a political slant. In his overview, he explained that our world was split into three geographical sections:

- Progressive nations—led by the Soviet Union
- Capitalist nations—directed by the United States
- Underdeveloped nations, usually colonized

He planned to cover all three sections during the next two years and began with the Soviet Union. I found his monotone voice boring and did not pay much attention to his lecture.

The other classes were equally unimpressive, except for mathematics, where the teacher introduced clever math puzzles. To make it worse, my inner-city classmates also acted snobbish; they wore nice clothing, and most even had wristwatches. I heard them talking about going to their weekend homes with their parents and spending summers at Lake Balaton. They had fancy snacks, and I stepped outside the classroom so they would not see me eating my lard sandwich. By the end of the first day, I did not like that high school at all.

On my way home, I began to formulate a plan for how I could work instead of

attending high school. During the week, my desire to leave the school grew even stronger. Knowing that Mother was not open to my idea of leaving high school, I visited *Józsi bácsi* over the weekend to get his thoughts.

"What a surprise. After opening the door for me, what brought you here?" he asked.

"I need your help. Mother's health has not been good, and I want to earn money by going to work. I don't like high school."

His jaw dropped. "You are a smart boy. Why would you not want to better yourself?"

"I am interested in electronics. Working at a factory like my friend Gábor, I could learn and make money simultaneously."

"Working in a factory will not challenge your mind. Why didn't you ask for admission to a technical high school?"

"My teachers arranged my admission to the regular high school so I could continue to college. I don't want to do all that."

"Well, let's see if you could switch to a technical high school specializing in electronics," he recommended. "You could also find a part-time job to help your mother financially."

His idea sounded good. Cousin Pista had already enrolled in a technical high school and liked it. Going to that kind of school, working, and running track sounded like a packed schedule, but I felt confident I could do all three. "Yes, I would like to do that," I replied.

Józsi bácsi took a day off from work the following Monday, and I skipped school. He took me to the Ministry of Education to see one of his former business associates. The man listened to my story and sent us to another department. After a long wait, we entered an impressive-looking office. Pictures of Stalin and Rákosi hung on the walls. I don't remember the title of the man sitting behind a huge desk, but he must have been important.

"So, you want to be an electronic technician," the man told me. "Tell me why."

Shaking with fear and excitement, I told him about the joy of constructing my first crystal detector radio. I also explained that I wanted to build a real radio with electron tubes and a loudspeaker. I added that I loved math and physics but did not want to learn a dead language like Latin. He laughed and asked us to step outside while he made a few phone calls. After a while, his secretary called us back again.

"It's too late to be admitted to *Kandó* (the technical high school specializing in electronics), but the other electrical technical high school would still allow you to transfer. Take this paper to their principal's office, and he'll take care of you." With that, he dismissed us.

Looking for Part-Time Work

"Now, let's see if we can find you a part-time job," said *Józsi bácsi* as we left the Ministry of Education. "I know someone who works at the central office of *TEJÉRT*³." Perhaps you could hand-deliver milk to their customers in the morning before school starts. That way, you could still go to the track practice after school."

I liked his idea. His ability to accomplish great things impressed me: *Józsi bácsi* seemed unfamiliar with the term "impossible." First, he had managed to arrange my admission to a technical school—even though the school year had already started. Next, he might find me a job where I could earn money and access free food. Many people told me I was too skinny; I hoped I could one day eat as much as I wanted. Working in a dairy store might enable me to drink more milk than the rationing system allowed. They might even have other delicacies like sour cream and cottage cheese.

On our way to another government building in the inner city, my mentor told me about a man named Stern, who had worked at a café belonging to *Józsi bácsi*'s mother. The two of them became close friends. Both of them had been taken to labor camps during the war, but Stern escaped and joined the Serb guerilla fighters. In an encounter with SS troops, he was severely injured and eventually lost an arm. At the war's end, Stern returned to Budapest, joined the Communist Party, and initially worked in a large food store. When most stores became nationalized, his Party connection helped him find a good government job at the dairy distribution center.

"Be very careful what you say when we are with him," *Józsi bácsi* warned me. "Even though we've been good friends, he is now a devoted Communist. I no longer trust him. Talk only about your mother, track, and school!"

His comments surprised me. "Why will we see him if you don't trust him?"

"He owes me a favor and might be able to help you. Don't worry, just be careful."

We reached the *TEJÉRT* office and located Stern walking in a hallway. He was a tall, thin man wearing a suit with the right sleeve of his jacket tucked into the pocket. Surprised to see us, he quickly recovered and hugged *Józsi bácsi* with his remaining arm. "Good to see you! I'm on my way to lunch. Will you join me?" he asked.

"Thanks, but I'm not alone," *Józsi bácsi* replied, introducing me to Stern.

"No problem. Both of you come along," Stern said. I followed the two men as they walked to the cafeteria. While we ate, the two of them spent some time reminiscing. Finally, *Józsi bácsi* brought up the reason for our visit: Would there be a way for me to work early in the morning in a *TEJÉRT* store near my new high school? Although Stern looked doubtful, he suggested we go back to his office. After taking us there, he pulled out a thick file and a map from a cabinet and studied them for a while, shaking his head. Then, he suddenly hit his forehead and grabbed another file. "We may have something," he said with excitement.

³ The government-owned chain store which distributed dairy products throughout the country.

He picked up the phone but did not dial a number. "No line again⁴," he murmured angrily. Finally, he dialed a number and spoke to someone at the other end in a low voice. I could not follow the meaning of his conversation, but hearing the word *rendőrség* (police) mentioned several times alarmed me. I became scared and looked at Józsi bácsi, but he showed no concern.

At last, the man hung up the phone and turned to us with an angry expression on his face. "One of our stores had two delivery boys arrested for stealing milk. They sold it on the black market," he said. "That store needs two people immediately to work one to two hours daily, beginning at 6 a.m."

I felt relieved that the police had nothing to do with us. "Perhaps Laci and his sister could work there," Józsi bácsi replied quickly. "Her classes are in the afternoons, so she'd have no problem. Laci could go to school from work in the mornings."

"Could you handle that?" asked Stern.

"I think I could—if I can still be at school on time," I replied hesitantly. "Tomorrow will be my first day there."

Józsi bácsi explained to Stern about my switching schools to study electronics. Stern looked at his map again and said, "The store is only two streetcar stops from your school. You could be there in a short time."

Someone else came to Stern with an urgent need. "Go down to Personnel, and they'll take care of you. Goodbye and good luck!" he said. We thanked him and headed for the Personnel Office.

They completed the necessary paperwork in the office for me and my sister. I received detailed instructions about the job and the location of the store. They also gave me a note informing the school about my part-time morning job. We left the building in the late afternoon. *Józsi bácsi* had a date, so we parted at the streetcar stop. I thanked him for all his help and headed home.

Mother was in the laundry room when I arrived home, and I helped her carry the wet clothing to the attic. While hanging the clothes on the lines, I told her all the day's events—bracing myself for a possible angry reaction—but it did not come. "I know how much you enjoyed building radios. As long as you finish high school, you can attend the one you want," she replied calmly. "However, I am concerned that working, studying, and running will be too much for you."

"I want to work so you don't have to do so much," I insisted. "You are not well, and I don't want you to become sick."

I could see she was touched, and eventually, she agreed to allow me to have a trial period. "If your grades suffer, you must quit either the job or running," she warned. "School must be the most important part of your life."

At that point, my sister arrived home from school. Initially, she was not too excited about

⁴ The telephone network under socialism was in pathetic shape. A popular Hungarian joke: Question: How did the police arrest a Western spy when he tried to make a telephone call? Answer: He picked up the phone and began dialing immediately—giving away that he was a foreigner. Hungarians knew that they had to wait patiently until they heard a dial tone.

being at work so early every morning. When she heard, however, that we could keep half of the money we earned, she began to like the idea. "I'll save to buy a pair of high heels," she exclaimed. "I could also buy cigarettes," she said when we were alone.

Mother woke us up early the following day. We gulped down some breakfast and ran to the streetcar. It took about 20 minutes to reach our designated stop. We arrived at the address given to me by Stern well before 6 a.m. The lights inside the *TEJÉRT* store were already on, but we found the front door locked. In response to our knocking, a woman wearing a white uniform opened it for us. "I am the manager, and you must be our new delivery help," she said. "I hope you are honest, unlike the two we had before."

We assured her that we were honest. She led us into the storage room behind the store and introduced us to her assistant. "*Gizike*⁵ will explain what you'll need to do every day. Remember that I'll be watching you." Then she rushed out to let a deliveryman into the store.

"You may also call me Gizike," said the assistant after the store manager left. She was probably in her mid-twenties, wearing a white uniform and smiling friendly. "The boss is frustrated because she was responsible for the theft by the previous delivery boys. She'll be much nicer to you if you work hard and don't cheat."

Several large milk containers stood on the floor among boxes of empty bottles. Gizike first showed us how to fill the one-liter bottles with milk from the containers and seal them with cardboard lids. Next, she gave us the delivery list of about 150 people who resided in apartment buildings within the neighboring blocks. We had to deliver the milk to those customers and return empty bottles. Gizike outfitted us with special "harness vests" with long front and back pockets. She placed the filled bottles into those pockets—four on the back and four on the front. In addition, we took two more bottles in a small hand-held carrier.

We would leave the store for each trip with ten full bottles weighing over ten kilos (22 lbs.). Coming back with the empty bottles was much easier. Gizike advised us to have several fill-and-deliver cycles rather than fill all the bottles simultaneously.

Enthusiastically, Éva and I departed in separate directions for our first trip. My first deliveries were to five or six customers in a building on the closest cross street. I quickly learned that using the stairs was faster than relying on slow or out-of-order elevators. Walking up four to five flights of stairs with the extra load was not easy, but I told myself it would help me build more muscular legs for running.

Most of our customers had already placed their empty bottles outside their doors. I rang their doorbells, introduced myself as the new delivery boy, and handed over the full bottles. On my first trip, I placed the empty bottles into my vest before going to the next customer. Later, I realized that it was easier to climb up when I had less weight to carry. After that, I collected the empties on my way down.

After delivering my first load, I returned to the store. Surprisingly, Éva filled the next

⁵ Hungarians frequently use nicknames and affectionate names. For example, the store assistant's first name was Gizella and her nickname was Gizi. The affectionate form was created by adding a "ke" or "ka" syllable to the nickname—making it Gizike. My first name was László, my nickname was Laci and the affectionate form was Lacika.

batch of bottles, including some of mine. I tried to walk faster on the next trip, but she beat me again. At that point, I had to accept that she was more capable of carrying heavy loads than I was.

By the time we finished our deliveries, it was past nine o'clock. I was exhausted, and even Éva looked tired. I was worried that the manager might fire us for taking so long. Surprisingly, she seemed to be satisfied. "I'm sure you'll finish faster once you learn the routes," she said. Seeing how tired we looked, she handed us two *zsemle* (hard rolls) and a bottle of milk to share. "You'll feel refreshed after eating this—see you tomorrow."

We gladly consumed the food and left the store. Éva headed home, while I went to my new school, only two streetcar stops away.

Technical High School

I entered the principal's office around 10 a.m. The secretary looked at me, annoyed. "Classes began at 8 o'clock. Why are you late?"

"I began a part-time job today," I said sheepishly while handing her the document from the Ministry of Education and my brand-new Employment Book. "Tomorrow, I'll be here earlier."

The letter from the Ministry had a powerful effect on her. She walked to a closed door and knocked on it. After entering the other room, she closed the door and stayed there for quite a while. Finally, she returned with a man who told me he was the principal.

"I've talked with Comrade Stern at *TEJÉRT*'s headquarters. He told me about your morning job. I'm impressed by your willingness to help your mother," he said sympathetically. "However, our school is not easy. I'm concerned that you won't be able to keep up with your courses while working."

It appeared that he did not know about my track involvement. "I've always been a good student and want to learn about electronics. My cousin is a student here, and he loves the school. I promise to do well," I pleaded.

"You've already missed last week's classes, including the safety orientations in the labs and shops. I'm unsure if those teachers will still allow you to participate."

My hope faded, and I did not know what to say. The principal looked at the letter in his hand and began to walk toward the front door. "Let's go and talk to the shop teacher. He is the most important one on the faculty. If he agrees, I'll let you enroll."

It looked like I still had a chance. I quickly followed him through the corridors and down the stairway to the basement. Without knocking on the door, he entered a small office that had a large glass window on one wall. Looking through the window, I saw a large hall full of workbenches. Boys and girls wearing blue lab coats worked busily on their projects.

A large grey-haired man sat behind a desk. He jumped up when we entered. "Good morning, Comrade Principal. What may I do for you?"

The principal showed the Ministry's letter to the teacher and asked if another shop orientation could be scheduled. The teacher replied negatively and asked if I had any experience with tools and machines. I explained that I had gained experience using a saw and the drill press at a friend's shop while building goal cages for *gombfoci*. Also,

I had used a soldering iron at Cousin Pista's place while building my radio. "My mother taught me how to chop kindling carefully with a sharp axe," I added proudly. Finally, I mentioned that my cousin could help me learn whatever I'd missed.

The teacher seemed to be impressed. "You don't need to cut firewood here, but we have many dangerous tools. However, it sounds like you are a careful boy. I'll make an exception and let you in."

"I trust your judgment, Comrade Gárdai," said the principal. He asked me for Pista's surname and checked the freshman roster. Then he turned to me. "You'll be in the same class as your cousin. I'll take you there now."

I felt like a huge boulder had been lifted off my shoulders, and I followed him gladly. We walked up to the second floor, where he told me to wait outside one of the classrooms. Cousin Pista later told me what happened next.

"Our math teacher was working at the blackboard when the principal came in. They talked for a short time," Pista told me. "Next, the principal told us we'd have a new student in our class. He opened the door, and YOU walked in. I couldn't believe my eyes!"

Pista sat in the last row of the class, and the teacher placed me in the same row. During the break, his neighbor agreed to switch seats so Pista and I could be beside each other.

At noon, an administrator handed me a bag with all the textbooks used during the first year. She told me that I needed to purchase a notebook for every course after school. We had about ten courses, including a six-hour session of mechanical shop practice. Classes were held Monday through Saturday, from 8 a.m. until 3 or 4 p.m.

The remainder of the school day passed quickly. The courses sounded interesting, and the instructors seemed to be enthusiastic. The class had at least 30 students, and Pista introduced me to the ones he already knew. Four or five girls were in the class, sitting in the front row.

On our way home, I mentioned to Pista that I might be unable to finish work early enough the next day to be at school by 8 a.m. Pista told me that the first morning-session was the Russian language class. "The teacher is a devoted Communist. She announced on the first day that she would not decide what grades to give us."

"No grades at all?"

"I didn't say that. At the end of the semester, she will ask each of us what we deserve and give us that grade. She trusts that ethical young socialists would not take advantage of her trust and only ask for the grade we truly earned."

I had never heard anything like that before. At last, a benefit of the Soviet system! "It'll be easy to get an 'A' in that course," I laughed.

At home, I took money from the box where my mother kept her cash. Then, I purchased the notebooks for school and headed to track practice. Later, when Mother and I were home, I told her about the job and being in the same class as Pista. She recalled the times when she worked long hours in the candy factory, beginning at the age of nine. After hearing about the hard life she faced at an early age, I felt fortunate to be able to attend school and continue with my track workouts.

The following day, my sore shoulders reminded me of the weight of the harness loaded with milk bottles. Mother assured me, "Your body will become used to it in a few days. By next week, it won't bother you at all."

Our following days on the delivery job went faster. By the third week, I could make it to school by the middle of the first period. However, I did not rush to school three days a week when Russian class was held during the first period. Perhaps it was my rebellion against having our occupiers' language forced on us. Or, maybe I did not like the harsh-sounding Slavic words. I routinely skipped class because I had a legitimate excuse to be late.

As the weeks passed by, I loved my school more and more. I found the mechanical workshop very interesting, although it introduced surprising challenges. For our first shop assignment, we received a rough iron block approximately the size of a pack of cigarettes. We placed the block into a vise and filed all six sides to perfectly smooth surfaces. Each side had to form a 90-degree angle to all four adjacent sides. Our shop teacher showed us how to hold and use the metal file properly to obtain perfectly flat surfaces perpendicular to the other sides. It looked simple until I tried it! Each side of my block had a hump in its center. We had six weeks to finish the project, and I barely made it—even with some assistance from Pista. He was far handier than I with manual tools. In return, I regularly helped him with math, which was not his best subject.

As I became more aware of my own body, I was increasingly self-conscious of the depression in the center of my chest, commonly called the funnel chest⁶. One time, when I was at a public swimming pool, I saw an adult man with a similar chest deformity. This man, however, had such a powerful upper body that his chest depression was almost unnoticeable. I wished I had a chest like that, but I did not know how to develop one.

Our class walked to a nearby clinic when our high school doctor announced an X-ray TB screening. While the girls waited in the hallway, I entered a large dressing room with the other boys and stood near the window that faced the hallway. A nurse told us to remove our shirts. After we complied, one of the prankster boys released the spring-loaded blinds and uncovered the window. Hearing the noise, the girls stared directly at us. I instinctively crossed my arms over my chest to cover the depression. Everyone laughed, and I was terribly embarrassed. The boys and girls teased me for quite some time about my reaction.

⁶ Medically called pectus excavatum, a depression caused when the sternum (breastbone) is abnormally pushed inward. It occurs in 1 out of every 1,000 children.

Introduction to Opera

"Karcsi told me about an Italian opera movie he saw with his parents, which he enjoyed. Let's go to see it," Éva suggested one evening.

By 1950, the Communist censors seldom allowed movies from Western countries to be played—unless they showed some “decay” of the capitalist system. Most of the socialist films shown in the theaters, some produced in Hungary, exhibited the victories of worker-peasant heroes over the decadent former bourgeois class. Art films and occasional French comedies, however, provided some exceptions.

When Ilonka néni, our former bed-renter, gave us theater tickets, Mother and I occasionally saw operettas. I liked those, particularly when a play included songs my mom used to sing for me at bedtime. I heard that in operas, the performers never talk and often sing in a foreign language. That did not sound very interesting to me. "No, I don't want to go."

"I'll buy your ticket," Éva offered. "The newsreel before the film will show parts of the recent Italy-Hungary soccer game," she added to entice me, knowing how much I loved soccer.

I reasoned it was worth suffering through the opera to see our national team score goals against Italy. The fact that she would pay for it also helped me decide. "In that case, I'll go with you."

The next day, we went to see the movie. All seats in Hungarian movie theaters were numbered. The price of admission depended on the location of the row. The first and last few rows, where we usually sat, had the cheapest tickets.

Television did not exist in Hungary until 1957. I always enjoyed watching the newsreels because they showed some international events I could not see otherwise. Seeing our soccer stars playing in Italy was a special treat that day. After the newsreels, the opera movie *Trubadur (Il Trovatore)* began.

To my pleasant surprise, the film had Hungarian subtitles. I could follow the tale of a young Gypsy interested in the same high-class woman as a well-to-do count. The love story did not interest me, but I found the dramatic contest of the poor versus the rich fascinating. Hearing songs instead of spoken words did not bother me—I hummed some of the melodies when we left the theater. I had to admit to Éva that I liked the movie! From that day on, I was an opera fan.

More than six decades later, I had the opportunity to watch the Live from the Met broadcast of Il Trovatore in a local movie theater. The performance was projected onto a giant screen in high-definition video, using the latest Dolby sound equipment. Still, it could not reproduce the thrill I experienced as a fourteen-year-old when seeing my first opera in a black-and-white film.

Preparing for My First Track Meet

Under the Soviet-modeled socialist system, a high-level government bureau (*OTSB*) directly under the Ministry of Health and Education handled all sport-related matters. Among other regulations, it issued strict rules to monitor the health of athletes, especially youth. Competitors in the Under-16 age group had to pass a rigorous health examination every three months. An athlete who did not pass the checkup could not compete. There were also restrictions on the frequency of competitions. Young athletes were restricted to entering one meet a week. In the more strenuous running events—400 meters and longer—participation was limited to one race every two weeks.

Shortly after I joined the track club, the administrator told me to obtain a health certificate. Coach Agócs recommended I have my checkup at the Budapest *Sportkorház* (Sports Clinic). "The doctors there don't expect *hálapénzt*⁷ (tips). See Doctor Csépe and tell him I sent you." The next day, I went to the clinic for the examination.

In those days, health care was free to all Hungarian citizens. The government-run health centers did not offer appointments. Patients would arrive at the doctor's office and wait for their turn. The Sports Clinic operated the same way. After the receptionist directed me to the proper section, I joined a group of other athletes waiting patiently. We stood in a hallway facing several office doors with the physicians' names posted. Doctors would open their doors and announce, "Next." Occasionally, when a well-known star athlete showed up, an exception was made, and that athlete received priority entry.

After a long wait, I was finally called to see Dr. Csépe. When I mentioned Agócs's name, the doctor told me how fortunate I was to have such an exceptional coach. Next, he performed a thorough examination, including cardio-fitness testing. He sent me to have a chest X-ray. I had to wait again to discuss that test result with him. Satisfied, he smiled and stamped my health book entry to indicate I could compete. "You are in good health but too skinny and need to become stronger. Being a hurdler requires power, not just fast legs!"

I continued my daily track workouts. Coach Agócs complimented me on my progress; he felt that my running form was finally smooth enough to begin going over the hurdles. At first, it was scary, but gradually, I built up my courage not to let them slow me down. A few weeks later, in mid-October, he entered me in the 80-meter hurdles at the last competition of the season. I was excited about being in a race. Proving to Pista's father that I could compete in a sport was very important to me. I invited him to watch my race, but he had planned to see Pista swim on the same day.

In addition to hurdling, I also practiced the baton exchange for the 4x100-meter relay. Because I didn't have enough natural speed, I could not make the A-team. In the sprint relays, however, there are two other important considerations besides speed: reliable baton exchanges and good curve-running by two team members. Our club relay coach emphasized that on the track's curves, we must stay as close as possible to the inside of our lanes to cover the shortest distance. Of course, we had to be careful because stepping

⁷ Because the government paid doctors poorly, it was customary and expected to "tip" a doctor after the service was performed.

on the line could lead to disqualification. He also taught us the most efficient way to run the curves—similar to the form speed skaters use. Working extra hard on the baton exchanges and learning to become a good "curve-runner" gave me an advantage over some of the faster boys. I made the B-team. With excitement, I looked forward to my first track competition.

Perfecting the baton exchange was something Hungarian coaches emphasized. "The baton must never slow down during a 4 x 100-meter relay," our coach told us repeatedly. Our teams needed to excel with their passes because our country did not have sprinters of the caliber of other nations, particularly the United States. It was no surprise that at the 1952 Olympics, our national team missed the gold medal by only four-tenths of a second, beating other teams with superior individual runners.

Keeping up with both my studies and the morning job kept me busy. I was often tired when I arrived at track practice. But I felt refreshed after the workouts and a hot shower. The physical activity at the track reenergized me.



Two photos of our Under-16 club relay teams show my long legs. Left: 4 x 100m B-Team in 1951—I am third from the left. Right: Sprint Medley B-Team (400m, 200m, 200m, 800m) in 1952—I am on the left.

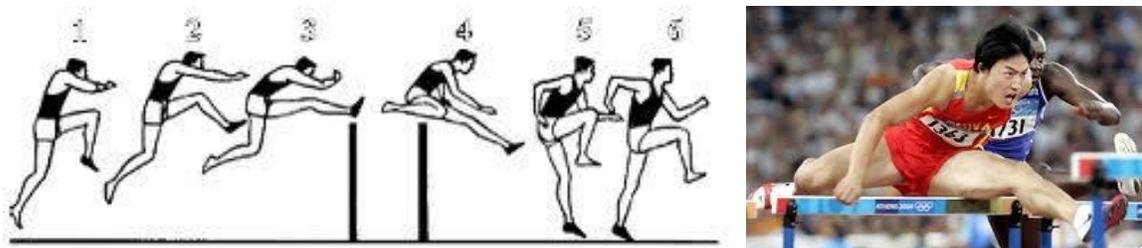
Finally, the long-awaited day of my first hurdle race arrived. The track meet occurred at our club's stadium on a Sunday afternoon. In addition to the 80-meter hurdles, I would be running the third leg of a 4 x 100-meter relay. Meeting my three relay team members at the track, we warmed up for our events—the hurdles for me and the 100-meter sprints for the other boys. The hurdle race opened the meet, and the relay was the last scheduled event of the day.

I was very nervous. The other boys, who already had race experience, kept reassuring me that I would do well. Péter, our club's best Under-16 hurdler, also joined us and encouraged me. I did all the routine hurdle exercises with him before the race. An official divided the 20 to 25 hurdlers into four groups. Runners with the three fastest times would receive medals at the end of the meet. Péter ran in the first heat, and my turn was next.

Watching Péter run smoothly and win his heat gave me confidence. As the call came for the next group, I recalled our coach's advice, "Attack the hurdle low and keep the trailing leg flat while going over the hurdle." *Yes, I will do that!*

Our sprint coach, Kovács-Kléri, was the starter that day. An accomplished international competitor⁸ in the early 1930s, he liked to show off his language skills by giving the start commands in English. When he called for the runners of the second heat, I stepped to the line with five other boys and waited for his signal.

The "On your marks" and "Set" commands placed me into well-practiced positions behind the starting line. At the blast of his gun, I took off toward the first hurdle, 12 meters away. After clearing it, I sprinted toward the next one, taking three steps between hurdles. There were seven more 33-inch high hurdles to clear before the finish.



Left: Elements of proper hurdling. Right: The object is to go over smoothly, as close as possible to the hurdle.

Halfway through the race, two boys ran well ahead of me. My determination to be at least third in my heat pushed me to run as fast as possible. However, another runner appeared on my right as I approached the last hurdle. *Oh no, I can't let him pass me.*

While watching him, I attacked the last hurdle, but something went wrong. In my desperate attempt to stay as low as possible, my lead leg did not clear the hurdle. The force of my momentum tripped me, and I landed on the red cinder-covered track. I was stunned for a few moments after the impact. When I stood up, the other runners had finished the race. I followed them over the finish line with as much dignity as possible.

Our coach rushed over and inspected me for injuries. My guardian angel must have been on duty that day because, other than cuts and bruises, I did not have any significant injuries. Though my pride had taken a severe blow, hearing from the coach that he had also fallen in his first race helped me to feel better. Not having Pista's father there to witness my disgrace was also comforting.

Coach Agócs questioned whether I could run in the relay that day. I begged him to let me compete, and finally, he agreed. The other boys on my relay team had mixed feelings, doubting that I could perform the baton exchanges properly in my condition. However, they did not have a substitute, and the team could not run without me.

Our relay coach made the final decision. He asked me to rest for a while. After the other boys finished their sprint events, he wanted me to run a couple of trial baton passes with the other boys. He would let our team remain in the race if satisfied with our passes.

During my rest, I did my best to focus on the relay rather than my hurdle race. Rehearsing baton exchanges, our coach was pleased, and our team performed well. I

⁸ For several years, he was the world record holder in the 300-meter sprint.

passed two other runners on the curve and thanked the coach for allowing me to redeem myself.

My bruises reminded me for days about falling in my first race. However, I learned an important lesson—never to allow myself to be distracted by the other competitors. During my ten years of competing, I never made that mistake again!

Chapter 10: Life Under Socialism

Because the Communist Party won only 17 percent of the votes at the first Hungarian postwar election, its leaders initially decided to slowly acclimatize the population to socialism. By 1950, our government accelerated the pace of transforming the country into a socialist nation under the scrutiny of Stalin. The Five-Year Plan, introduced in January 1950, resembled the plan the Soviet Union first used in 1928. It set ambitious goals to reorganize Hungary's economy and social structure. Under the banner "Protect the Peace," major objectives included:

- Liquidate capitalism and the old class system.
- Develop government-owned heavy industry.
- Improve agricultural production via communal farms.
- Build a strong national defense, coordinated with other socialist countries.
- Bring electricity to all small towns and villages and improve the infrastructure.
- Improve public health; create cultural-, daycare-, and sports-centers.
- Raise living standards.

The Party demanded unconditional support from everyone. Their slogan, "If you're not with us, you're against us!" clearly stated that opposition would not be tolerated. After several well-publicized trials of "class enemies," the population quickly learned to follow the Party's objectives.

Heavy industrial development was announced, but it faced two problems—lack of capital and insufficient raw materials. Moscow would not allow capitalist investment into Hungary, and none of the socialist countries had available funds. As for raw materials, such as timber and iron ore, the Treaties of Trianon and Yalta had given them to other countries. The only valuable assets Hungary could still offer were labor and agricultural products.

The Soviet Union had vast amounts of natural resources. Their country needed food and industrial products. In a deal that favored their side, the Soviet Authorities reached a bartering agreement with Hungary to exchange what both sides needed. The trade provided Hungary with gas, fuel, lumber, and metal ore to support construction and heavy industrial development. Our exports to the Soviet Union, however, created a domestic shortage of food and consumer products in Hungary. Rationing returned, and goods were frequently scarce. People quickly formed lines when word spread that some stores had received supplies.

Public recognition and higher pay were two ways to maximize the productivity of factory workers. Because the first tactic did not cost anything, the Party cleverly created titles for those who produced far above their quotas. Following the example of the famed Russian machine operator hero Sztahanov, a group of Hungarian workers also received celebrity status and extra benefits. These workers formed brigades and operated multiple machines to increase productivity. Initially, they received more money, but the continuously readjusted quotas often eroded the extra pay.

Agriculture represented another problem. Even though the government distributed a significant portion of the arable land to the peasants, the new owners could not afford the machinery necessary to cultivate and harvest efficiently. Many of them resisted the idea of

joining the communal farms. Even when they did join, the poorly organized and equipped farms could not produce enough food to satisfy both the domestic and export requirements. When shortfalls occurred, naturally, the shipments to the Soviet Union had priority.

It is fair to say that the socialist system brought benefits to a large segment of the population. They guaranteed equal rights to women, minorities, workers, and peasants, all of whom had received unfair treatment in the past. Subsidized food and housing, free public education, free child and medical care, virtually full employment, and crime-free living were easy to accept. However, the lack of free speech, the inability to start a new enterprise, restrictions on travel, and the possibility of persecution for anti-government activity—factual or fabricated—weighed heavily on the negative side.

As we adjusted to life after WWII, crime was extremely low in Hungary. People could walk the streets at any time with complete safety. Gangsters only existed in the West, or so the authorities told us. An excellent example of public safety was the case of the “Money Mailman.”

We had three kinds of mail carriers to deliver: 1) Regular mail, 2) Packages, and 3) Money. Personal checking accounts were not available to individuals. If someone wanted to send money to another person, he would go to the post office, fill out the appropriate form, and pay the currency to the office. A few days later, a local Money Mailman would deliver the cash to the designated address. These unarmed postal employees carried large sums of money in shoulder bags. During my whole time in Hungary, I never heard of a single time when one of them was harmed!

Some people took advantage of the advancements and promotions available to the Party faithful and quickly rose to high-level positions—far above their level of competency. Mistakes made by this new layer of management led to problems that were costly and difficult to correct later.

My family was relatively unaffected by political affairs. Since Mother provided domestic services to individuals, she was spared the typical company politics most people faced. Éva and I, being teenagers, felt disconnected from the Party’s activities. However, I did learn to be careful about what to say to people I did not know well.

The courses in my school covered a wide range of technical topics. In the mechanical shop, after the first project, we learned how to operate sophisticated equipment, such as the lathe and the milling machine. I found it much easier to maneuver those machines than to file the steel block manually. The main focus, however, was on Electrical Technology. The first year, we took an introductory course in electricity. The teacher told us we will learn about electric motors and generators next year. When I asked about electronics, he said, “You need to transfer to another technical school, because our school focuses on electricity generation and high-power electrical equipment.”

When Pista and I explored the possibility of a transfer, we learned it was possible after the first year, but only if we maintained high grades. We decided to study hard and ask for a transfer when the school year was over. As before, I had no trouble achieving good marks in the courses I liked. That year, Russian was the only course I did not like, but I was not too concerned. I heard the teacher allowed the students to set their grades, so I believed I

would be fine even without studying. I also skipped most of the Russian classes, using my part-time job as an excuse.

As the end of the semester approached, Pista warned me one day, "You'd better be here for the next Russian class. The teacher will be talking to us about our grades."

On that day, I showed up on time for the first period. After the teacher came in, she lectured for a while. Then, she announced that it was time to establish our grades. Beginning alphabetically, she called the students and asked what grade they thought they had earned. I waited nervously for my turn.

She called my name and asked, "What grade do you deserve this semester?"

I stood up. "I would like to have an A."

She paused while looking at her notes. "I don't recall any significant contributions from you in this class that would entitle you to have an A. Do you feel you've earned it?"

"Perhaps a B would be fairer," I offered quickly, sensing trouble.

"Come to think about it, I don't remember you being in my class. Have you transferred from another one?"

"No. I have a part-time job and missed some of your classes."

"In that case, I need to give you a brief test to give you a fair grade. See me after class." She then continued with the rest of the students.

During lunchtime, she tested me. It did not take her too long to find out how little I knew. Other than the few swear words we had all learned from the Russian soldiers after the war—certainly not proper to use with an adult—my knowledge was close to zero. She was ready to flunk me!

My mother will never forgive me for failing in school. If I don't pass the course, I won't be allowed to transfer to the other school. Desperate, I decided to confess and throw myself at her mercy. With downcast eyes, I explained how I had hoped to take advantage of her, letting the students select their grades.

"Although you tried to obtain a good grade dishonestly, I admire your courage in telling me the truth," she said after hearing my sneaky plan. "I'm willing to give you a second chance, but you'll have to work for it."

Before the end of the day, a cute red-haired girl from our class approached me. My heart began to pound faster, hoping she would ask me for a date. Instead, she said, "Our Russian teacher asked me to tutor you. I'll do it if you help me with math."

Of course, I jumped at the opportunity and looked forward to being with her. There were two weeks left until the end of the semester. We stayed at the school for an extra hour every day. She coached me in Russian grammar, and we did the math homework together. While traveling on the streetcar and during the evenings at home, I memorized Russian words. By the end of the semester, I had learned enough to pass with a C grade. Although that automatically lowered my average to a B, I had averted disaster.

When our study sessions ended, I built up my courage to ask my tutor if I could take her out one day. She laughed and said, "Oh no, I already have a boyfriend," and showed me his picture. I walked away quietly and wished I had investigated her status before asking the question.

While I studied Russian, I missed my track club's regular indoor practice sessions in a school gymnasium. After two weeks, I returned to the workouts in a gym. The winter program consisted of running, jumping, and strengthening exercises. At the end of each session, we played indoor soccer. I loved the routine. The only unpleasant part was walking home, wet with sweat, along the cold, snow-covered streets. I missed the luxury of the hot showers we had at our track.

When spring arrived, we returned to the track for practice. By that time, I had developed close friendships with my teammates. In the first hurdle race of the season, I ran well. Although I did not place, Coach Agócs was satisfied with my performance. He told me that the national track authorities planned to increase the hurdle heights of the 80m event by three inches the following year. "That will benefit you, with your long legs, more than most others," he predicted. I hoped he was right.

At the end of the school year, Pista and I requested and received transfers to the top electronics high school. We also had to complete a mandatory six-week industry-related practical training program during the summer. The school assigned us to the National Electric Power Company to work with two experienced electricians. After a few days of coaching, Pista and I did most of the manual work for them: we climbed power poles, stretched wires, and inspected and installed power meters. The two of them stood around, smoking and supervising us.

The lead electrician was a handsome man with lots of exciting stories. Among other things, he talked much about his escapades with scantily dressed, bored housewives. Pista and I usually blushed when he went into the details of what happened on those occasions. The two men had fun watching our embarrassment. Of course, Pista and I were curious to find out if these kinds of women existed, but when we knocked on doors, we never encountered the experience he described.

A single man, *Szarvas bácsi*, occupied a large three-bedroom apartment in our building. Having so much space for one person was highly unusual in socialist times. Three generations of the same family or three separate families would typically reside there. He was, however, a high-ranking Party member and the Managing Director of the Hungarian National Railway (*MÁV*), and the regime's elite enjoyed certain perks. He hired my mother to clean his apartment weekly, wash and iron his clothing, and prepare the food for his regular "men-only" parties.

During school vacations, Mother took Éva and me to his apartment to help with routine tasks like dusting, folding clothes, and shining shoes. Looking around the well-equipped apartment, I discovered his record player and a large 78-rpm record collection. That was our first experience with a record player. Éva and I enjoyed listening to the music of our choice. Mother allowed us to use the equipment as long as we promised to return everything to how we found it.

One day, as I was putting away *Szarvas bácsi's* shoes, I saw a large cardboard box in the back of a closet. My curiosity caused me to open it. Inside, I found more music records neatly stacked on their sides, with their labels blacked out.

Of course, I had to find out what kind of music they held. I took a couple of them over to the record player. As soon as I began to play the first one, I was shocked to hear the marching song of the outlawed Arrow Cross party, hailing its former leader, László Szálasi!

Mother rushed into the room with a horrified expression. “What are you doing?” she yelled at me. She immediately turned the volume down and told me to stop the player. “Where did you find this?”

After I showed her the box, she became even more irritated. “We’ll be in trouble if Szarvas bácsi finds out what you’ve done. Put everything away!”

After carefully returning the records to the box, she explained that Szarvas bácsi was a very important man. If he even suspected that we knew about his having those records, he could turn us over to the *ÁVO*, and who knew what could happen then?

Hearing the name of the feared agency terrified me. I promised never to touch anything besides following my mother’s instructions in the apartment. However, she never gave me another opportunity. After that day, I was banned forever from *Szarvas bácsi’s* apartment.

After Éva graduated from Commerce School, an Army Base hired her as a civilian secretary. My sister’s earnings helped our family finances, so I did not plan to work when the school year resumed.

Pista and I began attending our new technical high school in September 1951. The school, commonly called *Kandó*, was only a 15-minute walk from where I lived. *Kandó’s* daily routine was similar to what we had at the other school, but the subjects were far more interesting to me. In addition to math, physics, and chemistry, we had courses on radio and telephone technologies, material science, factory management, and mechanical drafting. The electronics labs were my favorite because we could build circuits and test their operations.

Our second-year class had about 40 students. Pista and I were the only transfers, so we needed to learn the new names and faces. They were all from Budapest, except one whose family moved there from the countryside. It was easy to remember him due to his dialect and the large sandwiches with unique aromas he ate during recess.

Following the local customs, except for labs and gym, the students remained in the same room, and the various instructors came there to teach. Several of the technical course instructors had solid industrial backgrounds. Some of them also lectured at the Budapest Technical University. I was highly impressed by the depth of their knowledge.

Although I had always disliked freehand drawing, I loved mechanical drafting. I enjoyed how precisely the various components of a product had to fit together. Our teacher, Mr. Frank, was a charming gentleman with an impressive ability to spot inaccuracies in our work. He also told us interesting stories with subtle double meanings to compare Soviet-made products with those of “certain other countries.” He was careful never to implicate himself, but we all knew he greatly valued Western technologies.

Our school also organized visits to factories and design centers where we could see the connection between the principles we learned and their real-life applications. The more I saw how useful electronics were, the happier I was with my chosen profession, and I looked forward to working as an electronics technician someday.

As at my other schools, our history teacher heavily exaggerated the importance of the Soviet Union, particularly the contributions of current and past Russian scientists. According to him, almost every technically significant product—including the airplane (*Mozhaisky*), steam engine

(Cherepanov), radio (Popov¹), and electric lightbulb (Lodigin)—was invented by Russians. Of course, we did not take those claims seriously and frequently cracked jokes about them. Since radio was closest to our studies, Popov bore the brunt of those jokes.

One day, our principal, head of the local Communist Party cell, announced a school trip to a large movie theater. The title of the film was *Famous Russian Inventors*. Every time the movie mentioned one of the claimed inventors, we snickered, but when Popov's name was brought up toward the end, a roar of laughter rocked the theater.

Our principal jumped out of his seat and halted the projection! Next, he ran to the stage and fiercely scolded us for our improper behavior as the future generation of young socialists. He ushered us back to school. As punishment, we had to write an essay about the five greatest Soviet technical inventions. In addition, we could not use the school's large courtyard for any activity for a month. Lesson learned!

Our PE teacher, an Olympic 3,000m steeplechase silver medal winner, prepared our class for the "Be Ready for Work and Combat" campaign's track and field events. Being one of the "expert runners," I helped him and looked forward to showing off my skills at the time trials. When the day came, we went to a nearby track and began to compete.

For the 60-meter sprint event, I proudly put on my spike shoes and enjoyed the admiration of my classmates. After giving instructions about how to start, our teacher called six of us to the starting line. Confidently, I went down to begin the race—already figuring how far ahead I would be at the finish.

To my great surprise, the country boy from my class, Andrászi, was ahead of me shortly after the start. I tried to accelerate, but he kept pulling away from me. It was hard to conceal my shock as I congratulated him on his win. Even though his running form was very bad, he had outclassed me in the short sprint.

"Did your village have a track club?" I asked him after recovering from the unexpected defeat.

"No."

"You should join my club. Looks like you could do very well."

He agreed and came with me to practice the next day. Our sprint coach recognized Andrászi's rare talent and was elated. By the end of the season, he had become one of the top young sprinters in Hungary and broke the under-16-year-old 60m national record. However, the regular training routine did not appeal to him, and he quit running later that year. The coaches and the rest of the club were bewildered by his decision to leave. We worked so hard to attain what came to him so easily.

As my coach had predicted, for the 1952 track and field season, the Hungarian track authorities raised the hurdle heights in the 80-meter competition by three inches. They arbitrarily set 12.5 seconds as the new national record. My fastest time in 1951 over the lower hurdles was 13.2 seconds.

During our indoor practices in the gym, I began running over hurdles set to the new height. By the time we moved out to the track, I could confidently deal with them. Our club's best under-

¹ Of all the claims, this one has some credibility. Popov might have been an unaccredited co-inventor with Marconi.

16 hurdler moved to the next age group², and I took his place in the ranking. I finished third in the year's first competition and received my first medal in a hurdle race. I wanted to wear it to school the next day, but my mother talked me out.

Throughout the summer, my track performances gradually progressed, and by mid-summer, I had become one of the top two Hungarian boy hurdlers in the Under-16 age group. My prime competitor, Péter Váry³, and I placed either first or second in most races. We both hoped to break the national record, but it eluded us by three- or four-tenths of a second.

Péter belonged to another club and trained at a different stadium. Despite our fierce competition, he and I became close friends off the track. Besides the customary handshake, we did not talk at the track before our races. After the finish, however, the one finishing second congratulated the other. After that, we usually sat down together and analyzed our performances.

One week in late September, a track meet was held on a Thursday to avoid conflict with an international soccer tournament taking place on the weekend. My coach gave us hard workouts on Monday and Tuesday and followed up with only light jogging and stretching on Wednesday. My training journal showed that I felt very good that week and looked forward to Thursday confidently.

During school hours Thursday morning, a huge thunderstorm came through the city. As I looked through the window, I envisioned the cinder cover of our track becoming soggy. *There goes the fast time I anticipated to run in my afternoon race!* I only hoped that my confidence would continue through next week.

Although the storm was gone by the afternoon, it did not cool the air. The hot, humid air bombarded me when I began my warm-up at the track. To my surprise, however, the condition of the track was good. Following our coach's strict instructions, I kept my warm-up suit on until the hurdles were set for the first race. My key opponent, Péter Váry, and I were both assigned to run in the first timed heat.

Starting blocks were only used in major track meets. I dug the two holes for my start with a small trowel. Then, I removed my sweatsuit and ran through the first three hurdles twice. The light tailwind helped me to sail over the 36-inch-high obstacles. I felt great.

The starter called for us to take our places. Péter and I exchanged our customary good-luck handshake and descended to the starting positions. He was two lanes away, and I concentrated only on the eight hurdles ahead.

"Pow!" the gun blasted. I took off and sprinted toward the hurdles. I had never before felt so light as I cleared them one by one. After the last hurdle, I realized nobody appeared in my peripheral vision. I leaned into the tape across the finish line and looked back. Péter was about two meters behind in second place.

"Wow, you moved fast," Péter commented after congratulating me. "I probably ran my best time, but I could not keep up with you."

² Young athletes under age 20 were divided into two groups. Between the ages of 14 and 16, they were in the "Under-16" group. The 17- through 19-year-olds formed the "Junior" category.

³ Not to be confused with my own club's other hurdler, Péter Surányi, mentioned earlier.

I thanked him, and we waited for the PA system to announce our times. It took an unusually long time while the judges conferred with each other. I began to worry. *Did I do something wrong? I hope they will not disqualify me.*

Finally, the announcement came through. "Eighty-meter hurdles. First, Besser László of Vörös Lobogó, 12.3 seconds, A NEW NATIONAL UNDER-16 RECORD!"

I did not listen to the rest of the announcement. I ran to my coach with excitement. He shook my hand. "Aren't you glad you decided to hurdle instead of high jump?"

"Yes, of course! Thanks for your great coaching. I am so happy!"

Scores of others came to congratulate me, including Péter. His time in second place was 12.5 seconds, equaling the previous national record. He had difficulty accepting that I beat him when he ran so well. Still, he was a very gracious loser. "Today was your day, but I'll beat you next time," he promised as we parted.

Without a doubt, it was the best day of my life. I wished my mother, Józsi bácsi, or Pista's father could have witnessed my glory. After going home, I told Galambos bácsi and the two tailors in our building the great news. When Mother and Éva came home, I shared the results with them. Then I went to the street to buy the evening edition of *Nép Sport* (People's Sport). I planned to show the article with the race results to many others. I wanted the whole world to know what I had accomplished!

During the next few days, I no longer felt like a poor, fatherless kid; I was the best young hurdler in my country. Carrying around the sports paper clipping, I showed many people the results. Even Pista's father acknowledged my performance, although he reminded me that Pista had already broken the national Under-16 record in the 100-meter breaststroke twice. "I'll probably do the same next week," was my cocky reply.

I wanted to have my mother watch me run the following weekend. She declined, telling me that it would make her too nervous to watch me "jumping" hurdles. Once again, I did not explain to her the difference between jumping and running. I still hoped that one day she would come.

I also invited Éva to my next track meet. To my surprise, she agreed. Her boyfriend liked sports, and she wanted to share his interest. Confidently, I promised her a victory and trained extra hard so I wouldn't disappoint her.

The last track meet of the season was held at Péter's club's stadium. He greeted me during our warm-up and told me his parents were in the stands. "I won't let you get away from me at the start like last week," he warned me jokingly. "This time, I'll be ahead from the beginning."

No, you won't, I thought while smiling at him. "I wish you good luck."

As we walked to the starting area, I tried to locate my sister in the stands but could not see her. Finally, as the starter called us to the line, I heard Éva screaming, "Go, Laci, go!" Suddenly, I became very nervous.

As we went down to the "On your marks" position, I was determined to be first at the start. When I heard "Get set," I was ready for action.

That day, I had a “nearly perfect” start—but in sprinting, that can be disastrous. Excitedly, I took off a split second before the gun went off! The starter called us back and warned me, “If you do that again, I’ll disqualify⁴ you!” Péter gave me a disapproving look.

Being overly cautious, my second start was abysmal. I was well behind the others at the first hurdle. No matter how hard I tried, I could only finish second, behind Péter—our times duplicated the times of the week before, except in the reverse order! Péter’s winning time matched my previously set record. I shook his hand and walked away, dejected.

“I was worried about you when you had that false start,” said Éva after the race. “But you did so well, finishing second among all those boys.”

Her boyfriend, Karcsi, also congratulated me. I put on a brave smile, but inside, I felt lousy. I knew they would not understand my mood, so I kept quiet. After being so confident about winning, coming in second wasn’t good enough.

That day, I learned another good lesson: *Ne igyál előre a medve bőrére!* An equivalent English expression is “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch!”

Glorifying Stalin

By the early 1950s, Stalinism had peaked, and the regime did not tolerate any opposition. Jails and concentration camps were filled with those who did not follow the strict Party guidelines. Even being a loyal Party member often did not guarantee safety because the leaders frequently eliminated possible competitors. During those years, Stalin was promoted as the supreme human being and the greatest leader the world had ever known. Cities, streets, and factories in socialist countries adopted his name. His picture was displayed—along with Lenin’s and Rákosi’s—in every Hungarian government office, and the Soviet National Anthem included his name.

In 1952, the Soviet Union participated in a Summer Olympics for the first time, coming in second place behind the U.S. in terms of gold medals won. Hungary finished third by winning 16 events, well ahead of Italy, France, and Great Britain. The Communist leaders hailed the strong showing of the socialist countries as further proof of their superior lifestyle. “We don’t breed professional athletes like the capitalist nations! Instead, we give all workers and peasants opportunities to participate in sports!” they told us.

Rank	Nation	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	 United States (USA)	40	19	17	76
2	 Soviet Union (URS)	22	30	19	71
3	 Hungary (HUN)	16	10	16	42
4	 Sweden (SWE)	12	13	10	35
5	 Italy (ITA)	8	9	4	21
6	 Czechoslovakia (TCH)	7	3	3	13
7	 France (FRA)	6	6	6	18

With the strong emphasis of the socialist system on sports, Hungary had its best Olympic showing in 1952. Star athletes received special privileges from the government.

⁴ These days, the rules vary. In some competitions, even one false start leads to disqualification. Other competitions allow one false start to the entire field. Anyone breaking the start after is immediately disqualified.

A joyful Stalin greeted the returning Soviet team with a Moscow festival. Similar celebrations took place throughout the other Eastern European countries.

Olympic fever infected everyone, including me. I fantasized about going to the Olympics one day and blindly followed everything the coaches told me. My goal was to become a national track and field team member by 1960 and go to Melbourne, Australia.

To centralize athletics in Budapest, three of the strongest Hungarian sports clubs (*MTK*, *Újpest*, and *Kispest*) were taken over by military and security organizations. My club had the dubious honor of being sponsored by the *ÁVO*! Its name was changed to *Vörös Lobogó* (Red Flag.) Surprisingly, the club's management and coaches were not replaced, and we had a significant new benefit—access to the *ÁVO*'s clubhouse on Andrassy Street. At first, I was reluctant to visit the place because it was very close to the feared security torture-house⁵. But the benefits outweighed my concerns. After hearing that inexpensive meals were available there, without the limits of rationing, I took advantage of the State's care of athletes by eating there as frequently as possible. We could also watch movies, participate in cultural events, and hear talks by distinguished sports figures.

One day, the clubhouse announced a visit by Mikhail Botvinnik, winner of the 1948 World Chess Championships. We could sign up for a lottery where 50 lucky people would play simultaneously against the Russian Grand Master. Of course, I jumped at the opportunity and was thrilled to be selected. When the day arrived, I waited nervously for my chance to play. An official of our club gave us instructions on chess etiquette—including how to concede our game when it looked hopeless without wasting Botvinnik's time.

A large room had 50 tables arranged in a U-shape, each with a chessboard on top. Chairs were placed around the outer perimeter of the tables, and each of us took a seat on one of the boards. We all were to play the white chess pieces, giving us the first move. Botvinnik walked around on the inner side of the tables, spending only seconds on his moves at each board.

My game did not last very long. Botvinnik's aide, who followed him and closely observed the games, gave me a sign to surrender. When the Master returned in his next round, I tipped over my king⁶ and waved my hands. He smiled, offered a handshake, and moved on to his next victim. By the end, he beat 49 of us and settled in a draw with one player.

I whistled and hummed my favorite melodies all the way home. When Mother saw me, she asked if I had won another race. "No, I had a chance to play chess with Botvinnik," I replied.

"Did you beat him?" she asked, not knowing who Botvinnik was.

"Of course not. He's a Grand Master."

"Then why are you so happy?"

I tried to explain to her that the mere opportunity to play with someone like him was a great honor—even if I lost—but she would not understand. Still, that event became one of the most cherished memories of my life.

⁵ After the Cold War ended, the building became a museum called the "House of Terror."

⁶ A commonly used chess gesture to admit defeat.



Mihail Botvinnik, referred to in his homeland as the "Patriarch of the Soviet Chess School," learned to play chess at an early age. After retiring from active playing, he focused his energy on computerizing the game.

Special Events

On May 1st, following World War II, huge crowds throughout the Eastern Bloc celebrated Labor Day. The Budapest parades were highly organized, and all able-bodied citizens were “encouraged” to join the marchers. Not participating was considered anti-socialist—an undesirable mark in one’s record.

Early in the morning, the “volunteers” either reported to their workplaces or waited near their residences for their turn. Many of them received signs, banners, or flags to carry. The signs either glorified the Party, its great leaders, and the Soviet Union or denounced the imperialist warmongers and their capitalist partners.

Following careful plans, the groups merged and paraded through the major boulevards, heading toward the final target near Heroes Square. Upon arrival, they were to wave enthusiastically at the party leaders and visiting dignitaries who stood all day on a vast specially prepared podium. The groups disbanded a short distance beyond the review stand, dropped off their signs, and went home. Except for the subways, public transportation was halted to keep the streets clear, so the exhausted marchers had to walk home. For most people, these Labor Day “celebrations” began at five or six o’clock in the morning and lasted until the late afternoon. People spent most of this time on their feet, walking or waiting. The following day, many of the marchers reported being sick to recover from the ordeal of the workers’ parade.

Mother grudgingly took Éva and me to participate in the parades during the first few years. Later, she managed to find some way to be excused. I could also stay away by telling the school I would march with the track team. Of course, I told the track club I would do it with the school. We hid in our apartment on those days—out of everyone’s view.

In 1950, the government declared April 4 a national holiday to celebrate the liberation of Hungary from fascism. On that date, huge military parades were held to display the latest weapons our army had received from the Soviet Union. I was not interested in the weaponry, but I gladly participated in one particular event—the *Felszabadulási Váltó* (Liberation Relay.)



Three pictures of the May 1st parades: The left photo shows the close police monitoring. The center picture was taken at the huge square where the leaders stood. The right picture shows the young Pioneers marching.

Virtually every sports club in the country entered one 15-member team to run the 5-kilometer (about 3.1 miles) race. It began at the Gellért Hotel on the Buda side, passed over the Freedom Bridge, and finished at Freedom Square on the Pest side. Team members ran various distances, ranging from 150 meters to 600 meters. Separate races were held in two age groups—Junior and Adult—for both women and men. Street traffic was blocked off for the entire route.

I made the Junior Boys' teams three years in a row, running different sections each year. The last year was the most memorable because I was the lead-off runner on my team. The 600-meter section included running across the bridge on a cold, windy day. Near the end of our stage, three of us broke away from the 250 to 300 other competitors. I was in second place when I passed the baton to my good friend John Fischer. He was the fastest junior sprinter in Hungary, overtaking the leading team when he passed to our third runner. From there on, our team increased its lead, and we won with a record time. We celebrated our victory on that day with a special party in our clubhouse.



Left: After crossing Freedom Bridge, with about 50 meters more to go, I (#237) was ready to move into a close second place before passing the baton to our second runner. Right: The medal I received after our team's record-setting victory.

The End of Stalin's Era

On March 5, 1953, the Budapest Radio station suddenly began playing solemn music and, without giving any details, announced the unexpected death of Stalin at the age of 65. I did not know how to behave after hearing the news, whether to be happy that the tyrant had died or sad because a worse one might follow. He had not designated anyone to take over. After his iron-fisted rule of nearly 30 years, his death left a huge vacuum in the Soviet leadership.

A day later, Malenkov received the titles of Premier and First Secretary of the Party. In a short time, however, a challenger emerged—Nikita Khrushchev—who eventually gained control of power in the Soviet Union. Although a ruthless character himself, Khrushchev did not like the brutal methods used by the Hungarian leaders. He summoned Rákosi to Moscow and replaced him as Hungarian Prime Minister with another Kremlin-trained Communist, Imre Nagy. However, Rákosi was allowed to remain the Party Secretary in Hungary—a position that wielded solid political power.

Under the leadership of Nagy, who introduced a “New Direction to Socialism,” the Soviet grip on political control in Hungary eased somewhat. He instituted reforms, relaxed the harsh methods of forcing peasants into collective farms, and shifted the focus from heavy industry development to consumer goods production. The reforms were welcomed by Hungarians but were viewed with jealousy by the more conservative members of the Politburo and the leaders of other Eastern Bloc countries.

In May 1953, during my third year of high school, I became eligible to vote in the “Third Hungarian free election.” Free election was in name only. In reality, as in the 1949 election, there were only two choices: approve the Party’s candidates or not. Disapproval of the candidates was both obvious and dangerous. But showing up to vote was mandatory!

When I entered the large voting room, I saw the Party representatives from our city block at the head table. After I handed the Party Secretary my ID Book, he checked my name on his list. Then he greeted me heartily. “Good day, Comrade Besser,” he said, using the offensive salutation I did not like to hear. “Today is a special day in your life!” With that, he handed me the ballot.

“What do I need to do?”

“Well, you can approve the candidates of our Party by simply dropping the ballot in there,” he replied, pointing to a large box with a wide slot on its top.

“And if I don’t approve?” I asked, trying to be funny.

He did not like my sense of humor. “Then you go to the voting booth, write an ‘X’ at the bottom of the ballot, and put it into the same box,” was his harsh-toned reply. The other Party members stared at me in disbelief.

“Of course, I was just kidding. I wouldn’t think of doing that.” I quickly placed the ballot into the box and asked myself how I could be so stupid.

“That is not something a young man like you should joke about,” the other committee member added as he marked something in his notes.

I left the place with genuine concern. *What will be the consequences? Will they report the incident to my school?* For several days, I worried, but fortunately, nothing happened. I promised myself not to be so foolish again.

After completing my third summer of the compulsory industrial job, I studied hard and enjoyed my last year of high school. Following the European custom, in addition to written tests in every class, we had to pass rigorous oral exams in six essential courses before earning our certificates. The examination board included selected teachers and industrial experts. Those comprehensive

tests covered everything they considered necessary from what we had learned during the four years.

The most challenging and most feared oral exam was Material Science and Processes. Most of us questioned why we had to learn about metallurgy since we would be electronic technicians. Worse, the instructor who taught the course did not make it enjoyable.

Sensing our apathy, the teacher tried to be helpful a month before the exam. He selected 42 topics from the textbooks—one topic for each student in the class. At the exam, we would randomly draw one of those. He asked a student, one of my close friends, to prepare 42 slips of paper with those topics written on them. He would pin those slips face down on the bulletin board in the examination room. At the exam, each student would take a slip from the board and discuss that subject with the committee.

The amount of material covered was overwhelming. However, Pista and I, along with the boy selected to write the slips, devised a scheme to ease the burden. Our friend used three slightly different kinds of paper for the slips, so there were only fourteen topics in each group. The three of us agreed among ourselves which group each of us would study. Of course, our success depended on the teacher not discovering our plan.

In addition to preparing for the oral exams, I had another scary event to face. A 10 x 400-meter exhibition relay was scheduled in the recently completed *Népstadion*⁷ (People's Stadium) during the half-time intermission of the Hungary-England soccer game. Only the two top junior team finishers in the Liberation Relays were invited. This time, our relay coach selected me to run the third leg.

Our visiting national soccer team beat Great Britain 6 to 3 in London last year. Undefeated at their home field for the past 90 years, England had been shocked by the defeat. Their revitalized team had been preparing for revenge ever since. The second game would take place in Budapest at the end of May 1954—a sellout crowd of 105,000 people paid to watch the match. Scalpers were selling tickets at record prices.

The game became the focus of the entire nation. Most people planned to camp in front of their radios to hear the broadcast. Our national team had been undefeated for nearly four years, winning 25 international games and the championship in the 1952 Olympics. Naturally, every Hungarian fan expected a victory over England.

At my previous track meets, a few hundred people usually came to watch. I would run in front of ten percent of Budapest's population. I was scared to death. I had diarrhea, and my legs trembled whenever I thought of the approaching Sunday afternoon. I went to see the sports doctor, but he could not help. Our coaches, who were used to competing under such conditions, assured me that the nervous energy would allow me to run better. That advice did not help either. The night before the race, I had trouble going to sleep. I prayed I would not drop the baton or perform poorly in front of all those people.

Our team met at our track, and a bus took us to People's Stadium. During our warm-up, I heard the crowd roar as the Hungarian team gained a 3-0 lead during the first half of the game. Then it was our turn. A uniformed official led us inside the stadium. I had been in the stands several times before, but this was my first experience being on the track. People began to clap

⁷ After the Cold War ended, the stadium was renamed *Puskás Ferenc Stadion* to honor one of Hungary's greatest soccer players.

as we walked in. Looking up and seeing the vast crowd was intimidating. Quickly, our relay race began.

My team's second member entered the final stretch dead, even with his opponent. The crowd was yelling encouragement to their favorite team. My legs were excitedly shaking as my teammate approached our baton exchange zone. We had a good pass, and suddenly, I felt intense and explosive. The nervousness disappeared, and the crowd's noise no longer bothered me. I sprinted by the other runner during the first 50 meters and settled into my 400-meter pace.



Maintaining the lead while being watched by 100,000 spectators in the People's Stadium. In my excitement, I forgot to switch the baton to my right hand when I received it. Our third runner had to change his starting position to avoid a possible collision.

"I must keep the lead," I thought as the other runner attempted to pass me on the second 100 meters. *It would be awful to have these people witness my losing the lead.* I accelerated and stayed ahead. He tried to pass again as we came out of the second curve, but I could outrun him again. After passing the baton to our third runner, my coach told me I ran almost one second faster than my personal record (PR).

Although we ultimately lost the race, I was thrilled with my performance. Later, watching the Hungarian team conquer the English 7 to 1 made up for losing our race. We all sang happily on the bus on the way back. Having our national soccer team win was far more important than coming in first in the club relay.

When exam week arrived, I felt confident about all the tests except the last one in metallurgy. Frantically, I studied the fourteen topics assigned to me (as planned with Pista and my friend) and prayed that everything would go well. The first five daily oral exams went smoothly.

After studying through a large part of the night before the metallurgy exam, I showed up at school at the scheduled time on Saturday. When my partner-in-crime, ahead of me, came out from the classroom, I asked if everything went OK. One of the examiners was standing behind him at the door. He only said, "I passed," but gave me an alarming signal by rolling his eyes. I sensed trouble.

The examiner escorted me to the bulletin board and asked me to pick one of the papers posted. I quickly looked for the shade of paper indicating my fourteen topics. To my shock, all 38 slips looked the same!

I stepped slightly to the side, hoping that from a different angle, I could see the different shades I expected. They still looked the same. The examiner was growing impatient. “What are you waiting for?”

Only a one in three chance of picking the right slip, I thought. After taking a deep breath, I pulled one from the board and looked at it. “Explain the details and benefits of the Bessemer process⁸.” That question was not among the fourteen for which I had prepared! Although this process had a name similar to mine, steel production methods had never interested me. I did not know enough about the subject to face the examiners.

“May I pick another slip?”

“Yes, you may, but it automatically lowers your grade by one,” he replied. “Are you certain you want to do that?”

“I’m afraid I am unprepared to discuss this one.”

“Go ahead and take another.”

There were still 37 slips on the board. Not wanting to raise any suspicion, I picked the first one. It stated, “Discuss the industrial applications of high-frequency heating.” Although it was not among the topics I had studied, I sighed with relief. In two summer jobs, I worked at radio tube factories and saw the metal parts of the tubes heated while being sealed to create a better vacuum. In addition, induction heating was an electrical process that I knew well.

My presentation impressed the board. They would have given me an “A,” but my switching topics reduced it to a “B.” Still, that was the last hurdle I had to pass to become an electronic technician. I was elated!

I intercepted Pista and gave him the bad news about the paper slips. He was as concerned as I had been but could do nothing. However, he was lucky and picked a question that he had studied.

The following week, Pista and I received our technician certificates. The school stamped into our ID books the official release, “Completed his studies on June 23, 1954.” The social director sent the two of us and another student to a company called Audio for job interviews. None of us had heard of the firm, but our Class Chief told us they developed and produced sound systems for large concert halls and sports arenas. We were excited about the prospect of working for them.

Mother was delighted when I showed her my certificate that evening. “I’m so proud of you for being the first in my family to finish high school,” she said with tears in her eyes. The next day, she baked my favorite *dobos torta*. We did not have a party then, so I could eat a large part of the cake—a special treat.

The following day, dressed in my Sunday clothes, I met Pista, and we took the streetcar toward our destination. We had an additional 15-minute walk from our stop to the company’s front gate. Our classmate was waiting for us there. The guard directed us to the front office. A secretary greeted us and soon led us into the managing director’s office, where he sat behind a large desk. At his side sat two other men wearing blue lab coats.

⁸ In the late 1800s the Bessemer process had revolutionized large-scale steel production. Among other applications, it was widely used to replace iron in rails.

After we handed our certificates and ID books to the director, he introduced his colleagues, the chief engineer, and the head of quality assurance (QA). He went on to tell us that the company needed three more technicians to work in their QA department. The jobs would require testing their products during the various phases of production. Whenever he addressed the other men, he referred to them as “Comrades.” I assumed he must be a Party member. (Later, I learned that he was the head of the local Party cell.)

During the next hour, the two blue-coated managers quizzed us about our understanding of electronics. Sometimes, they asked us to draw schematic diagrams on the blackboard to supplement our answers. The director sat quietly, watching us constantly. At the end, they asked us to step outside and wait for a while.

The three of us quietly whispered among ourselves, discussing the interview. We hoped that our answers would satisfy the managers and they would hire us. After a long time, the secretary’s intercom buzzed, and she asked us to reenter the office.

“We are impressed with your qualifications and have decided to employ all three of you,” the director announced. “You two,” he said, pointing to Pista and me, “will work in the electrical QA department.” Our classmate was assigned to the mechanical QA. “You can report to work on the first of next month.

The head of QA led us to Personnel to process the required paperwork. On our way, he told us that our starting monthly salary would be 850 *forints*⁹. “Depending on the quality of your work, you may also receive a premium (bonus) every month,” he added. “Be here at 8 a.m. on the first.” With that, he left us. Pista and I were pleased, but our classmate was disappointed about not working in the electrical section.

After Personnel completed our registration, we received our ID books back. Inside, we saw a new stamp. Under the company’s name were the words, “Hired as Quality Controller from July 1, 1954.” On that day, I became an official member of the labor force!



Photo of our graduating class, 4C, showing the faculty and the 42 students. My picture is in the third row from the bottom, fifth from the right. Pista is at the center of the bottom row.

Although the new official name of the school was *No. 7 Technikum*, most people referred to it by its previous name, *Kandó*.

By a sheer coincidence, a few years ago I met one of my classmates, named Páfi, at a Hungarian gathering. He had also escaped in 1956 and lives near our house in California.

⁹ About seventeen U.S. dollars, calculated at the 1954 exchange rate. However, an exact comparison of the value of my earning would be difficult due to the wide range of Hungarian government subsidies.

Although I initially hoped to be a soccer player, I had the good fortune of being advised by four mentors with international track and field fame: Our neighbor, József Galambos, my two PE teachers (József Vadas in grade school and Sándor Rozsnyói in high school), and club sprinter/hurdler coach József Kovács were all Olympic runners:

József Galambos's running talent was discovered during his military service. In his mid-twenties, he started competing in 800 and 3000 meters but did not succeed in these distances. He became an excellent marathon runner in the colors of Kisvárdá SE (1924-30) and later became a member of the Egyetértés SC (1930-35) and then the BSZKRT SE (1935-37). He competed in the marathon at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928, although he finished towards the back of the field. He reached the 4th position at the European Championships in Turin (1934) and won four times at the famous Košice International Marathon. He won the Hungarian Championship title 7 times in the marathon and twice in the 15 km run. During his career, he improved the national record four times.

József Vadas started athletics in his hometown in the colors of Székesfehérvár TC. In 1935, he moved to Budapest and joined OKHT SE. From 1937, he competed for Magyar Athletic Club; in 1945, he was with KAOE. Vadas won the Hungarian championship at 400 meters in 1936 and 1939, in the 4 x 400m relay in 1946, and in the 4x800 meter relay in 1939 and 1943. Between 1934 and 1940, he represented Hungary 14 times internationally. At the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Vadas reached the semifinals of 400 meters and the quarterfinals at 800 meters. They finished sixth in the 4x400 relay, as Hungary set a national record in the final, which stood for 16 years. In the 4x400 relay, he also finished sixth at the 1938 European Championships. After his sports career, Vadas worked as a coach and physical education teacher.

Sándor Rozsnyói was a steeplechase specialist who, in August 1954, set the first IAAF-recognized world record in the 3,000-meter steeple, recording 8:49.6 at Bern, Switzerland, while winning the 1954 European Championships. He also set four Hungarian records in the event and won Hungarian titles in 1954-55. Rozsnyói set another world record with 8:35.6 in Budapest in September 1956 and went to Melbourne as the favorite in his event but was edged out for the gold medal by Britain's Chris Brasher. After the 1956 Olympics Rozsnyói elected not to return to Hungary and settled initially in Austria, running briefly for them and then was national team coach in 1960. He studied geography at the University of Wien (Vienna). He emigrated to Australia in 1964, working as a physical education teacher and tennis coach at the Epping Boys High School, Cumberland High School, and Model Farms High School, and as a coach with the Ryde-Hornsby Athletic Club until his retirement.

József Kovács started his sports career as a high jumper with KAOE, but in 1927, he moved to Budapest Budai Torna Egylet (BBTE) and switched to the sprints and hurdles. He won 29 Hungarian championships and set 20 Hungarian records in multiple events. He was the first Hungarian to run 400 meters under 48 seconds and the first under 15 seconds in the 110-meter hurdles. His national record at 200 meters was only broken 31 years later.



József Galambos leading a Marathon race

József Vadas

József Kovács

Sándor Rozsnyoi at the Melbourn Olympics

Chapter 11: Beginning My Adult Life

With great excitement, Pista and I went to Audio to work on July 1, 1954. The company was founded in 1948 by two brilliant engineers and nationalized a few years later. It was the leading Eastern European firm developing and producing industrial high-power sound systems. For example, Audio built the PA system for the Moscow Olympic Stadium. By 1954, it employed about two hundred people at three closely located plants.

After a thorough plant tour by the head of electrical QA, William Tell, we received our blue lab coats. Our boss assigned us adjacent chairs in the QA department behind the test benches. He jokingly introduced us to our new colleagues: “These are the new hotshot *Kandó* graduates. Perhaps you can all learn something from them.” His comment puzzled me because Pista and I were much younger than the others—two ladies and four men. How could we teach them anything? As we learned later, they all had acquired their technical skills on the job instead of through formal education. Of course, their long years of experience far outweighed our theoretical knowledge.

To our relief, everyone in the department addressed each other by their first name, without prefacing it with the recommended Communist Party form, “*Elvtárs*” (Comrade). Because we were a generation younger, it would not have been proper to call them by their first names; therefore, we used *Szaktárs* (Colleague) in front of their family names. Later, we used the more affectionate form for some of them by adding “*bács*” or “*néni*” after a man or woman’s first name.

My job exposed me to a wide range of electrical and electro-mechanical products. Revisiting the mechanical tools, machines, and design concepts we had studied at the technical high school became very useful to me.

In addition to various audio equipment, our company developed and produced a relatively low-cost triangular-shaped adapter that converted a conventional record player into a reel-to-reel tape recorder. Many people already owned record players, and his clever device was placed on top of the record player, enabling them to record programs on tape in their homes. The adapter quickly became popular. The only limitation to its production was that the recorder and playback heads had to be imported from Philips of The Netherlands and paid for with scarce Western currency.

Pista and I did not receive any formal briefing. Our on-the-job training included testing various visual, electrical, and mechanical components before they were installed into the final products. Some test procedures were new to us, and our colleagues were very good at teaching us everything we needed to know. Of course, they had a stake in seeing that we learned fast; our entire QA department shared in the monthly *prémium* (bonus). The bonus was tied to the number of defective products found by the customers. In a perfect month, with zero rejects, we received twenty percent extra pay. If the returns exceeded a certain level, none of us received a bonus.

Production supervisors also received incentives depending on meeting the monthly production schedule. Such contradictory goals often lead to heated disagreements between production and QA managers. I rejected a large tray of components with marginally low electrical performance one day. An irate production supervisor tried to convince me to pass them because they did not substitute parts and would not receive any for two more weeks. The amplifiers could

It took me a while to adjust to the new work routine, but I managed to continue with my training schedule. The most challenging part was switching from the 80-meter hurdle race that the *Under-16* competitors ran to the *Junior* category's 110-meter distance, which included ten 42-inch-high hurdles. Even though I was a good hurdler and had long legs, it became apparent in my first year of *Junior*-level competition that I did not have the explosive start to excel in that short race.

After a conference with my coaches, they decided to train me for the 400-meter hurdles, one of the most demanding running events. The ten 36-inch hurdles are spaced 35 meters apart. Maintaining constant, robot-like strides of 15 steps between the hurdles¹ throughout the quarter-mile distance is vitally important. Even a mild headwind or tailwind could easily shorten or lengthen one's regular stride. When that happened, the runner would reach the hurdles too close or too far for the takeoff. Even a small deviation from the customary distance could lead to a devastating crash at high speed.

In addition to the need for a consistent stride length, the 400-meter race required great stamina. Thanks to the hard cross-country training I had done the previous winter, my endurance had improved, and I adjusted to sprinting the longer distance. I performed respectably during my second *Junior* season, usually in the top three. With high expectations, I looked forward to my third (and last) year of *Junior* competition.

Cousin Zsuzsi comes to Budapest

In the fall of 1954, we had an unexpected visitor at home. My 16-year-old country cousin showed up and announced that she wanted to move to Budapest. Zsuzsi, Éva's younger sister, told us that she no longer liked living in a small, backward village. Instead, she hoped to find a job and become a city girl. When Mother asked how Zsuzsi's father felt about the relocation, her answer was, "He was glad to see me go."

Back in her village, she had worked at the communal farm, helping with the animals. We did not know what kind of unskilled work might be available for her in Budapest. However, one of our neighbors, who worked in a textile factory on the city's outskirts, recommended that Zsuzsi visit her company the next day. They left together in the morning, and to our joy, my cousin was hired as an assistant to a machine operator. Although she did not have her government-issued ID book, the company would allow her to work until she obtained one. Disobeying the rigid employment regulations was unusual, but the company needed workers badly.

Zsuzsi told us that she lost her National ID while traveling to Budapest. It was a serious problem to be without one. The next day, she took time off work and went to the district police station to apply for a new book.

A week passed, and my cousin became a regular part of our household. She was sweet and quiet, ready to help whenever needed. However, something was puzzling about the young woman. She would sit and stare out the window in the evenings, deep in thought. She acted like she hadn't heard me if I asked her a question. When I touched her, she suddenly returned to reality and apologized by saying she was thinking about friends in her village. We accepted her

¹ Later, as runners became stronger through weight training, some of the 400-meter hurdlers were able to cover those distances with only 13 strides, significantly lowering the record times.

explanation. We even joked about the possibility of a boyfriend left behind, hoping she would open up to us, but she didn't.

Over the weekend, however, Zsuzsi agreed to see a movie with our neighbor. When she returned home, she said she liked the movie very much, even though it was a heartbreaking story about a young woman who committed suicide.

A few days later, she came home in tears. After lengthy questioning, she told us the company would no longer let her work without her ID book. They had given her a one-week deadline to bring in the book. She promised to visit the police station the next day to find out the cause of the delay.

The following morning, Mother did not feel well. Despite that, she decided to go to one of her regular customers to do their laundry. When she, Éva, and I headed for work, Zsuzsi set out for the police station. We all hoped she would receive her ID book that day.

A sudden shower began as I stepped off the streetcar on my way to Audio. I was nearly soaked by the end of the fifteen-minute walk to the factory. I put on my blue coat inside our department and began some routine testing. Right after our morning snack, I received a page for a city call. Our apartment building's housemaster said, "Come home immediately!"

Mother should have stayed in bed, I thought. I ran all the way to the streetcar in the rain, praying that she would be all right. At the other end of my ride, I ran to our building again, fearing that I would see an ambulance there.

There was no sign of an ambulance. Instead, the large utility truck from the power company was parked in front of the building. I ran into the building and up the stairway without paying attention. Several of the older people stood outside their apartments, staring at me.

The front door of our kitchen was partially ajar, with one of its windows broken. When I stepped into the kitchen from the walkway, the smell of natural gas hit me. As I continued through the kitchen, I saw my mother crying as she talked with two men who wore the familiar uniforms of the power company. On the sofa, just behind them, lay Zsuzsi with her eyes closed. Her face was an ashen blue-purple color. She was dead!

Mother was hysterical. "If I'd stayed home, this wouldn't have happened," she sobbed.

I tried my best to comfort her, but I was also in shock. I could not believe that the young girl to whom I had casually said, "See you later" just a few hours earlier, was no longer alive.

One of the neighbors stepped in and asked if she could help. The utility men suggested she take my mother somewhere else until she calmed down. Reluctantly, Mother agreed to go with the neighbor to their apartment. After she left, I learned what had probably happened.

Most likely, Zsuzsi had returned home shortly after we all left. She locked the kitchen door from the inside, turned on the gas without lighting it, and placed her head inside the oven. Later, when one of the neighbors passed by our front door, she smelled gas and alerted our housemaster. Not receiving any response after ringing our doorbell, he broke the window, unlocked the door, and entered the kitchen. Zsuzsi was lying motionless on the floor, her head still inside the oven. He shut off the gas, dragged her outside, and attempted first aid, but he could not revive her. After the ambulance doctor confirmed the death, they carried her body into our bedroom. The ambulance left, and the power company came to investigate. Shortly after, Mother came home to rest. She then learned about the tragedy.

Using the housemaster's phone, I called the morgue to find out when they would take Zsuzsi's body away. To my dismay, they said, "Sometime tomorrow morning." The body would have to stay in our apartment overnight. Meanwhile, Éva also arrived home. She was devastated by the horrible news. Mother returned from the neighbor's. The three of us sat down to decide our next step.

Zsuzsi's body lay in the room where Éva and I slept on two separate sofas. We did not dare to move the corpse from Éva's sofa, so I covered it with a sheet instead. Being the man of the house, I offered to sleep in that room; Mother and Éva would sleep in the other one.

As the terrible news spread throughout the apartment building, neighbors stopped by to offer their condolences. Of course, everyone wondered why an attractive sixteen-year-old girl would take her own life. Finally, the neighbor who had gone to the movie with Zsuzsi a few days earlier offered a possible clue as to why she had chosen that form of suicide.

"My God, that was the same way the girl in the movie killed herself!" she exclaimed. In the film *A 9-es Kórterem* (The No. 9 Hospital Ward), a troubled young woman kills herself by turning on the gas in the kitchen stove. Everyone in the theater had cried. According to the neighbor, Zsuzsi had commented on the way home that dying that way must be peaceful.

The neighbor's explanation of Zsuzsi's action seemed likely. Of course, that still did not answer the fundamental question—what had pushed my cousin into making that fatal decision? The only thing we could conjecture was the possibility of a love relationship that had gone wrong.

It took me a long time to fall asleep that night. At first, I was afraid of being alone with a dead person. As the clock ticked off the minutes, I became more determined to find out why she ended her life.

We did not look under the sheet until the hearse personnel arrived at our door the following day. One of them was a police officer who brought official documents to sign. I filled out the papers and gave him the form left by the ambulance doctor. When they placed Zsuzsi's stiff body in a canvas bag, we took a last look at her. Her young face was utterly white and peaceful. After the hearse attendants left, we cried and held each other.

The following day, Éva and I went to work, and my mother took the train to the village where Zsuzsi lived. She returned late that evening after talking with Zsuzsi's father. As she told us what they had discussed, we began to understand what most likely drove my cousin to that fatal decision.

According to the father, Zsuzsi had run away from home without obtaining permission from the farm where she worked. Because she quit her job this way, she didn't have an official stamp in her ID book, and no other company would hire her. If she had tried to obtain a new book, the authorities undoubtedly would have learned what she had done. As we found out later at our district police station, she had never reported a lost book. Rather than admit the truth, she had decided to take her life.

Sadly, her father hadn't worried about Zsuzsi's departure. "I have another child to take care of," he had told Mother. He did not come to Budapest for the funeral.

Mother had asked for an autopsy. It confirmed the cause of death—asphyxiation by poison gas. The report put my mother's mind at ease about the possibility of other causes.

The funeral service was simple, attended only by a few people. I had my last cry about the cousin I did not know very well. Éva had spent much of her childhood with Zsuzsi and was struck

by the sudden death of her half-sister. Mother cried for several days, and it was a long time before she smiled again.

A few months later, an acquaintance of Mother contacted us to see if their niece could stay with us for a while. She was a factory worker who had moved to Budapest from the countryside and had trouble finding a place. Even though the war had been over for nearly ten years, there was still a dire shortage of apartments. Mother, still affected by my cousin's suicide, reluctantly agreed. Our new bed-renter stayed with us until the summer of 1955 when she married one of my friends and former classmates, Gábor Benedek. After the wedding, they moved into his family's apartment. Their happiness did not last long; Gábor was drafted into the army shortly after. Surprisingly, in the next year, the three of us teamed up to take an unexpected journey.

Learning to Live with the Political System

At Audio, I was introduced to some of the socialist activities. The Party required all employees to attend a 10- to 15-minute press briefing before work. First, one of the Party officials summarized the relevant political articles from the daily *People's Voice* newspaper. Next, he asked us to comment on the issues by asking questions like, "Why must the socialist nations be alert and protect the peace?" or "What is the goal of the capitalists?" Unable to answer satisfactorily led to a reprimand in the Party office. Repeat offenders could face more serious disciplinary action.

During those sessions, I always cowered in the back, hoping they would not ask me a question. Perhaps they spared me because I was young or relatively new at the company. However, I did run into problems with Korean War Bonds.

The Hungarian government routinely asked workers for "voluntary contributions" to aid North Korea. During the Korean War, the goal was to repel the Imperialist forces from their country. After the 1953 Armistice, Party officials collected money to rebuild North Korea after the damage caused by the American bombers. In 1955, a new campaign was launched to feed starving North Korean orphans. I initially refused to participate. However, I was summoned to the Party office two days before an out-of-town track meet. Three people waited for me behind the conference table—the director of the company, the Party secretary, and the personnel manager. They greeted me warmly and congratulated me on my recent victory at the Budapest Track and Field Championship. Next, they turned the subject to the Korean Bonds.

"We heard you did not sign up for the expected monthly contributions. Is that true?" asked the Party secretary.

"Yes, that is correct," was my reply.

"Don't you feel we all need to chip in for our Korean comrades in their desperate need?"

"I sympathize with their cause, but I don't have any extra money. My mother earns very little, and we live month-to-month on what we make together."

"If you think you have a hard life, I'll read to you about how some of the North Korean children live."

He then read an article from the daily Communist newspaper describing the dire situation of Korean orphans. Next, he turned back to me.

"After hearing that, don't you agree that you should help them?"

"I'm very sorry, but my family also needs every penny we make."

"I regret to hear you are so uncooperative," he said. Then he turned to the personnel manager.

"Do we allow Comrade Besser to leave work when he has track meets? Didn't he also take paid time off to go to a training camp last spring?" He paused briefly so I would be sure to see where he was heading. "I believe he is supposed to take a day off tomorrow to travel to another meet."

"Yes, Comrade secretary—all those facts are correct," replied the personnel manager.

"Are we obligated to let him go?"

"No, but supporting the elite athletes' sports activities is customary."

"Well, if Comrade Besser doesn't want to contribute to a common cause like everyone else, from now on, he will have to take vacation time off for track meets." Again, he waited for this to sink in. "Of course, we cannot guarantee he won't be needed here at work when he wants to go. Do you agree?"

The director and the personnel manager both nodded to indicate their approval. The secretary turned back to me again.

"You heard our conclusion, Comrade Besser. Are you sure you don't wish to change your mind and sign up for the bonds?"

I realized that I could not win. "You have convinced me that I have been selfish. Do you have the papers for me to sign?"

They kept their part of the bargain and allowed me to take paid time off for track meets. However, I knew they would note the incident; it would be in my personnel file forever.

Other than the occasional severe political pressure, I loved my job. Being a technician elevated me to a level just below the engineers on the technical ladder. My school had prepared me well for the practical world, and I was learning more at work every day. After my first year with Audio, my boss reviewed my performance and gave me a small raise and a promotion. Although I remained part of the QA group, my task was now to handle the technical part of incoming electrical component testing. The new assignment allowed me to visit the locations of outside vendors for occasional spot-checking of their products before they were shipped to us.

The criteria for getting my bonuses also changed with the new job. Detecting faulty incoming goods worked in my favor. Letting defective parts go into production worked against me. I did my best not to pass any faulty parts. However, production could not meet their goals if I rejected vital components. I quickly learned about negotiation—an art I had not been exposed to in school.

Compared to my previous position, I had more freedom in my work. When my outside visits took me near to where Nagymama (Pista's grandmother) lived, I always stopped by for a short visit. For the past several years, she had lived with Pista's aunt and her husband. The couple had no children, and Nagymama was left alone while they worked. She always welcomed my unannounced visits with a big hug, calling me "Kis Laci"—the name she had given me when I lived with them in my early childhood. We played card games of rummy for pennies, and I always let her win. When we finished, she happily collected the coins and pretended to spit on them for good luck. I loved her with all my heart and looked forward to having those special private times.

One day, Pista came to work with a long face. "When my aunt went home from work yesterday, the front door was blocked from the inside. After forcing her way in, she found

Nagymama's body on the floor," he told me in a low voice. "According to the doctor, Nagymama suffered a severe heart attack. Apparently, she tried to find help by going outside but did not make it out of the apartment."

The news struck me hard. The kind woman who had treated me equally as a family member since childhood was gone. Zsuzsi's death was very traumatic, but losing my surrogate grandmother was too much to bear. I rushed to a deserted corner of the warehouse and cried for a long time.

Many people attended Nagymama's funeral, many of whom I did not know. They shared stories of what an unselfish, caring person she had been and how deeply they loved her. Despite their words, I felt nobody would miss her as much as I would. A special mass for her followed on Sunday in the Catholic church she had faithfully attended throughout the latter years of her life.

Communists did not believe in God. Although they allowed most churches to continue with limited functions, the Party disapproved of any religious activity. The trial and resultant life sentence given to Cardinal Mindszenty had sent a clear warning to the clergy: follow the guidelines or suffer the consequences.

The Catholic priest of *Rókus kápolna* (Rokus chapel) somehow defied the Party's directions. His sermons contained cleverly hidden messages that would not openly violate the rules. I always looked forward to attending his early Sunday mass in the crowded chapel and listening to his encouraging words. We always concluded by loudly singing our national anthem. I often wondered if the *ÁVO* paddy wagon would wait outside to take us away, but it never happened.

Attempts to Beat the Draft

After I turned 19 years old, I had to register for the draft. The idea of the two-year mandatory service scared me for several reasons. In addition to not being able to help my mother, the possibility of becoming an *ÁVO* soldier was my worst fear. Because the hated organization had taken over our sports club, I was likely to become one of them.

A few days before the medical exam, I asked my coach to let me practice through the 42-inch-high hurdles. After repeatedly running over them, I scraped the inner part of the ankle of my trailing leg. From previous scrapes against hurdles, I already had some calcium deposits there. When I left that day, my poor ankle had a noticeable bruise.

When I filled out the medical questionnaire, I wrote about having a sensitive ankle that did not allow me to wear boots—hoping they would dismiss me. My plan did not work. The examiner told me about special boots for people like me.

Next, I tried to convince the X-ray doctor that I had a weak heart. "I run out of breath easily when I walk up two flights of stairs in our apartment building."

"Looks like you have a slightly enlarged heart," he replied, "but that should not cause any serious problem." He entered something in my report and sent me to the next room.

An army doctor and an officer sat behind the desk. I told them about my health concerns while handing over the X-ray report. The officer looked into a file on his desk.

"It says here that you are a 400-meter hurdler. How could you run such a demanding event with a weak heart?"

My jaw dropped. Naively, I had not expected him to have that information and could not think of a reasonable reply.

“Don’t try to fool us! You are in perfect health.” He wrote something into the file and used a rubber stamp. “We’ll notify you when to report for duty.” In anger, he dismissed me.

The visit left me in a foul mood and, worse, afraid of what might happen next. For several nights, I had scary dreams about being in the *ÁVO* with my hair shaved completely off. My good friend Gábor had been drafted shortly after his marriage, and I saw him completely bald when he came home for an overnight stay. Unfortunately, I could not see any way of avoiding the service.

My First Girlfriend

At work, one of my QA colleagues was sick, so I stepped into another department to inspect a partially assembled lot of circuit boards. Some of the components were not properly mounted. I carried all the boards to the production area and asked the young woman who had performed the operation to redo it. In her frustration, she let out an expletive. Not being used to hearing such language from women, I blushed. Several of the girls working on the production line noticed and broke into laughter. I quickly retreated to the safety of my department, but the damage was already done. At lunchtime, when I passed by the same group, the girls began to talk to each other using colorful language as soon as they noticed me. When I pretended not to hear their words, they laughed even more.

In the cafeteria, I approached the production line supervisor. “Your girls use foul language to embarrass me. Please tell them not to.”

“Well, that is the way they speak. You’ll have to learn to live with it,” was his unsympathetic answer.

After he left, one of the young production girls sat beside me. “Profanity bothers me too, but I don’t show it. You’ll have to do the same, and they’ll leave you alone.”

She was a tall, pretty girl with big brown eyes. I thanked her for the advice, and the two of us continued to talk until the bell indicated the end of the lunch period. After we parted, I realized I had not even learned her name.

At the end of the workday, I rushed outside the factory and pretended to tie my shoelaces while watching the people leaving the front gate. After untying and tying them many times, I finally saw her emerge. Casually, I strolled over to her and asked if she was heading to the streetcar stop. When she replied, “Yes,” I asked if we could walk together.

She looked around, possibly to see if any of her coworkers saw us, and then agreed. I was surprised at how easy it was to talk with her. Her name was Julika. She asked what I carried in my sports bag, and I told her about my hurdling. My athletic background impressed her. She admitted to being somewhat of a klutz in sports, although she had played Ping-Pong several times. I quickly offered to help her become a better player.

I liked talking with Julika so much that I even considered skipping practice that day. She declined when I asked if we could sit at a park to chat more. “My parents keep track of my time, and my father will be upset if I am late,” she explained. Then she went on to tell me that her father was a Party member and the director of a large company. “He is annoyed that I have not

joined the *DISZ* (Working Youth Association), but I am not interested in their politically motivated activities.”

At first, hearing of her father’s Party membership put me on high alert. But hearing that she disagreed with his political views put me at ease. We parted when I had to transfer to another streetcar line, but we agreed to play Ping-Pong over the weekend.

After work the next day, I again waited for Julika outside the plant. She told me her father wanted to meet me before allowing her to go out on Sunday. “He’ll ask you lots of questions. Be sure not to disagree with him, or he won’t let me go,” she warned. I began worrying about the “interview” but decided that if taking her out was the cost, I would have to endure it.

I had a track meet that Sunday afternoon, so we agreed that I would come to their apartment in the morning. They lived on the Great Circular Boulevard, about ten minutes from my home. Having had only one previous short-lived date in my life, I nervously prepared myself for the occasion and rang their doorbell promptly at the agreed time.

A well-dressed woman opened the door. She smiled and invited me in. “*Szervusz*. You must be Besser Laci. I’m Julika’s mother.”

“Yes, I am. *Kezit csókolom*,” I greeted her as I stepped inside. She led me through the hallway and into their nicely furnished living room. A stern-looking man sat at a large table. He stood up, shook my hand, and introduced himself.

“Julika told me about your invitation to play Ping-Pong. Take a seat. Let’s talk for a few minutes first.”

Here comes the interrogation. I sat down and tried my best to look confident.

“Tell me about your family,” was his first demand.

I briefly told him about Mother, Éva, and the well-rehearsed fable about my father having been killed in the war. He asked what work my father had done, and I said he was a bank clerk. Next, he wanted to know what school I had attended. He seemed impressed by my background. *Perhaps I passed his inspection.*

“Julika told me you are not a member of *DISZ*³. Why aren’t you active in it?”

Because she had warned me about that, my answer was well prepared. “I do participate every year in the Liberation Relay. I have a practice or a track meet almost daily, so my time is limited. In fact, I have a meet later today.” Then, I proudly told him about holding a national hurdle record and added, “In my free time, I help my mother with her work.”

It looked like I had scored again; he was probably relieved I would not have time to see Julika often. He called her into the living room. “You two run along but return an hour before lunch.” He shook my hand again and escorted us to the front door.

Passing her father’s scrutiny impressed Julika immensely. Perhaps seeing my Ping-Pong skills later also helped to make a favorable impression. When I walked her home, well before the time specified by her father, she gave me a big smile. “Good luck at your track meet. Tell me about it tomorrow at work.” We parted with a handshake. I left happily, already looking forward to seeing her again.

² Traditional Hungarian way young people greeted adults—“I kiss your hand.”

³ The Communist youth organization

At the track meet, I ran on my club's Junior 4 x 100-meter A-team for the first time. For the past month, our relay coach had had me practice for the third leg, receiving the baton from Munkácsy and passing it to Fischer. The four of us on the relay team formed a close friendship and took pride in having perfected our baton exchanges.

On my way to the meet, Julika was on my mind. I wanted to do well in my two events, and the idea of showing her the results from the newspaper the next day at work increased my motivation even more.

My two arch-opponents were also entered in the 400-meter hurdles. Although the three of us had been evenly matched in the past, I was determined to win that day. I drew Lane 2. Being on the inside gave me opportunities to glance at them during the race, because they drew two lanes closer to the outside. Although we all finished within a few tenths of a second from each other, I came in first. To top it off, our sprint relay team also won.

Later that evening, I waited near a newsstand for the daily sports paper. A small crowd was gathered there, most of them waiting to see the results of the soccer games. Finally, a truck stopped, and a man tossed a large bundle of papers to the newsstand's owner. The group crowded in on him. After some pushing and shoving, I managed to buy my copy. Flipping through the pages excitedly, I found our track meet's results. Although it did not show the individual names of our winning relay team, my name was there to indicate I had won the hurdle race.

At home, I showed Mother the article. She smiled but only said, "Very nice. I'm glad," and continued ironing. She never liked the idea of my participation in an event she considered dangerous. I still hoped that one day she would come to see me run.

The next day, Pista and I bragged about our achievements at work. During the previous year, Pista had switched from swimming to water polo. He played for the junior team of *Fradi*, the club whose soccer team I had hoped to play for when I was younger. The paper mentioned his name as the MVP of the game they had played the previous day. Our colleagues were impressed. Unfortunately, Julika was not at work that day. The day was not as good as I had expected without her being there to see my results.

She came to work the following day, looking pale. "We had something in our Sunday evening meal that made all three of us sick," she told me when we had a chance to be away from the others.

I was glad her mother had not invited me for dinner that day. Then, I asked her, "Would you like to see a movie with me next Sunday?"

"Yes, there is a funny Hungarian film I heard about."

According to Hungarian customs, if a girl accepted a second date invitation, it meant "going steady." At the age of 19, I finally had a girlfriend!

Julika and I had lunch together regularly at work. When I was not visiting outside companies for inspection, we also walked to the streetcar after work. Coworkers began to notice our closeness and frequently teased me, "Time to announce your engagement!" and "Made any wedding plans?" In the beginning, these comments were flattering. After a while, however, I began questioning the wisdom of dating someone at work and suggested to Julika that we not sit together at lunch.

She did not like my idea and did not speak to me for a couple of days. To make up, I asked if she would come to watch the National Junior Track and Field Championship competition over

the weekend, where I competed in three events. The meet took place at Csepel, an industrial suburb of Budapest. Julika had to work on Saturday (I had a paid leave for the meet—but she promised to come on Sunday. The next day, she told me that, at first, her father refused to let her go. After she cried for a while, though, he agreed to take her to the meet.

The Hungarian National Junior Championship

As my running times improved, I occasionally traveled with the track team. The short excursions to different parts of the country allowed me to see more of Hungary. The trips also helped me to develop closer friendships with the rest of the team. They became an extended family. We rooted for each other's successes at the races and shared the pains of the losses. I looked forward to the day when I might be selected to compete internationally.

In 1955, I had the fastest time among the Hungarian Junior 400-meter hurdlers and hoped to win the title. In addition, my club's 4x100-meter relay also had the best time in the country that year, so we entered the championship as "Budapest A." In the 4 x 400-meter relay, the Vasas club had four strong runners, so they received the A-team title. I teamed with three other boys from various Budapest-based clubs to form the "Budapest C" team. These two days will be the most important national competition in which I have participated.

Fall weather moved in early that year. I warmed up with the team for the 4 x 100-meter relay on Saturday, October 1, as a strong wind blew across the field. We easily won our heat and qualified for the final, but the Budapest B team had a faster time. Our relay coach suggested to the second, third, and fourth runners that we lengthen our usual take-off distances⁴ by a foot. That would place the locations of the baton exchanges dangerously close to the end of the passing zone but would allow the receivers to gain more speed. Of course, our team would be disqualified if we did not pass the baton within the zones. It was risky, but he knew we would still manage the exchanges.

Later in the afternoon, I watched my teammate John Fischer win the 100-meter sprint. As the relay final approached, our four runners warmed up again. We expected a close race. Our youngest member, May, was very nervous, and the three of us did our best to keep him calm.

During the race, our passes worked well. The second runners of the Budapest A and B teams led the pack. I matched the pace of the B team's third member, and we passed dead even to our respective anchors. Fischer pulled away, and we won by two-tenths of a second. Standing on the podium, we listened joyfully to the announcement—National Junior Champions of the People's Republic of Hungary!

I proudly showed my gold medal to Mother and Éva when I arrived home. For the first time, my mom showed some interest in my running. However, she again declined when I asked if she would come the next day to watch me. She told me she would be proud of me regardless of how I finished. Still, having her watching the meet would have meant so much to me.

⁴ Each runner who receives the baton places a marker on the track about 20–25 feet away from his starting position. When his incoming teammate with the baton passes over the mark, the receiver takes off at full speed. On a well-practiced team, the runner with the baton catches the receiver only a few meters before the end of the zone. When the exchange takes place, the baton does not slow down.

On Sunday, I had three races: the 400-meter hurdles heat and final, in addition to the 4x400-meter relay at the end. The relay would have timed heats, in which the winner was decided by the fastest time. The weather was worse than the previous day—cold and windy. When we walked to the starting line for the hurdles heat, I saw Julika waving from the stands. Her father was sitting next to her.

I did not have to run too hard in the heat to make it to the final. My coach told me to run the first 250 meters at high speed and relax from there on. After qualifying, I went to see Julika.

Her father was surprisingly friendly. He told me that he had played basketball in his youth but could not continue when he began to work. “You are fortunate to live under socialism, because our Party values sports,” he added in his loud voice. “You could set a good example to *DISZ* members and encourage them to participate.”

People around us stared, and I felt uncomfortable. I agreed and excused myself to be with my teammates to escape from his possible political lecture. He wished me luck in the race.

I drew the outside lane for the 400-meter hurdle finals, which was not a lane preferred by most runners. Due to the staggered start, that position would not allow me to see the other competitors until the end of the second curve. If they passed me on the first 200 meters on the inside lanes, catching up in the second curve, where I had the longer path, would be difficult. If I started too fast, I might not have much left for the last 100 meters.

Sensing my dismay, my coach waved me to see him before the start. “You have the best lane. Nobody can distract you. Run the pace we practiced, and don’t worry about the others.” His advice calmed me down. I shook the hand of my archrival, Péter Váry. We wished each other good luck and went to our respective starting lines.

The first 100 meters went by fast, but the robust and gusting headwind hit me as I reached the second 100. I stretched my strides slightly to reach all the hurdles properly. No other runner appeared in my sight. After the eighth hurdle, I switched from the 15-step to a 17-step pace and turned into the last stretch. Still not seeing the other runners gave me another burst of energy, and I finished unchallenged, nearly 20 meters ahead of the others.

To my surprise, Péter came in third, behind another boy from a different city. “In my haste to catch you, I hit a hurdle in that headwind. It threw me off my pace. I was lucky to be third,” he explained while congratulating me.

Julika’s father took a picture of us when we stood on the victory stand. He promised to give the print to her so I could show it to my colleagues at work. She hugged me while her father looked on disapprovingly. They decided to leave after the ceremony because ominous clouds were moving over the track.

The 4 x 400-meter relay was the closing event of the championship. The rain had poured by then, and the temperature had dropped further. After the second baton exchange, the Budapest A and C teams pulled away from the rest of the field. Surprisingly, our Budapest C-team challenged the strong A-team with the four Vasas runners. I passed the baton first to our anchorman, but he was overtaken in the last 50 meters. It was an exciting race, and my team was happy to receive the silver medal.

400 m gátfutás	
1. Besser László (Budapest)	57.2
2. Vörös Sándor (Bács-Kiskun)	59.4
3. Váry Péter (Budapest)	59.5
4. Sági Sándor (Pest)	59.8
5. Szilva Imre (Pest)	60.7

4 × 100 m	
1. Budapest A. csapata (Máy, Munkácsy, Besser, Fischer)	44.3
2. Budapest B. csapata (Fogel, Somorjai, Kassányi, Elkán)	44.5
3. Budapest E. csapata (Dinnyési, Zsin, Veres, Bányai)	45.2
4. Szolnok (Fábián, Tóth A., Oros, Tóth G.)	45.5
5. Békés (Maxim, Zelenyánszky, Szigeti, Földessy)	45.8
6. Borsod (Mádai, Csótai, Beeskei, Szarka)	46.1

4 × 400 m	
1. időfutalom	
1. Budapest A. csapata (Parsch, Tarr, Csikós, Szdes)	3:27.7
2. Budapest C. csapata (Lázár, Antal, Besser, Süttő)	3:28.2
3. Bács-Kiskun (Oravecz, Pataki, Dudas, Rohrböck)	3:34.0
4. Budapest B. csapata (Fischer, Szemendrei, Lansták, Nagy)	3:34.9
5. Szolnok (Tóth, Oros, Cimege, Veréb)	3:35.5
6. Baranya (Sági, Horgas, Kalményi, Fogarassi)	3:37.6



Left: The results of the 400-meter hurdles (the sixth runner was disqualified) and the two relays.

Right: On the victory stand with my long-time rival, Péter Váry on the right.. By today's standards, our times do not look very impressive. Keep in mind, however, that over a half-century ago, neither weight training for runners and fast all-weather tracks existed. The bad weather that day also did not help.

I felt like I was on the top of the world. I had won two national championships and had placed second in my third event. When I arrived home, I thanked *Galambos bácsi* for his encouragement to start running. I was also thankful to the *Fradí* coach for not selecting me for their soccer team. Perhaps God intended me to run track instead!

That night, I went to bed happily, counting the blessings in my life. I had a loving mother and an excellent job with a promising future. My girlfriend and her father had witnessed my triumphs at the track meet. I hoped my dream of competing at the Olympics someday would come true.

We had the season-closing banquet in our clubhouse when the track season ended. The team's administrator announced some great news. John Fischer and I had been selected to be on the National Track Team! In addition to the elevated prestige, we would participate in the team's two-week pre-season spring-conditioning program at a special training site outside Tatabánya.

The following spring, the training camp was a wonderful experience. We worked out twice daily under the watchful eyes of the national coaches. The fact that my club's hurdles coach was in charge of the National Team's hurdlers offered continuity in my training.

The women's national basketball team was also training at the camp. Somehow, a challenge match was arranged between their team and the hurdlers. The losing team was to hand over their desserts to the winners during dinner while reciting a silly poem. The fact that the Hungarian women had finished second and third place at the last two European Championships did not scare us. I made our team because I had played club basketball for several winters. After a short practice session, we hurdlers were confident of an easy victory.

The game took place in the field house and was refereed by the basketball team's coaches. I was playing forward on our team and immediately received the ball from our center, who easily out-jumped the shorter woman. After several fast passes, I headed to their basket for a lay-up.

Bang-bang-bang! I was pushed and punched so quickly that I did not even know what happened to me. Suddenly, the ball was no longer in my possession. The referee was standing nearby but did not blow his whistle.

“That was a foul,” I protested.

“No. You just dropped the ball.”

I quickly stepped back into action, but the women had already scored. Soon, it became apparent that even though we had the height and jump advantages, they easily outmaneuvered us. My team had no game plan; the women’s did. In addition, whenever we even came close to touching one of their players, the referees called fouls on us. Whatever the women did to us was “fair play.” They beat us badly!

At dinner, my team had to comply with our agreement. It was a humiliating occasion. The women cheered and sang while we watched them eat our desserts. They also teased us every time we crossed paths during our stay.

Besides learning to lose to women, I enjoyed our two-week stay, made new friends, and hoped to return there many times. I was motivated to work out even harder and looked forward to the possibility of traveling to foreign countries to compete. Those who toured regularly with the National Team shared the common (although illegal) practice of smuggling back luxury items unavailable in Hungary. Selling products like Western-made lipstick and nylon stockings could bring handsome profits. I already envisioned myself peddling them to people at work.

The track season that year taught me to be humble again. Competitions became much harder when I advanced from the Junior age group to the Open category. I ran more often in the People’s Stadium, including twice during invitational track meets where foreign athletes competed. The Olympics that year were scheduled for November-December in Australia. Our national teams prepared to travel to that continent. I hoped that by the 1960 Olympics, I would be doing the same.



Two pictures from my club trips. In the left photo (**I am third from the right**), our **sprint coach stands fourth from the left** in the back row. The discus coach is second from the right. In the right photo, our relay coach stands in the center. I am standing on the left.



My first individual race in the People's Stadium, running the 400-meter hurdles. I am the third runner from the left.

After two years of tolerating Imre Nagy as Hungary's Prime Minister, Moscow had had enough of his political reforms. Khrushchev, having won the power struggle for the top Soviet post in early 1955, removed Nagy and even revoked his Party membership after he refused to "confess his mistakes." Rákosi, still the Party's boss, hoped to become the new Prime Minister. However, the Politburo wanted to follow a more subdued path and selected another Muscovite to become the new Hungarian leader. The Party also changed Rákosi's harsh command from "If you're not with us, you're against us" to "If you're not against us, you're with us." The subtle change in the word order clearly indicated the new direction.



Two more photos were taken in the People's Stadium. Left: Before warm-up, standing with one of the competitors. Right: Flying high over the last hurdle while winning a heat of a 400-meter race.



Picture of the Budapest People's Stadium. Recently, it was retitled to carry the name of one of the best Hungarian soccer players, Ferenc Puskás, Captain of our greatest national team of the 1950s.

Significant Change in the Political Direction

To ease the Cold War, Khrushchev also agreed to withdraw Soviet troops from Austria on the condition that Austria remained neutral and did not allow any foreign military bases. At the same time, eight socialist countries—the Soviet Union, Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania—formed the Warsaw Pact for joint military protection to counter NATO. With the announcement of the Pact, any hope that Hungary would escape from the Soviet occupation died.

In February 1956, Khrushchev presented a speech to the Soviet Congress. The shocked assembly listened to the list of crimes Stalin had committed during his reign. Khrushchev also denounced the cultism practiced under Stalin. Although he did not announce any significant reforms, he brought Stalin down from his pedestal to a near-criminal level.

In June 1956, Polish shipyard workers did something unthinkable under the socialist regime—they went on strike to protest their poor standard of living. At first, it looked like the Red Army would step in, but Khrushchev reached a compromise with the Polish leader Gomulka to

prevent a confrontation. In return for receiving improved living conditions, Gomulka agreed that Poland would remain a faithful ally in the Warsaw Pact.

Encouraged by the Polish example, Hungarians also began to express their frustration. Moscow had Rákosi removed just when he was about to arrest the leaders of the unrest. Khrushchev replaced him with Gerő, who was equally disliked by the population.

At the beginning of October 1956, 100,000 Hungarians appeared in Budapest to mourn Rajk's rehabilitation⁵. Perhaps for the first time, the Hungarian Communist Party publicly admitted a mistake by clearing Rajk's name of the espionage charge. The event set the stage for additional gatherings later.

October 22, 1956, was like any other regular weekday for me. After work, I went to our track to begin our fall-winter conditioning workouts. My company had scheduled me to perform spot-checks of vacuum tubes at *Tungsram* early the following morning. I went to bed unaware that many technical university students had met that day at the school and read a 16-point list of demands they wanted to present to the government. They had scheduled a mass demonstration for the next day. I had no idea that the coming day's events would forever change every element of my life.

⁵ A former Minister of the Interior, Rajk, was charged with Titoism and arrested in 1949. After he was tricked into signing a confession, he received a death sentence and was promptly executed.

Chapter 12: Hoping to Beat the Odds

On October 25, 1956, I awoke from a confused sleep. It was early in the afternoon; why wasn't I at Audio? Then, the memory of what had happened in Budapest over the previous two days returned to me; the mounting tensions made "normal" sleep patterns challenging. No wonder I had fallen asleep in the middle of the day!

Radio Budapest was still broadcasting threatening messages to the rebels; interestingly, the government kept extending the deadline for surrender by a few hours. However, the threats did not affect the fighting, and the sounds of shots and explosions continued throughout the day. According to the VoA transmissions, a large number of Soviet armored vehicles and tanks had been disabled by the Hungarian fighters. Many of the Soviet soldiers did not want to fire on the young revolutionaries, and some of them decided to defect. Hearing the news, I wondered if Pavel, the Soviet officer I hadn't had the heart to shoot, had safely reached one of the Soviet units. If he had, how had he explained wearing a Hungarian sports club sweat suit while carrying his army uniform in a bag?

The sudden end to my brief revolutionary activity bothered me for quite a while. After all, I had never even fired my weapon and ended up sitting safely at home while other Hungarians were fighting and dying for our freedom. If they had all left the streets like I had, the revolution would have quickly failed, and Communist dictators would have continued ruling our country forever. On the other hand, the responsibility of looking after my mother, who had sacrificed so much to raise me, was very great. In addition, the VoA and RFE kept sending reassuring messages—"We will not let down the brave Hungarians." I convinced myself to stay home with civilian status. I did not venture out except for short trips to look for badly needed food.

That same afternoon, a forceful knock sounded at our door. Answering it, I met with Miklós Gotthárd, a young college student who lived on the floor below us. In worried tones, he told me that a man who looked just like Pista—same herringbone overcoat and all—had been killed on the corner outside our building. His words brought chills to my spine, and I feared Pista might have tried to visit us and now lay dead on the street. Without a word to my mother, I pushed past Miklós and ran down three flights of stairs and out the gate, not caring if I ran smack into the middle of a Russian tank. I had to find Pista!

To my great relief, the body was not that of my "cousin" but rather some unfortunate victim who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. His face had a grotesque expression that hounded me for a long time. I thought of looking into his ID book to find out where he lived, but I was afraid that someone might mistake my actions for being a thief. After saying a quick prayer for his soul, I went home.

In the 1950s, only a few apartments in Budapest had iceboxes¹ to keep perishable foods. Vendors driving horse carriages drove by daily, selling large blocks of ice that lasted two to three days. Households without iceboxes needed to buy most food daily, but even those with such a "luxury appliance" had to shop at least twice a week. My mother had bartered for an icebox a few years earlier, but the ice vendors did not risk overrunning their wagons by tanks. Although the nationwide strike did not interrupt essential public services of Budapest, such as

¹ Predecessors of modern electric refrigerators.

water, gas, and electricity, virtually all the stores were closed, and residents depended on food farmers brought to the city randomly.

Finding farmers with food proved difficult; their limited supplies were already gone by the time word spread of their locations. In addition, continuous street fighting kept everyone in fear. Stepping outside a building posed risks of being caught in crossfire or hit by stray bullets. For days after the initial insurrection, we consumed whatever staples we had at home—dried corn and beans, potatoes, and some dry salami. Part of our meals also came from the bottled fruit Mom prepared every summer. I loved eating such delicacies and encouraged her to open a few. In the past, we had never touched those jars until the winter. But under the circumstances, she reluctantly complied.

During the next few days, while hunting for food, I noticed the display windows of most stores located on major boulevards were shattered, with all contents emptied. Posted signs, such as, “We are revolutionaries—not thieves! Goods are kept with the building manager,” could be seen all over. Looting, a frequent occurrence during wartime, had been virtually non-existent, and I felt very proud of that.

I remember the touching experience of seeing flowers, pictures, and hand-printed signs on top of makeshift gravesites of the fallen fighters, often showing their ages and addresses with comments like “He died for our freedom.” One of the graves I saw had a wooden cross and a sign saying, “A nurse in uniform, killed by ÁVO gunfire while aiding wounded fighters.” Another casualty I saw near where I lived was a heavyset elderly woman, still clutching her shopping bag. She had been shot through her legs with large caliber bullets² and probably bled to death. Her body and the rest of the corpses, including those of Soviet soldiers, had been sprinkled with lime to prevent diseases from spreading.

Radio Budapest had suspended its regular programming to broadcast classical music most of the time. On October 24, it announced the appointment of a new Prime Minister, Imre Nagy, who had been a long-time Communist and had gradually worked his way up in the Hungarian government. In 1953, the Soviet Politburo promoted him to be Prime Minister³, replacing Rákosi, a man hated by most Hungarians. Both Nagy and Rákosi had lived in the Soviet Union since WWI and had been active in the Communist Party for decades. They returned to Hungary after World War II to form a new government.

Rákosi had first become General Secretary of the Communist Party, and Nagy initially held the post of Secretary of Agriculture. Nagy introduced significant land reforms, gradually eliminating all privately held farms over 15 acres in size. Rákosi was appointed Prime Minister in 1948, quickly creating a terror-based government until Stalin died in 1953. Rákosi prided himself on being one of Stalin’s best students. He was also known for his “salami” tactics⁴. To improve the economy and relax the political pressure, Nagy was given the top post in 1953.

² Most Soviet tanks were equipped with anti-aircraft machine guns that fired 12.7 mm (0.5 caliber) bullets.

³ In the 1946 election following WW II, the Communist Party received only 17% of the votes while the Smallholders Party had a clear majority of 57%. Still, the Soviet Union insisted on a coalition government, giving the Communists the most important positions. In early 1948 all Hungarian political parties—with the exception of the Communist Party—were abolished. After that, the top Hungarian government officials were regularly selected by the Soviet Politburo.

⁴ Eliminating political opponents like slicing salami.

Two years later, the Soviet bosses felt he was too lenient and had become too popular among Hungarians. Nagy had witnessed the gradual failure of the collective farm system and wanted to return some land to individual farmers. During his term, he closed forced labor camps, announced political amnesties, and allowed private family businesses with fewer than four employees. However, the Kremlin felt he had gone too far at that point. They removed him from office and kicked him out of the Party but allowed him to live⁵ in retirement.



Left: Burning pictures of the hated former communist leader, Rákosi, in 1956.

Right: Dead body of a 16-year-old fighter, covered with lime and flowers.

I was still in high school when Nagy became Prime Minister in 1953, so his economic reforms did not affect me personally. When he was removed from his post two years later, our Party Secretary at Audio denounced him as a misdirected person who wanted to lead our country in a dangerous direction. Hearing the Party's negative line about Nagy, I instantly liked him. I felt he was a good man at heart and was proud that he tried to wrestle Hungary out of the grip of Soviet oppression.

After becoming Prime Minister for the second time on the 24th of October, 1956, Nagy gave conciliatory talks, both through the radio and live at the Parliament. He urged fighters to surrender to the Hungarian authorities before the deadline—still being extended hourly. At that point, however, being a devoted Communist and a loyal Hungarian, he faced a serious conflict in deciding whose side he should take. He understood the failings of Communism but tried to work within the system to ease the suffering of Hungarians.

Outsiders didn't understand this. Most Hungarians didn't trust him because he had been closely associated with the Kremlin. To the Western governments, particularly the U.S., as well as to some of the rebels, he seemed to be just another Communist ruler who should not be trusted. Both RFE and VoA openly denounced him. They could not understand how a Communist could oppose the Soviet bosses, and both radio broadcasts lobbied for different leadership.

Last but not least, he was more of an economist than a politician; reaching compromises through effective negotiation was not his forte. Nevertheless, Nagy was still popular among some Hungarians due to the economic reforms he had produced while he served as Prime Minister from 1953 to 1955.

One day, a large crowd gathered at Parliament Square, seeking specific answers to their demands. Soviet tanks had already surrounded the Parliament, but the environment was peaceful. Many of the tanks had their top hatch open, allowing the soldiers inside to smoke.

⁵ Failing to follow strict Communist Party lines frequently led to execution, so Nagy was fortunate to have his life spared.

Hungarians crowded around the tanks, and those who spoke Russian attempted to convince the soldiers to return to their bases. Without warning, *ÁVO* militia fired shots into the crowd from the rooftop of a Ministry building adjacent to Parliament. Some of the tanks returned fire; the ensuing crossfire killed over 60 people and left several hundred wounded. Why the shooting started was never confirmed, but in that incident, the Soviet vehicles helped to protect the Hungarian population.



Two photos depicting Soviet tanks and unarmed Hungarians at the Parliament before the *ÁVO* massacre.

Word of the *ÁVO*'s unprovoked action quickly spread around the city, triggering a brutal reprisal against any *ÁVO* soldier or agent captured alive. Fearing a large-scale killing, Nagy abolished the *ÁVO*, although it took several days before his order was completely carried out.

The resistance of the revolutionaries continued on the third day, increasingly annoying the Kremlin. The news that some of their troops had defected and even sided with the rebels further frustrated the Soviet leadership. Surprisingly, Khrushchev initially agreed to a political solution to the Hungarian crisis. Perhaps he hoped that if he appeared to be a moderate, he would be more successful in negotiating an arms treaty with the United States. He also promised to withdraw his troops from Budapest, thinking Hungary would be satisfied with somewhat looser control. He did not realize that the people wanted no Soviet control at all. The head of the Soviet Army divisions stationed in Hungary, as well as the Soviet Ambassador to Hungary, both agreed to remove their armed forces from Budapest. Their troops began to pull out that day.

Then, news of the Suez Canal crisis reached Hungary. Egyptian President Nasser had nationalized the Canal a few months earlier, pushing France, Britain, and Israel into a coalition to attack Egypt. This new war diverted international attention from Hungary, resulting in a strategic disagreement between the U.S. and the British-French alliance. Although the Western nations had not offered any assistance to the Hungarian fighters beyond feeble talk, the Suez War dealt a devastating blow to the outcome of our struggle. Of course, the Kremlin welcomed the news. It made it much more difficult for the Western powers to criticize Soviet intervention in Hungary while they were meddling in the Middle East.

The next day, relative calm came to Budapest. Although somewhat reluctantly, Nagy gradually began to accept the revolutionaries' demands. Then rumors circulated that political prisoners were being held captive in a district Communist Headquarters on Republic Square, located within 200 meters from where I lived. Inside the building, some Party officials, regular staff members, and about 20 *ÁVO* foot soldiers led by two officers had maintained operations since the outbreak of the revolution. After Nagy gave the order to close the *ÁVO*, the Internal Ministry sent police uniforms for all *ÁVO* personnel to replace their outfits. Earlier that morning, being concerned about a possible outside attack, the *ÁVO* detachment had asked for additional reinforcement from the Hungarian Army, and the Defense Ministry dispatched ten officers to coordinate the defense of the building. Unknown to me then, the highest-ranking Army officer sent to the Party building would later become my half-sister's husband!

When a group of fighters tried to enter the building to look for prisoners, a major armed confrontation broke out. I did not participate in the attack, but I watched almost the entire proceeding from the corner of the square. The rebels, equipped with rifles, submachine guns, and hand grenades, began firing on the building. A T-34 tank that sided with the revolutionaries also assisted, using its 85 mm (3.5") cannon. The tank stood only about 30 to 40 meters from the Party office. Seeing its cannon flash and the resulting instantaneous crumble of the wall where the projectiles struck left a deep impression on me.



Left: Photo of the District Party building located two blocks from our house at the end of the fight. Center: Executed *ÁVO* defenders. Right: Mob revenge on a captured officer.

The defenders called for help, but when three more Hungarian Army tanks arrived, they also shelled the building instead of dispersing the crowd. It is still unclear whether the tank crews were confused or purposely fired on those who called for assistance. Eventually, the rebels took over the building, and most of the defenders were shot point-blank after they surrendered. The furious crowd lynched an officer who tried to flee. The picture of his half-naked body, hanging upside down from a tree, appeared in *Life* magazine a week later, along with photos of other dead *ÁVO* soldiers. Such barbaric killings occurred in several places as a reprisal for the butchering of civilians at the Parliament earlier.

In fairness, all soldiers wearing *ÁVO* uniforms should not have been classified as enemies of the people. The Hungarian military had several branches: the Army, Border Guards, the Air Force, and the *ÁVO*. After being drafted, any 19-year-old could be placed into the *ÁVO*, regardless of his political beliefs. Of course, after induction, they received extensive Party-oriented brainwashing, but they had no choice. Most likely, some of the *ÁVO* conscripts killed

at Republic Square only followed orders while perhaps secretly identifying themselves with the revolutionaries. Since my sports club was “sponsored” by the ÁVO, I could have been thrown into their ranks if drafted.

Thirty-two years later, in Budapest, I met my half-sister Kati and her husband Lajos, a devoted Communist and a retired general of the Hungarian Army, for the first time. I was astonished to learn that he was the highest-ranking Army officer in charge of defending the Party Building! Here is what Lajos told me about the Republic Square confrontation.

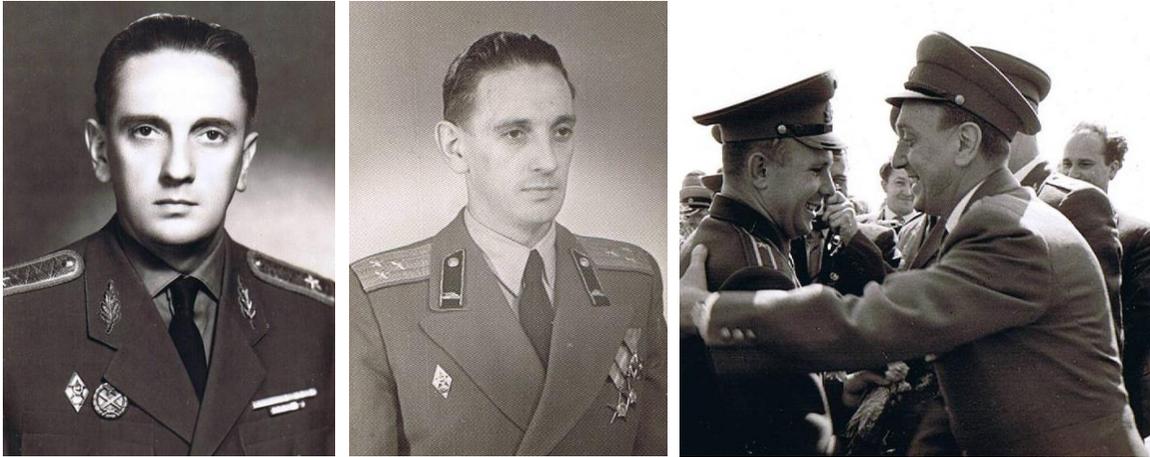
According to him, he carried specific orders to assist the ÁVO in protecting the building from “insurgent troublemakers.” The insiders were stunned when the expected rescue tank turned on them and felt that their commanders should be court-martialed for the shelling. According to court records of the trials held a month later, the tanks came from an out-of-town Army base without proper maps and radio equipment. The newly arrived units joined in because the other tank had already fired on the building. They turned around and left when they saw the crowd’s cheering reaction⁶. At that point, the defenders tried to arrange a cease-fire to allow the civilians to leave the building unharmed. The crowd was not in the mood to negotiate, and the ÁVO officer in charge of the building was critically wounded while holding a white flag. He died later that day in a hospital. My brother-in-law’s life was spared, however, despite his being seriously injured by a hand-grenade explosion. When the building was taken, a fighter rushed in with his weapon ready to fire. Lajos, lying on the floor in his Army uniform and covered with blood, asked the man, “Will you shoot a wounded Hungarian soldier?” Instead of killing him, the fighter left and returned with two medics. They covered him up on a stretcher and carried him out of the building while yelling, “He is one of us.” Lajos later recovered in a hospital, but his body still had some of the fragments from the hand grenade that nearly killed him.

Despite the obvious shortcomings of Communism, some people—like Lajos—still supported the regime because it did have an ideological appeal. They felt that Communism was great in theory—perhaps we were not applying it right. Also, the only way to gain any power or higher position was to climb up the Communist system’s hierarchy; plenty of people were willing to do whatever was required for a Party promotion.



A badly wounded Hungarian Army Colonel, Lajos, placed on a stretcher. He was one of the few defenders who survived the siege.

⁶ After the revolution ended, all three tank officers received severe punishments for the action.



Left to right: Photos of my brother-in-law as an Army Colonel in 1956, a full General in 1968, and a year later greeting Yuri Gagarin at the Budapest Airport. (Soviet Cosmonaut Gagarin was the first human to orbit around the world in a satellite space capsule.)

In a recent telephone conversation, Lajos also told me that the Party building did not hide any political prisoners, and the search conducted by the revolutionaries was a waste of time⁷. In addition, he revealed that several Party officials and employees managed to escape from the building before it was captured by breaking through a rear wall into an adjacent courtyard. A woman who was the top-ranking District Party Official did not have such luck. After being cornered, she attempted suicide by jumping off the top floor. Although she survived the fall, she died a few years later due to complications caused by her injuries.

The newly formed Hungarian government was aware of the infiltration of new Soviet troops and heavy equipment. Sensing an ominous threat, Nagy launched a solid protest to Andropov, the Soviet Ambassador. Without immediate reassurance that the flow of armored divisions would stop, Nagy threatened to break away from the Warsaw Pact and declare Hungarian neutrality. Andropov still did not respond. Next, Nagy tried to communicate directly with the Politburo in Moscow, asking to discuss the Soviet troop withdrawal. Again, there was no reply.

The next day, the 1st of November, Prime Minister Nagy lifted the city curfew and announced sweeping political changes. He would:

- Give general amnesty to all who participated in the armed revolution.
- End the single-party dominance of the Communist Party.
- Promise to form a new democratic government.
- Declare neutrality for Hungary and exit the Warsaw Pact.
- Ask the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops from Hungary.
- Release Cardinal Mindszenty (given a life sentence by a kangaroo court in 1949) from prison.

He also contacted the U.N. and asked to discuss Hungary's declared neutrality in the next session.

⁷ Heavy equipment dug up various sections near the building, looking for hidden tunnels believed to hide prisoners. The search continued for several days without finding any evidence or people.

Jubilation erupted throughout Hungary. We had accomplished the impossible—David had defeated Goliath. Even those who had previously questioned Nagy's true intent suddenly agreed he was one of us. The rebels and government established regular communications. Free Radio Budapest told us that the Soviet troops would soon leave the city and asked everyone to return to work as quickly as possible. New publications and political parties popped up overnight. Volunteer crews began cleaning the debris and destruction on the streets so public transportation could start operating again.

Although most Hungarians celebrated the victory, some became increasingly concerned about their future. Out of the total population of ten million, about 900,000 Party members existed. Perhaps less than a third of those were true Communists, but the remainder maintained the pretense of better job opportunities or other personal reasons⁸. Seeing the brutal treatment of captured *ÁVO* soldiers, most Party members felt threatened and wanted to revert to the past. Also, since all Hungarians had lived under socialist-communist control for nearly a decade, their mentalities and expectations had changed considerably. Only a few people under 30 wished to rotate completely to full-scale capitalism and give up state-subsidized living with all attendant social benefits⁹. I included myself in that group. We did not remember much about life before World War II; our adult lives were formed in the Communist era. The older generation could recall how they had lived before the Soviets had occupied our country; not counting the war years, life had been good. In 1956, however, we just wanted to live in a safe environment without the fear of *ÁVO*-like security forces, have freedom of speech, and enjoy an economy that blended socialism with capitalism.

Representing the former Communist rulers, a small delegation of high-level Party officials, including János Kádár, who had already accepted a post in the new government, secretly flew to Moscow for help. They found a receptive audience there. Khrushchev, who initially approved allowing more freedom to Hungary, had already become very alarmed about the latest demands. Since October 23, the Soviet Politburo had changed plans—sometimes more than once a day—about the following steps to take in Hungary. Khrushchev even described his dilemma between crushing the rebellion and recalling the Red Army in his diary. He could not allow Hungary to defect from the Warsaw Pact, to have multiple political parties, to declare neutral status that could invite Western investments, or to openly kill Communists. This time, Nagy had gone too far and must be stopped!

Reversing the previous decision, Khrushchev and the Politburo decided to end the dangerous adventure that might lead to a chain reaction in other Eastern Bloc countries. After consulting with the military leaders, they decided to replace their troops stationed in Hungary and launch a coordinated military attack on November 4. A massive force of 500,000 soldiers and 6,000 tanks¹⁰ were designated for the task. Field Marshall Zhukov assured Khrushchev

⁸ A year later, when I lived in Canada, I learned that one of my high school teachers, believed by us to be a devoted communist, only acted that way to save her husband whose past as a Nazi sympathizer imprisoned him.

⁹ Apartment rents, food, and transportation were heavily subsidized by the State. Taxes and unemployment were unknown. Every worker had a guaranteed two-week paid vacation yearly at a government resort, to mention just a few of the benefits of socialism.

¹⁰ In the first attack they used the older T-45 tanks while in the second phase they brought in the more powerful T-54 models.

their army would finish the job in four to five days. The Politburo appointed Kádár as the new Hungarian Prime Minister immediately after the invasion.



Left: Nikita Khrushchev. Center: Imre Nagy. Right: János Kádár, the Soviet Politburo's new choice to replace Nagy as Prime Minister of Hungary.

On Friday, November 2, along with many Hungarians, I headed back to work for the first time, wondering if the facilities had been damaged during the fighting. Most streetcars and buses could not operate due to the torn-up streets and remaining barricades. It took me over an hour to walk to Audio. To my relief, none of my company's buildings had been affected, and about half of the employees showed up to work. Pista and I happily greeted each other. After attending technical school and working together, we were used to seeing each other six days a week¹¹. Naturally, we had lots of new information to share after not contacting each other for nearly a week. He was touched by hearing how worried I was thinking that he was the young man shot on our street.

We had both missed regular workouts since the beginning of the revolution, and we were eager to return to our regular training schedules. When I told him about my scary experience with the *ÁVO*, he sheepishly admitted to staying home during the fighting. Pista had been my role model since our earliest childhood, and hearing his admission made me feel very proud of my small revolutionary participation. For the first time, I thought that I had accomplished something he had not.

The fact that our company's General Manager, the Party Secretary and the third member of the local "Party Triangle" were all conspicuously absent generated a lot of discussion among the employees. Some of us exchanged experiences of the past days; others just stood or sat quietly, wondering what would happen next. Later in the morning, an announcement through the PA system asked everyone to gather in the theater¹² for a general meeting. After we crowded into the hall, one of the managers, who was not a Party member, took the podium. The man suggested we elect a committee to examine the past behaviors of all Party members and decide if any punitive action should be taken against them.

Before going through a list of Party members, J.G., one of the production foremen, stepped between Pista and me and whispered, "You guys know that I am a decent person and have never harmed anyone. Please speak up on my behalf." Pista and I looked at each other as we slowly walked away from him. What should we do? Should we help him?

¹¹ We worked 45 hours per week—eight hours daily Monday through Friday, and five hours on Saturdays.

¹² Since our company's main product was large audio systems, we had a state-of-the-art theater to test the various loudspeakers.

J.G. had come to work in our company about a year earlier, and rumors floated around that he had transferred from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This organization oversaw the *ÁVO*'s operation. Anyone working at the Ministry had known or suspected Communist ties. J.G. had zero technical background, so we all wondered why he had been placed in a position requiring some knowledge of technology. Nobody at our company, perhaps except the Party Triangle, had information about J.G.'s background, but we had all behaved extremely carefully whenever he came within earshot. Pista and I worked in Quality Control, and J.G. supervised the production area; while we had daily contact with him, we never had a significant conflict. But since the possibility of his being a Party informer existed, Pista and I decided to withhold any endorsement. I do not recall any action being taken against J.G., but I never saw him again.

Those of us present quickly elected a committee and a leader who immediately recommended destroying all personnel records of the Party. Two production workers and I readily volunteered when he asked for help. I was particularly eager to see my personnel file—for a good reason. A year earlier, I had refused to purchase bonds to help the North Koreans fight the Americans and was curious how the Party kept track of it.

Since only the Party officials had a key to the door, we broke a window and climbed into the unattended office. A large padlock secured the file cabinets, but one of my cohorts ran back to the shop for a sledgehammer and smashed the lock. We filled large boxes with the personnel files and then wheeled them back to the theater. Each person present was given their file. With a sense of triumph, I took mine home and still have my first year's review¹³ written by my immediate supervisor (see copy below), dated before the bond fiasco. The review's last sentence probably relates to my refusal to join *DISZ*, Young Worker's Association, which was the prelude¹⁴ to membership in the Communist Party. Unfortunately, I have lost the rest of the folder due to my numerous moves over the past fifty years, including detailed political reports written by various Party officials about my sister and me. The summary mentioned my refusal to buy the bonds and did not rate me favorably politically—even though my mother was a domestic worker¹⁵.

¹³ I did not dare take it with me during my escape from Hungary, but I retrieved it later while visiting the country legally.

¹⁴ Three steps recommended for successful life under Communism: Become a Pioneer in grade school, join the *DISZ* in high school, and apply for Party membership at work.

¹⁵ In the communist society's hierarchy, workers and peasants were on the top, followed by "progressive" intellectuals. The lowest groups, from the bottom up, were Nazi sympathizers, former business owners and large land owners, and former army officers. In the middle are the petty-bourgeois—the kinds that neither openly opposed nor cooperated with the system.

J E L L E M Z É S.

Besser László /elektromos anyagátvevő /technikusró.
1954 Julius 1.-óta van alkalmazásban az osztályon. Szakmailag jól képzett. Munkáját korához képest felelősséggel és pontosan végzi. Áldozatkész, a hóvégi hajrákban, sokszor minden ellenszolgáltatás nélkül szívesen és odaadóan résztvevett. Sokat és eredményesen sportol. Kissé polgári beállítottságú. Ja vaslon mielőbb az oktatásra való beállítására./középszintre t. i. az iskolában tanultak alág alap erre/ mert fejlődőképes. Hibája: Ünérzetes és kissé konok természet.

Budapest. 1955. IV. 9.

Tell Vilmos s.k.

Bredetiről megolta
Hagy Gézoré szem.e.a.

Ónag Gézoré

László Besser is the incoming electrical component inspector/technician. He has been employed in our department since July 1, 1954. Technically well-educated. Considering his age, he has been responsible, performing his job precisely. He always participated beyond the call of duty during the end-of-the-month overtime without any expectation. He has been very involved with sports and has achieved a lot. Politically, he has a "petty bourgeois" attitude, and I recommend re-education at the intermediate level (his high school should have provided the basics), because he has the ability to grow. Weaknesses: Self-righteous and somewhat hard-headed.

Because so many employees were still absent, the production lines could not function. Our newly elected committee decided to take the rest of the week off and begin work again the following Monday, three days later. Only a relatively small number of the workers had telephones, so we all promised to contact one other employee personally with that news. After that, we sang *Himnusz*, our national anthem, and parted joyfully. Before leaving, I fulfilled my assignment by calling on a colleague from my department to tell him about the events of our meeting. I also passed him his personnel file from the Party Office. My colleague could hardly believe what had happened and promised to be at work the following Monday.

The small cut I suffered when I tripped over the cobblestones a few days before healed, but the gum above my upper front teeth was still sore, particularly when I bit on something hard. I visited *Sportkorház* (Sports Hospital) to see a dentist, but the clinic was only open for serious emergencies. The doorman suggested I take aspirin and return a week later when they would be available for routine services. I followed his advice to take the medication, but the pain did not go away. It took almost a year to find a remedy.

During the next two days, RFE broadcast ominous news about fresh Soviet troop movements crossing into Hungary from Romania and Ukraine (the latter, then being part of the Soviet Union). However, Free Radio Budapest still had no news about the threat. Some newly established Hungarian newspapers also questioned whether Moscow would fulfill its promise to leave us alone. However, most of us still naively believed in honor. Khrushchev would never lie openly in front of the entire world, and in any event, we assumed the West would not let the Soviets attack us again.

Most Hungarians were busy clearing the destruction left after eight days of fighting; they buried the dead and obtained food for their families. Living conditions began normalizing, and some of the bakeries reopened, with long lines of hungry people waiting for a loaf of bread.

Many people had returned to work, and schools were scheduled to open again soon. Our dream of leaving the Warsaw Pact and becoming a neutral nation suddenly seemed possible.

We did not know that the U.S. allegedly promised the Soviet Union not to interfere or aid Hungary (and possibly Poland) if the Red Army stayed out of the Suez War. The Soviets had close ties with the Egyptians after nationalizing the Suez Canal. President Nasser publicly asked for Soviet assistance against the Imperialist powers of Britain and France. President Eisenhower, concerned that the two conflicts might lead to a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, decided to stay neutral. He publicly supported the freedom fighters' cause, but his words were useless. Britain and France had their own problems and did nothing to help either. In addition, leaders of other Eastern Bloc countries—such as East Germany, Romania, and Bulgaria—had vested interests in seeing our revolution fail. If Hungary could break free from Moscow, others might also rebel and create a domino effect throughout the Warsaw Pact. To protect their empires, all those Communist bosses wholeheartedly supported Khrushchev's plan. In addition, Marshall Tito, the Yugoslav dictator, who had played up very skillfully to the Soviets and the West, also became concerned. He did not want a competitor next door and secretly approved crushing our revolt.

Prime Minister Nagy again complained to Andropov about the constant inflow of new Soviet troops and heavy equipment into Hungary. One more time, the Ambassador assured him that the soldiers were there to safeguard the removal of Soviet citizens and property. Since Nagy still hoped for a peaceful settlement and wanted to prevent panic, he ordered Free Radio Budapest not to say anything about the imminent danger. Most of the city's residents were not aware that the Red Army had already formed an iron grip around Budapest, ready to strike a lethal blow. Hungary was left alone to face the humiliated and angry Soviet Union.

The 1956 map of Central Europe illustrates the difficult geographical location of Hungary. Three of its neighbors, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and Romania, were in the Communist camp. Yugoslavia played both sides and could not be trusted. From 1945 through 1955, Austria had been partially occupied by the Soviet Union. The Kremlin justified keeping its troops in Hungary to "maintain the necessary strategic linkage to Austria." On the same day that the Soviets agreed to leave Austria and allow it to become neutral, the Warsaw Pact was created—much the way NATO was formed—for "mutual defense among the Communist countries."



Map of Hungary in 1956 with its five neighboring countries.

The Pact justified the continuing presence of Soviet troops and personnel in the satellite territories to counter the American presence in Western Europe. Hungary had been gradually melted into the core of a Communist pot. The 200-km (about 125-mile) border between Hungary and Austria had been fortified to “prevent Western provocateurs sneaking into Hungary.” Fortification included zones of landmines, guard towers, horse patrols, searchlights, barricades, and barbed-wire fences. Border guards were instructed to “shoot to kill” anyone found in that region, and promotions were given for successful hits. In addition, the last ten kilometers (about six miles) to the border had been declared a forbidden area, and only local residents had permission to be inside that region. (A well-known Hungarian joke I heard in those days was, “Those Western provocateurs must be stupid, trying to sneak into Hungary while walking backward,” pointing to the fact that all those killed in the border zone were always shot in the back.)

Shortly after taking office for the second time, Prime Minister Nagy ordered the clearing of the fortified border zone between Hungary and Austria. As soon as people heard about it, refugees began fleeing to Austria. Some left because they feared reprisal for past political behavior, while others just wanted to live in the West. Although many of the initial refugees were not freedom fighters, they received generous help from our Austrian neighbors, who still remembered their dark days under Soviet dominance. RFE acknowledged the first successful escapes and even broadcast some interviews with the newly arrived refugees.

The husband of one of my mother’s laundry customers had just been released from political prison a few days earlier by Nagy’s amnesty program. Feeling uncertain about the new government’s stability, he and his wife quickly decided to flee the country while the opportunity existed. They had a motorcycle and planned to ride it toward the western border, then find a way to sneak into Austria. Fearing the risk of taking their 30-month-old son with them, they asked my mother to look after him for a few days until his grandmother’s cold improved. Mother was reluctant since we had little food left, but the couple sounded so desperate that she finally agreed. The fact that they offered her money and some canned food helped her to decide. They did not tell the grandmother about their scheduled escape and planned to notify her through the Red Cross after arriving on the other side. I heard later about their successful escape. It took years to obtain permission from the Hungarian government to let their son join them in Sweden.

On the morning of November 3, the Soviet High Command invited the newly appointed Hungarian military leaders to discuss a peaceful transition of power from the Soviet troops. The first meeting took place at the Parliament. A former tank commander, Colonel Maléter, who had sided with the revolutionaries and had been promoted to Major-General, led the Hungarian delegation. The Soviet Army group, headed by General Malinin, appeared very cordial and asked to continue the discussion at their temporary headquarters outside Budapest later that day. During their conference, however, KGB officers rushed into the room to arrest Maléter¹⁶ and his delegates. When Malinin, apparently unaware of the plan, demanded an explanation, the ranking KGB officer walked up to him and whispered

¹⁶ Maleter and several other revolutionaries were later executed for treason.

something into his ear. Visibly showing his displeasure about such a sly, secretly planned maneuver, Malinin and his army commanders abruptly left the room.

Moscow's dirty trick robbed the Hungarian Army of its commanders, leaving the military leaderless to face the events that followed. Documents that surfaced after the end of the Cold War showed that the entire "diplomatic" procedure had been secretly planned by the KGB's Moscow headquarters, using their high-ranking military officers as decoys in the game.



Left: The Soviet delegation, with General Malinin (they are all sitting) second from left. Right: The Hungarians with Maléter in the middle.

The Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty, recently released from prison, tried to prevent another Soviet attack by issuing a declaration¹⁷ on the evening of November 3.

“Our future depends on the next move of the powerful Soviet Union’s army in our country.....Hungary wants to stay neutral rather than fight the Soviet nation. We hope the Soviet leaders will realize we would respect their people if they leave us alone....We have not attacked the Soviet Union and sincerely hope its army will leave our country soon....”

The Fatal Blow

At 4 a.m. on Sunday, November 4, the Red Army began to bombard Budapest from their fortified ring around the city. Andropov, the Soviet Ambassador, informed Prime Minister Nagy that the firing only responded to some provocation. At 5:20 a.m., after receiving confirmation about the magnitude of the Soviet attack, Nagy sent out the following emotional broadcast, letting the world know what had happened.

This is Imre Nagy, Prime Minister of the Hungarian Republic. This morning, the Soviet Army launched a major attack against Budapest with the apparent purpose of removing the lawful Hungarian government. Our Armed Forces are fighting the invaders, and our government is functioning¹⁸. This announcement is aimed at all Hungarians and the public opinion of the entire world.

¹⁷ David Pryce-Jones, *The Hungarian Revolution*, Horizon Press, 1970.

¹⁸ This sentence did not really tell the truth. Our military had not been ordered to fight, and a section of the new government had already been captured by the KGB.

Fifteen minutes later, his speech was repeated in English, French, German, and Slavic. Half an hour later, in another broadcast, he asked the Maleter delegates (who had left the previous evening for a meeting scheduled at the Soviet Headquarters) to return immediately and take control of their duties. When he learned about the fate of the Maleter group, to save lives, he ordered the Hungarian military not to resist the superior Soviet force. He also aired another broadcast in Russian, asking the Soviet Army to stop all hostilities. As expected, the Soviet command ignored his request. At 8:07 a.m., the last broadcast of Free Radio Budapest ended!¹⁹ For a while, local stations throughout the country continued to send requests for help in several languages. Nagy asked for and received shelter from the Yugoslav Consulate, taking his family and several government officials with him. Altogether, 42 Hungarians received temporary refuge at the Yugoslav Consulate. Cardinal Mindszenty, released from jail only four days before, received protection at the U.S. Consulate.

The heavy rumble of explosions and the scrambling of Soviet jet fighters awakened us that morning. Hearing Nagy's desperate announcement on our radio and recalling the long siege of Budapest during World War II, Mother and I expected heavy aerial bombing. We quickly decided to take the little boy, Gyuszkika, over to his grandmother, who lived in a ground-floor apartment about a mile from us. We felt he would be safer there, and if anything drastic happened to all of us, he should be with his family. I picked up the child and carried him to his grandmother, who thanked me profusely. On my way home, I witnessed workers turning over streetcars and creating barricades where they had just removed the first ones a few days before. I hesitated for a few moments when one asked me to join in. Then, remembering the oath to my mother, I sprinted back to our apartment. Perhaps she had a premonition of what would happen later. Her threat of suicide possibly saved my life.

The second Soviet invasion came two days before the U.S. Presidential election. After announcing the attack, the VoA informed us that no decision could be made to authorize any U.S. involvement until the election results were known. Although the broadcast did not promise anything specific, many Hungarians assumed an implied imminent military assistance and went out again to fight the Soviet Army. Four days later, in a Western church service broadcast, prayers were offered for the utterly forsaken brave Hungarians who sacrificed their lives for freedom. After all the agitation and encouragement, Hungary received no help when it was needed. I wondered if the story might have been very different if my country had been rich in oil.

Radio Budapest resumed broadcasting from a remote location protected by Soviet troops in the city of Debrecen on November 5. Ferenc Münnich represented the group of former Hungarian Communist government officials who had just returned from their Moscow meetings. He made a public announcement, based on the Soviet Politburo's decision of the previous week, announcing their resignation from the Nagy government—*five days retroactively*—due to its irresponsible “counterrevolutionary” policies and directions. He added that in good conscience, they could not stand by and witness the killings of Party leaders²⁰ as well as the sons of workers and peasants²¹. Nagy had been singled out as responsible for the

¹⁹ Radio Budapest resumed broadcasting several days later under the control of a pro-communist government.

²⁰ Specifically referring to the Communist Party Secretary killed in the Republic Square District Party Office.

²¹ Most likely the *ÁVO* soldiers.

recent turmoil, stating that if this new direction were allowed to continue, all past results of the socialist movement would be lost. The group, therefore, had established a new Hungarian Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government. They asked all those who believed in socialism to join and fight the reactionary fascist threat facing Hungary. Münnich's address had an extremely critical and threatening tone.

Fifteen minutes later, János Kádár delivered a major speech, admitting that the two former Communist leaders, Rákosi and Gerő, had committed numerous serious mistakes that had rightfully frustrated workers. As a result, he said:

Reactionary and counterrevolutionary forces grabbed the opportunity to follow their selfish goals; they attacked the democratic system with the help of a large section of successfully misled youth. The enemies of the people wanted to return factories to the capitalists and land to the wealthy farmers...we must not stand by and see the counterrevolutionaries take advantage of the weakness and inability of the former government headed by Imre Nagy...We need a strong government to lead our nation out of this severe predicament!

Kádár declared himself the new Prime Minister and filled several Cabinet posts with faithful Party members. He added, however, that additional Cabinet openings and top government positions would later be available to members of other political parties "who are ready to protect the past achievements of socialism." As for the goals and directions of his new government, he provided a summary:

- *Gain national independence [although he did not mention "from the Soviet Union"].*
- *Follow the goals of socialism.*
- *End our civil war and provide amnesty to those who participated in the fighting.*
- *Maintain close and fair relationships with all socialist countries.*
- *Coexist peacefully with all countries, regardless of their political and economic system.*
- *Increase workers' wages and enable companies to build new apartments for their employees.*
- *Modify the latest Five-Year Plan by shifting resources from industrialization to increased living standards.*
- *Ask the Soviet Armed Forces to help destroy the reactionary forces and reestablish peaceful living conditions in our country.*
- *After such a successful operation, the new Hungarian government, the Soviet Union, and other Warsaw Pact nations would jointly negotiate the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Hungary.*

Finally, he asked again that the workers, peasants, and students stand behind the new government and fight against all counterrevolutionary gangs.

Next, the commanding general of the invading Soviet force broadcast the following announcement:

The Soviet Union has enough land and does not want to take over your country. We are here at the request of your Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government. Our goal is to help our Hungarian brothers. The Soviet Army is your friend, not your enemy!

Later that day, under the escort of a Soviet armored column, the new Hungarian government officials, led by Janos Kádár, arrived back in Budapest. The Soviet High Command also issued a declaration that, among other things, demanded:

- *The immediate cessation of all armed counterrevolutionary activities and the surrender of weapons to the Soviet forces (all those giving up their weapons will not be harmed).*
- *A curfew for all residents from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m.*
- *Residents unconditionally obey the instructions of Soviet soldiers and officers.*
- *All workers report back to their factories.*
- *Anyone attempting to sabotage work will be severely punished.*
- *District officials must arrange food and firewood distribution with special permits.*
- *Food stores must be kept open between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.*

This time, the Soviet attack was well-planned and coordinated throughout the country. By evening, the Soviet infantry occupied most of the strategic locations in Budapest, including government buildings, the radio station, and the Parliament. In about a week, all Hungarian resistance ended. Although Khrushchev's generals promised him a straightforward victory, this second attack faced a fiercer reaction than the Soviets expected. Many of the hastily assembled Soviet troops did not even know where they had been deployed. Some later reported that they had never seen such a determined enemy. Most of the replacements also did not understand why they were there. Many of them came from the Asian provinces of the Soviet Union without any knowledge of Europe. Some of the officers told their troops they were to fight German fascists or protect Hungary from American invaders.

Most of the revolutionary fighting came from the Hungarian working class, supposedly the backbone of the Communist society. This surprised the Kremlin. Even though the unrest began on the university campuses, most men who took up arms were unskilled laborers, like Lapát, one of my mother's employers as a laundress. Men in situations like his had very little to lose. Frustrated by low income and constantly increased "working norms," they were ready to vent their anger by attacking the regime.

Although unemployment and homelessness did not exist in Hungary in 1956—all able-bodied people had to do some productive work, study, or face forced labor camps—the standard of living was low compared with the Western nations. Housing, food, medical care, public transportation, and entertainment were subsidized, yet most workers could not purchase much after paying basic living expenses. For example, as an electronic technician with two years of experience, I earned 950 *forints monthly (about \$20)*; a *tailor-made heavy winter coat I wanted to buy cost 2,000 forints*, more than two months of my entire salary. A low-quality mass-produced pair of shoes costs 300-400 *forint* in the state-owned store and three to four times more when made by a private cobbler. Except for a few "super-workers," factory workers generally earned even less than I did, and most resided in cramped apartments.

Since communication from the West had been severely curtailed—Western movies, newspapers, and magazines were forbidden in Hungary after 1948—we had little knowledge of how people lived in “capitalist” countries. However, the elite members of my track team had already reached the international competition level and had traveled to the West. They told us about the fancy cars and merchandise in stores they saw in England and West Germany, but to most of us, those luxuries did not seem real. Since my legs, streetcars, and buses had always provided all my transportation requirements, I would have been pleased just owning a bicycle and could not imagine what it would feel like to have a car. My company's managing director was the only man I knew who had personal access to an automobile.

Hungary's “planned” economy, copying the Soviet model, was based on long-term (i.e., three- or five-year) plans set by the Central Committee rather than market-driven demands. Government economists met periodically to decide how many dresses, hats, bicycles, and other goods to fabricate during the terms of each plan. The number of teachers and doctors to send through schools, agricultural production quotas, factory capacities, etc., were also incorporated into those plans. When shortages developed later due to incorrect guessing, black marketers stepped in to fill some of the needs—risking their lives if caught. Failure of the centrally planned economy frequently led to stores having empty shelves or, at the other extreme, being full of unwanted merchandise.

One of the last resistance holdouts was the large industrial complex of Csepel, located on the south side of Budapest, where workers and some defected soldiers fought against ÁVO detachments during the first phase of the uprising. A Hungarian Army anti-aircraft unit moved into the factory zone during the cease-fire. Some factories had already manufactured weapons that were now given to volunteers, forming a new militia. Soldiers also joined in. Under the command of an army colonel, the group prepared to defend the vital industrial region from possible attack. Facing the superior power of the invading Soviet armor, they fought bravely and inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. It took seven days of combined ground and air assaults to silence the defenders, who eventually sent out heartbreaking S.O.S. messages through short-wave broadcasts: “*Our ship is sinking. The light vanishes....*” Then, on November 11, 1956, it was all over!

The Aftermath

In parts of Budapest, the devastation left after the second attack was comparable to the destruction caused by World War II. Although the Soviet aircraft did not carry out bombing attacks against the city²², the heavy cannon fire severely damaged residential sections. This time, the Soviets brought in armored vehicles equipped with howitzers. If their troops encountered resistance, the heavy guns demolished the buildings before the infantry moved in to finish the job. When the shooting ended, we could not believe what we saw. Disabled, burned-out tanks and troop carriers, smashed busses, streetcars, barricades, as well as dead bodies were scattered everywhere. Crater-like holes scarred several major boulevards. Partially destroyed residential buildings were common sights—sometimes showing large gaping openings in their heavy brick walls. Many of the church steeples were completely

²² Jet fighters and bombers attacked industrial resistance centers elsewhere in the country.

blown away. Nervous and trigger-happy Soviet soldiers peeped out of their tanks, wondering if they would be attacked again by passersby. The painful sacrifices spent to rebuild our beloved city during the past ten years since the end of World War II were destroyed in two weeks!



Three photos of Rókus Chapel where I frequently attended Sunday masses because it was located near where I lived: a) In 1938, b) After World War II in 1945, and c) After the second Soviet attack in November 1956.

Imre Nagy and the other revolutionary government officials who had received asylum at the Yugoslav Embassy embarrassed the new Kádár government. After a series of talks with the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry, Kádár released an announcement on November 11, stating that Nagy and the rest of the group would be allowed to return to their homes. Believing Kádár's promise, the next day, Nagy and the other Hungarians agreed to leave the sanction of the Embassy in a bus under Soviet military escort. Two Yugoslav officials joined them "to witness everyone's safe passage to their homes." However, instead of driving Nagy and the others to their homes, the bus took them to the Soviet military command. At that point, the two Yugoslav officials were sent home, and the group was taken to Romania, where they were kept under house arrest for about eighteen months. Then, in a secret trial, Nagy and several others, including Major-General Maléter, were sentenced to death. Nagy had already been executed by the time his sentence was announced. His remains were buried in a remote location outside of Budapest. Ten years later, *The Observer*, a British paper, published Nagy's final words.²³

I have twice tried to save the honor and image of Communism in the Danube Valley, once in 1953 and again in 1956. Rákosi and the Russians prevented me from doing so. If my life is needed to prove that not all Communists are enemies of the people, I gladly make that sacrifice. I know that one day, there will be another Nagy trial, which will rehabilitate me. I also know I will have a reburial. I only fear that the funeral oration will be delivered by those who betrayed me.

²³ David Pryce-Jones, *The Hungarian Revolution*, Horizon Press, 1970.



A bronze memorial of Imre Nagy.

His words were prophetic. In 1989, after the Cold War ended, Nagy was rehabilitated. His remains were reburied in a large ceremony attended by over 100,000 people. A statue was erected near the Parliament to remind future generations of his role in Hungary's history.

At times, I still ponder whether a more polished politician than Imre Nagy could have avoided the second Soviet invasion. Although Nagy was popular among Hungarians because he relaxed the severe government control during his two years of leadership (1953-1955), this time, he did not set realistic goals for the country. Could he possibly have prevented the bloodshed and destruction by following the example of Polish leader Gomulka²⁴? Instead of skillfully negotiating terms acceptable to the Kremlin, Nagy fully caved into the rebels' demands; he wanted a knockout victory rather than settling for winning by points. Being a form of Muscovite²⁵ and part of the Communist elite for decades, he should have known that Khrushchev and the Politburo would not allow Hungary to drift into the Western sphere of influence.

The Kádár government's secret report estimated that 2,600 Hungarian "counterrevolutionaries" were killed and about 19,000 wounded in the fighting. Soviet losses included 720 killed and 1,540 wounded. The report was released only when the Cold War ended in 1989, but many felt that the real numbers had been higher. About 400 Hungarian soldiers were killed or wounded—most of them while fighting on the side of the rebels. During the period of reprisal, between 1957 and 1958, over 30,000 civilians were imprisoned or sent to forced labor camps, and about 2,000 were executed. Nearly 600 soldiers and officers faced court-martial; thirty of them received death sentences. Internment camps existed until 1963, when a general amnesty was finally declared.

²⁴ A similar unrest that year in Poland had ended more peacefully, because Gomulka, their newly appointed Prime Minister, was able to assure the Kremlin that his country would not break away from the Eastern Bloc.

²⁵ Slang for Hungarian-born Communists who lived in the Soviet Union before WWII and were fully aligned with Stalin's policies.



Left: *Divatcsarnok*, a large department store, located next to the street where I had lived. Center: Killian Barrack, after the second invasion ended. Right: *Time* magazine's special edition dedicated to the Hungarian freedom fighters.

International condemnation of the brutal Soviet attack quickly followed. Huge crowds demonstrated throughout the Western world and neutral countries. Soviet embassies were assailed, requiring heavy police protection for their employees. Disillusioned Communists openly burned their Party cards and set fire to Communist headquarters in Paris and Rome. Demonstrators demanded that their governments help Hungary. *Time* magazine declared the Hungarian Freedom Fighters “*Man of the Year*.” *Life* magazine’s editorial, entitled “To the Heroes of Hungary,” stated:

....In your five days of freedom, you shook the world of Communism to its foundation. In setting off the monster’s fury, you made him show his true face in a way that all the world could see.....With his tremendous new mandate, our President must develop a “liberation” policy, which is more than words. Our people, by urging and supporting such a policy by refusing to let the world’s outrage subside, must give the final assurance that the heroes of Hungary will not have died in vain.

In Washington, the newly re-elected President Eisenhower publicly denounced the Soviet invasion and ordered the U.N. representative to take up the Hungarian case again. Unfortunately, the conflict created by the concurrent Suez Canal War, combined with the veto power of the Soviet Union, prevented the U.N. from even reaching a unified condemnation of the attack. An action to assist Hungary was never considered.

By Monday, November 12, most Hungarians had accepted that the revolution had failed and life must go on. However, buying food, firewood, coal, and other necessities required money, and very few people had savings; most of us lived from paycheck to paycheck. The general strike continued except for the utility workers, and people had no income for nearly three weeks. At first, the new government begged everyone to return to work. Later, they issued sharp threats to those who still refused to do so. Radio Budapest announced that bread would be distributed to factories, and workers would receive their wages retroactively from the establishment of the new Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government. The double lure was effective, and people gradually began to report for work. Companies assigned some employees to form emergency crews, sending them out to clear roadways so public

transportation could run again. Curfew and martial law were still in effect, and the streets were deserted after 7 p.m.—except for Soviet patrols that drove around in armored vehicles. Despite its nearly a million residents, Budapest became a ghost town at night.

The first morning after the curfew ended, I headed to work—hoping to collect my pay and pick up some bread at the factory. Our need for money helped to override my fear of what might happen to me if Audio's Party Secretary found out about my involvement in breaking into their office. Since the streetcar line to my company still did not operate, I had to walk all the way. As I turned into Róna Street, where my company was, I saw a coworker named Józsi Szeles coming from the opposite direction, carrying an unwrapped loaf of bread²⁶. Józsi, who lived nearby, told me he planned to return to work after dropping the bread off at home. He warned me not to show my face at work until I found out if any punitive action would be taken against the troublemakers at the last company meeting.

Seeing my disappointment, he invited me to his apartment and said he would give me some of his bread. I gladly accepted his offer. During our walk, he shared with me his recent revolutionary participation in a group of fighters. His involvement had lasted several days and sounded much more impressive than mine. In his apartment, he proudly showed me a handful of 7.6 mm submachine gun cartridges he kept as a reminder of his activities.

At that point, my ego began to hurt me. Not only had Józsi shot his weapon, but he also held on to actual evidence of his action. I had nothing to show for mine. When I meekly asked if I could have a couple of souvenirs, he generously handed me four cartridges and some of his bread. After thanking him, I put the ammo in the side pocket of my jacket and happily headed home. Now, I could also show off to others!

At an intersection about halfway to our apartment, I heard shots and saw people running. Before I realized what was happening, a Soviet troop carrier careened around the corner and came to a screeching stop. Several soldiers and an officer jumped off the vehicle, waving their weapons and shouting, "*Stoy, Stoy!*" (Stop, Stop!) I was directed into a building's open entryway with ten to twelve other pedestrians and shoved against the wall. The officer yelled at us in Russian, but only one man in our small group understood enough to translate. He told us the officer wanted to know if any of us were involved in a nearby shooting. When we all shook our heads, saying "*Nye!*"²⁷, the officer ordered one of his soldiers to search everyone for weapons. The other soldiers pointed their submachine guns at us.

As the young soldier patted down our group of men one by one, I suddenly remembered the cartridges I had foolishly taken from Józsi. Looking around, I realized that my chance of escaping was zero; they could quickly shoot me before I reached the doorway. Numb and terrified, I figured the Russians would detain me for having forbidden ammunition. Knowing that martial law almost always led to a death sentence, I feared my life might end soon.

When the soldier reached me, I was trembling and must have looked pale. He routinely patted me through my trench coat from the shoulders down. When he felt the bulging of the ammunition, he unbuttoned my coat and put his hand in my jacket pocket, touching the cartridges. My entire body was trembling. *This is the end!*

²⁶ A loaf of Hungarian bread, weighing 2 kg (4.4 lbs), was considerably larger than what we have in the U.S. The stores never provided paper bags or wrapping for baked goods.

²⁷ All Hungarians knew at least a handful of Russian words. *Nyet* (No) was a commonly used word in jokes.

At that point, the officer asked him a question, most likely wanting to know if he found something. The soldier looked at my face momentarily and turned to the officer, saying, “Nyet.” With that, he quickly proceeded to search the rest of our group. Since no prohibited material had been found, the officer told us we were free to go.

On my way out of the building, I glanced at the young soldier who, in all probability, had saved my life. Our eyes met briefly, but his face remained expressionless. Recalling that Pavel, the Russian I had freed two weeks earlier, told me his younger brother was deployed somewhere in the Ukraine, I wondered if I was repaid for my kindness. Although the probability was extremely low—could the young soldier be Pavel’s brother?

My narrow escape shook me. After I left the building and regained my composure, my first task was to dispose of the evidence of my foolish action safely. Within the next block, a narrow alley with several overstuffed garbage containers provided the perfect place to hide the evidence that could have led to grave consequences. After carefully looking around to be sure nobody observed me, I reached into my pocket, grabbed the ammo, and shoved it under a large garbage bag. Although the cartridges weighed only a few ounces in my pocket, disposing of them lifted a heavy weight off my chest. Light and happy, I headed home rapidly.

During my walk, I considered my alternatives for the near future. With very little money left, I would be forced to return to work soon. The possibility of facing the angry Party Officials after distributing their secret files scared me because their power was almost limitless. Even a lenient punishment could demote me to menial labor and suspend my athletic activities.²⁸ A more severe accusation could charge me with illegal political activities that would lead to an arrest and court trial where, in the past, the prosecution almost always won its case. If I were to lose my track team privileges, a quick draft call would immediately follow. Even though Nagy had disbanded the *ÁVO* two weeks earlier, the new government would undoubtedly recreate it under a different name. Since the *ÁVO* had officially sponsored my track club during the past three years, I would most likely be placed in that military branch. Such an idea was terrifying because I feared the thought of the daily bombardment of Communist ideology. In addition, although it was a relatively minor concern, I knew that all new soldiers had their heads completely shaved, and I did not want to lose my full head of hair. Also, I could not help my mother financially with the meager pay that soldiers received.²⁹

I felt unsafe and began considering the unthinkable—leaving Hungary illegally.

Planning an Escape

At home, I found an unjammed program from either VoA or RFE that focused on refugees escaping into Austria. Some of the Hungarians who made it through the border had been interviewed. They described their experiences as less harrowing than I expected. Yet, I did not dare to take off alone, particularly without knowledge or familiarity with the forbidden

²⁸ Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia, one of the world’s greatest long-distance runners and multiple Olympic champion, was kicked out of the Communist Party for publicly disagreeing with its policies. For several years, he was forced to work as a street sweeper.

²⁹ Conscripted soldiers received about one sixteenth of my technician wages plus three boxes of cigarettes monthly.

border zone. To make it worse, I had no idea how to reach that region because trains and buses still did not operate.



My good friend Gábor and his wife Boriska.

That afternoon, I had two unexpected visitors. A young couple, Boriska and Gábor Benedek, had been my longtime trusted friends. Boriska had lived with us until her marriage. Gábor had been my elementary school classmate since fifth grade. In addition, we also regularly played soccer in a nearby park and later basketball for the same club team. (During winters, I played indoor basketball and ran cross-country for conditioning.) Gábor had already served in the Hungarian Army for nearly a year at a base outside of Budapest. When a division of Soviet tanks encircled his army base at the beginning of their second invasion, a negotiator gave the Hungarian Army two choices: “*Surrender your weapons and walk away alive, or we’ll destroy your base, including you.*” Not having any direct orders from the Hungarian Defense Ministry (Major General Maleter had been arrested by the KGB the previous evening, and Nagy refused to sign an order for the Army to resist), the Base Commander had decided to accept the peaceful option rather than to fight the superior firepower; he sent every soldier home unarmed. A week later, the newly formed Kádár government issued a general order commanding all enlisted military personnel to report to their respective bases. Gábor had not followed the order, and rather than face court-martial, he and Boriska were also considering escaping from Hungary illegally.

I told them that during World War II, my mother helped some of our Jewish friends avoid deportation by obtaining “Safe-Passages” for them from neutral consulates, such as the Swedish and Swiss. (I still remember standing in line at one of those consulates with my mother when the Hungarian Nazis, called the Arrowcross Party, came and disbanded the crowd with their rifle butts.) Perhaps we could also receive honorary citizenship or find another clever legal way to leave our country instead of escaping illegally to Austria. Even though we heard about looser border control compared to before the revolution, reaching the border zone and then walking six miles through unknown territory sounded too risky. My friends agreed that we had little to lose by exploring a legal exit first, and we made plans to visit Western and neutral consulates the next day. Most foreign consulates are clustered in three regions of Budapest: one on the Buda³⁰ side and two in Pest. Fearing possible arrest, we decided to

³⁰ Although Budapest had been combined centuries ago from three separate cities, Buda, Obuda, and Pest, the residents still commonly referred to the regions by their former names.

leave out those hated most by the Communists, such as the U.S. and British consulates, and try only the less conspicuous ones, like the Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, Swiss, and Swedish consulates.

Since public transportation was still not operating, we set off first on foot for Buda. All the foreign consulates had armed Hungarian guards out front; some had long lines of people waiting at the gates. We stood in line for several hours at three different consulates, but when we reached their front doors, all denied us entry.

We visited several consulates for the next two or three days but gained entry only to the French Consulate. A well-dressed, gray-haired gentleman, with the help of an interpreter, listened to our stories and replied that even though he highly sympathized with our cause, there was nothing he or his country could do for us. After offering tea and cookies, he shook our hands, said goodbye, and wished us good luck. We departed and decided to give up the idea of visiting more consulates.

As I walked into our apartment, my mother greeted me in tears. After I calmed her down, she told me that my sister's best friend and colleague³¹, Joli, had come to see her earlier. Joli explained that another co-worker had obtained an Army truck and forged papers stating that the vehicle was on an official mission to bring wheat from a flour mill in the Austrian-Hungarian border zone. The occupants of the truck were assigned to help with loading and delivery. Joli told my mother they had already contacted a trusted flour mill employee, explaining that a small group wanted to escape to Austria. The man at the mill promised to find a suitable guide to take the entire group over the border for a reasonable price. Joli continued by telling Mom it was a golden opportunity for my sister to leave the country and seek better opportunities in the West. My mother informed Joli that my sister had been staying with her boyfriend since the beginning of the disturbances, and she had no way to contact them. However, Mother told Joli I faced trouble at my factory and asked if Joli would consider taking me instead of my sister. Although Joli originally intended to take her close friend and confidante, she assured Mom that her group would accept me and I should meet the group at her apartment building the following day—ready to go.

I took Mother's news with mixed feelings. When I asked if she also planned to go, she replied that she would not leave Hungary after working so hard to obtain an apartment and all the belongings she so proudly owned. At 45, with only a third-grade education and Hungarian as her only language, what could she do in a foreign country? Also, she would not leave my sister alone. As for me, she continued, I was I young and had a profession and a possible sports career ahead of me. She felt I could have a much better future in the West. If I stayed in Budapest, I could be in trouble at work. Even if this didn't happen, the Army would take me away for three years. "Go, my son. Grab this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," she begged me.

Logically, the offer seemed like an ideal solution to my dilemma. Safe passage and a local guide to see us through the border sounded too good to believe. At the same time, my mother's unselfish proposal to stay behind bothered my conscience. After all, she had sacrificed so much in her life to raise me. How would she manage without me? What would she tell the authorities when later questioned about my disappearance? Would she be held

³¹ My sister worked as a clerk in an Army base in Budapest.

responsible? Questions like these were racing through my mind. My head told me her decision to stay in Hungary was right, but my heart was not entirely convinced. After a long, painful deliberation about these valid concerns, I convinced myself that the government would not dare risk another revolution by persecuting every relative of those who escaped from Hungary. As for worrying about her finances, I reassured myself that once I found a job in the West, the “land of milk and honey,” I could send her enough money to live well.

The Communist system did everything possible to create an unfavorable image of the capitalist nations—particularly the United States. The average Hungarian dismissed those claims as propaganda. I had frequently heard comparisons between the evils of the American lifestyle (crime, unemployment, racial bigotry, etc.) and the ultimate form of living, Communism (freedom, equality, security, etc.). The Hungarian public media regularly described stories like the following:

- Jesse Owens was forced to race against horses to make a living.
- Louis Armstrong was not allowed to stay in the Las Vegas hotel where he had performed for a white audience.
- Known gangsters and wealthy capitalists lived in high style while masses of unemployed workers and their families went hungry.

Of course, I did not believe these stories and naively assumed that everyone in America lived well. Our national track team had traveled to England and Sweden, and my teammates reported high living standards there. If our escape was successful, I hoped to live in one of those three countries. Although the United States sounded most interesting, I could not imagine being so far from my mother and sister; England and Sweden were the more desirable places to go. Having a background as an electronic technician, I figured that good jobs would await me. Being able to continue running hurdles was equally important, and I assumed that Western governments subsidized athletics to the same extent as Hungary’s.

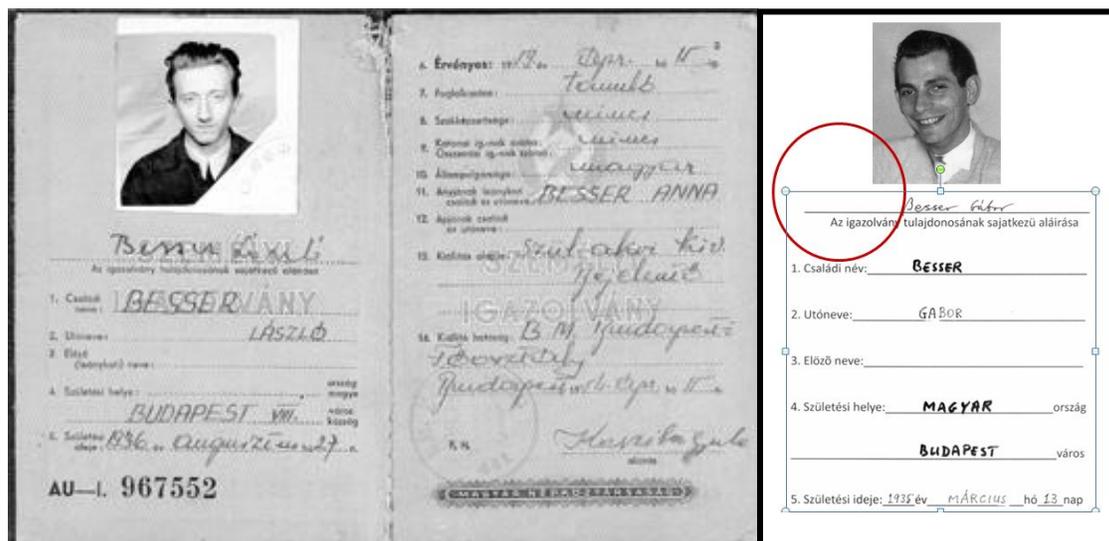
I decided to join Joli’s group the following day to leave Hungary and went to sleep.

Chapter 13: Escape to Austria

My next step was to notify Boriska and Gábor that I had found a promising way to escape and ask them to join me. Not knowing if Joli's group would agree to take two more passengers, I decided the best way would be to show up together at the meeting place the following day and beg them to take all three of us. I walked over to Gábor's apartment building and gave them the news. They were both relieved about this chance to escape and hoped that Joli's group would not turn us away. We decided to go without any luggage to avoid suspicion.

Gábor, however, faced a significant problem. His national ID book had been taken away during his induction into the Army, and it was illegal for any civilian to be without it. We had to find some other document for him quickly. It was already late afternoon, and the curfew started at 7 p.m. In desperation, we decided to alter my track club membership book, which was similar in form and color to the national ID booklet. We removed my photo and pasted his picture in place, but the new picture was missing part of the official circular red ink stamp. Since we didn't have a red pen or ink, we completed the missing segment using Boriska's lipstick. Trying to minimize the extent of the forgery, we erased my handwritten first name and birthday only and entered his data instead. With that, Gábor officially became my brother!

We no longer have the forged document, but the illustration below provides a reasonable facsimile that can be compared to my old national ID book. We did not look like brothers, and our forgery was amateurish, but that was the best we could do in a short time.



Left: My national ID booklet, Right: A replica of the page from my track club's ID book with Gábor's forged first name, birth date, and signature. The red circle shows the outline of the official ink-stamp that we doctored up with lipstick.

By the time we finished doctoring the new document, the curfew was already in effect. I had two possible routes to go home: one through a major street and the second one through the park where we used to play soccer. I decided to take the second route but heard Russian voices singing halfway through. My heart began pounding faster. About 50 yards in the distance, I could see fire and a group of soldiers around the flames. They had probably cut

down some tree branches or bushes to warm themselves in the cool November evening. Walking quietly, as far from the group as possible, I managed to pass by without detection. Ringing the bell of our building brought the irate *Házmester* to open the gate. He lectured me loudly about staying out so late. I mumbled some excuse and assured him it would never happen again—a promise I knew I would keep.

Mother was sobbing in our apartment while looking through some of my childhood pictures. She made a simple supper and sang for me because she knew I always enjoyed hearing her soft voice. I promised to contact her and my sister and inform them about my welfare as soon as possible. I gave my mom a crash course on how to find the shortwave frequencies of RFE and VoA, with the hope that I would be able to send her a broadcast message from the West. Finally, I wrote a list of my tools and electronic parts with a farewell note to Cousin Pista, asking him to sell the components and give the proceeds to Mother. Sleep did not come quickly that night as I lay awake for a long time, wondering what kind of day awaited me.

Early in the morning, Mother packed a sandwich for my trip. I decided to go without an overcoat so if we were chased, I would not be slowed down. During our breakfast, Mother told me again how proud she was that I had finished high school—a first-time achievement on her side of the family. Shortly after the curfew ended at 7 a.m., she sprinkled holy water on me, blessed me, and we parted. I left quickly so I would not break down and cry.

Boriska and Gábor were already waiting for me at the corner of our block. We proceeded to Joli's place, only a few houses away. At the front of her building, a large Army truck with a camouflage canvas cover over its back stood waiting. A small group of people stood nearby on the sidewalk. Joli and her husband, Gyula, greeted me, surprised to see my two friends whom they did not even know. I explained Gábor's desperate situation to Joli, and after a short debate with the driver and the leader, they agreed to take all three of us. It was soon time to leave. We boarded the truck and sat on burlap bags spread out to cover the cold metal bed. Boriska and Gábor moved closer to the truck's cab while I stayed near the back. That way, we figured, if our papers were viewed at checkpoints, the Soviet soldiers would not notice how different the two "Besser brothers" were. Our group had 15–20 people, including a baby. Two men sat in the cab next to the driver, equipped with maps and directions to our destination.

Many in our group worked for the Army in various civilian capacities. Some of them knew my sister, who held a clerical position there. One of the men, a recently graduated physician, proudly announced that he could easily immigrate to the United States because he already had a cousin in New York. He said he was tired of making less money than some bus drivers¹; he planned to open a private practice in America and become rich. One of the couples had their hands clasped together during much of our trip. I learned later they were newlyweds who had prayed feverishly for safe passage.

I became acquainted with a young couple named Balogh who lived in the countryside. They came to Budapest to attend a wedding; when the revolution broke out unexpectedly,

¹ In the Communist system doctors working for the state were not paid well—officially. To improve their standard of living, they expected to receive *hálapénzt* (tips) from their patients.

they stayed with relatives during the fighting. When the shooting ended, their relatives decided to escape and left everything in the apartment to the couple. Because their relatives escaped early and spoke English, they received the “red carpet” treatment and a quick entry to Great Britain. They sent the couple a message through the BBC asking them to abandon everything and leave Hungary. The Baloghs took their advice and joined the group.

Because we took various side roads to minimize the probability of being stopped by Soviet patrols, the 150-mile trip to the border zone took most of the day. One roadblock we could not avoid brought instant fear to all of us. After talking with the driver for some time, two Soviet soldiers came to the back of the truck and asked for documents. We all passed our ID books to the soldiers, but they did not even open them. Instead, they counted the books and the number of people on the truck. One soldier questioned why a baby would be with a group of people whose task was to carry wheat back to Budapest. The driver, who spoke Russian, explained that the mother wanted to visit her sick father, and because public transportation was not available, we were giving her a ride to her parents’ village. Next, he asked if we had any weapons, and of course, we all said, “*Nyet.*” Satisfied with the answers, the soldiers let us pass. As we drove by the patrol, I saw two back-to-back tanks guarding the road, with cannons pointed in opposite directions.

A few minutes later, the truck stopped. We heard a heated argument coming from the cab. One man climbed out from the back to investigate why we had stopped. When he came back, he told us that the driver had mentioned to the leader of the group that he had a handgun hidden under the front seat. Hearing about such an irresponsible action that could have caused serious trouble for all of us, the leader became extremely angry and told the driver to dispose of the weapon. After some heated exchanges, the driver complied and threw the gun into the field. We all felt relieved, and the rest of our road trip was uneventful.

We reached the flour mill by late afternoon and went inside the building. We saw stacks and stacks of large bags filled with flour. The strong flour smell stayed with me for a long time. We took turns using the country-style outhouse and waited for the smuggler to guide us through the border.

There was no sign of him. Minutes were ticking by, and I was becoming increasingly nervous. What would we do if the border patrol or Soviet troops came to investigate our presence? We were supposed to load flour on the truck instead of huddling inside the mill. Our fake pass would no longer protect us. Someone suggested we split into small groups and walk around the village, but that idea was quickly abandoned. Our “city folk” appearance would give us away immediately. We decided to stay still and wait until our contact came for us.

Much to our relief, he finally appeared sometime after sunset. He did not fit my image of a smuggler at all. Instead of a large, tough guy in a rugged outfit, I saw a frail, bespectacled man wearing nice clothes and carrying a zippered briefcase. Despite his fragile appearance, his manner was authoritative. He warned us that we had a long walk ahead and that this was the last chance for anyone to change his mind and return home safely. Noticing the baby, he voiced his concern about the possibility that the child would cry and alert the Soviet troops camped near our path. The mother told him that she had already put a mild sedative into the baby’s milk, and he would sleep quietly for several hours. Next, our smuggler asked us to give him all our Hungarian money. He said, “Outside of our country, socialist currency is worthless.”

When we handed over our money, he neatly stacked the bills in the briefcase, zipped it up, and told us to follow him.

Outside the mill, a local peasant watched the "city people" emerge from the building without showing any noticeable surprise. Perhaps he had already seen similar groups there before us. The driver asked him if he knew how to drive a truck, and the man replied, "I have driven tractors but not a truck."



Two pictures, taken in 2010, show the flour mill where we had hidden. Left: Standing in the photo is my friend, Gábor. Right: In 1966, the mill's commercial operation ended, and it was declared a historical monument.

"Take the truck and use it for parts," the driver told him. He handed the keys of the truck to the dumbfounded stranger. Our smuggler walked away, and we followed quickly, not waiting to see if the peasant managed to start the truck.

We walked through plowed fields and meadows for what seemed like forever. Occasionally, we sensed people walking near us in the dark, coming from both directions. When that happened, we were instructed to hit the ground and stay motionless until they were out of sight. The fields were damp, and I did my best not to dirty my nice sports jacket. I wished that I had brought my old trench coat to protect the only clothing I had with me.

Suddenly, Joli stopped and dropped the suitcase she was carrying. "I can't walk anymore. I want to go back!" she cried. Her husband tried to calm her down, but she was inconsolable. "This is insane. We'll never reach Austria," she insisted.

Gábor and I stepped next to her. I grabbed her suitcase and held onto one of her hands. Gábor took Joli's other hand, and we gently pulled her forward. At first, she resisted, but after a few minutes, she became more cooperative. Eventually, she even insisted on carrying her suitcase again. She resigned herself to the situation, and there were no more problems for the rest of the night.

After a long walk, we reached a creek with a narrow bridge over it; a bright spotlight illuminated the crossing. Our smuggler spoke to us in a low voice. He said the border was not too far from the other side of the creek, but we still had to be careful. Soviet patrols were stationed in the nearby forest. He pointed to a glow a long distance away, "That is in Austria." Then he said goodbye, turned around, and left us. Watching our guide go, I wondered if we would ever reach that dim light without him.

Several people in our group became terrified. Could this be a setup? What if the smuggler had sold us out to the authorities? Did we dare cross the bridge under the bright light or wade through the water instead? Neither option sounded safe. After a quick discussion with Boriska and Gábor, we decided to run across the bridge first. We were young, without any bags to slow us down. We figured that even if the bridge was watched, we were fast enough to reach the other side before any shooting started. Running toward Austria seemed safer than staying with the fearful, indecisive group.

Our sprint across the bridge took us only a few seconds, and we arrived on the other side without any problem. Seeing our success, the rest of the group followed. We kept walking toward the dim light, as the smuggler had instructed. Then, suddenly, several Austrian border patrol guards emerged, talking to us in German. Our entire group cheered and hugged the startled soldiers. “We made it! We are free!”



Left: Joli and Gyula Leflinger before we left Budapest. Right: Refugees heading to Austria. In the background is an abandoned Hungarian border patrol guard tower.

The Austrian patrol escorted us to a collection point where several buses parked. Other small groups of new escapees joined us, and we boarded the well-heated buses. Inside, we received hot drinks and sandwiches. Such care and comfort provided a welcome rest after our long journey. An official, also serving as a translator, informed us that our next stop would be a refugee camp for processing.

We reached our destination in Eisenstadt late at night, but the Austrian Immigration acted quickly and efficiently. A large tent had been set up next to the main building. Inside, they took our pictures and provided temporary permits surprisingly quickly. After we received our documents, they directed us to a large, dingy hall filled with hay. Canvas bags were strewn over the straw. The place smelled like a barn. About 50–60 other Hungarians already occupied the place, and the Austrians told us to stay in one of the corners for the rest of the night. As we settled into our corner, I asked one of the earlier occupants for directions to the toilets. He pointed toward the other side of the room and warned me to prepare myself for an unpleasant experience. It was easy to find the stalls by the stench! I finished my business and left as quickly as I could.

While talking with others in our hall—some of whom had already been there for several days—I learned that the camp had been a former Soviet Army base, unoccupied since their troops had pulled out of Austria the previous year. Grossly unprepared for the massive number

of Hungarian refugees, the Austrian government hastily reopened the abandoned base to provide temporary shelter for those crossing the border. They haven't had enough time to fix its rundown equipment or make the place more livable for civilians. Plumbing problems plagued the facility—this I already knew firsthand—although portable toilets were promised for the near future.

I later wondered if, initially, the Kádár government purposely let Hungarians escape to Austria after the second Soviet invasion. Rather than prosecute all those involved in the revolution, perhaps it was simpler to let them leave the country. After Kádár realized the magnitude of the exodus—about 200,000 people left in a few weeks—he ordered the border sealed again. Many of the refugees were well-educated and under the age of 30. A tremendous youth and brain drain occurred because a large percentage came from Budapest, a city of one million people.

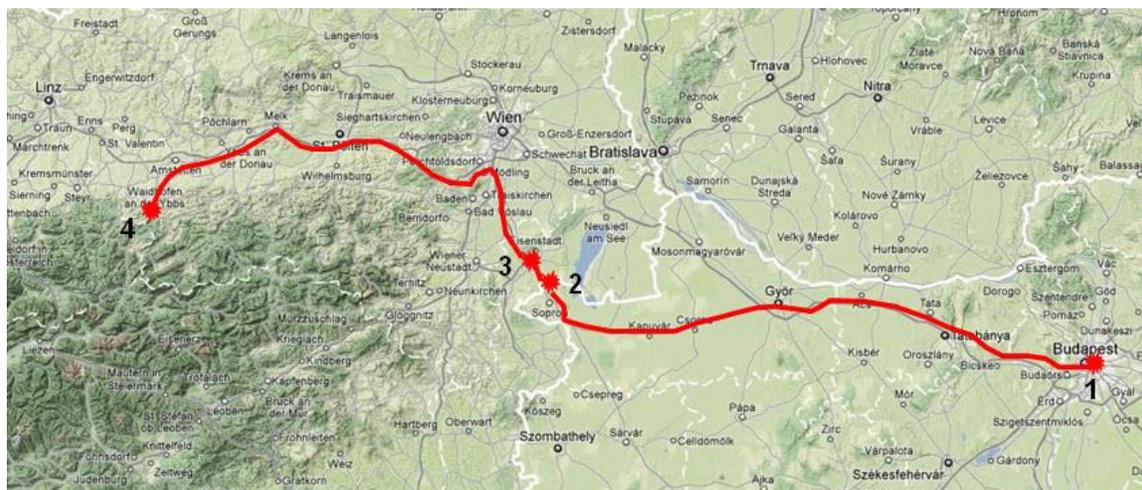
Walking around the huge immigration complex outside the hall did not put me in a better mood. Even knowing that it had been called into use without time for refinements, I was depressed by our new residence. It was not a civilized place to stay. When I finally returned to our hall and stretched out on one of the unoccupied straw beds, I began to doubt the wisdom of leaving Hungary. I had heard horror stories of refugee camps where people lived for years, and I could not imagine staying in the Eisenstadt facility for any extended period. A rapidly spreading rumor was that the Soviets had warned Austria not to accept any refugees, or the Red Army would reoccupy the country. That threat scared me. In addition, for the first time in my life, I could not communicate with the people making decisions about my future. Only a limited number of interpreters stood out in their bright yellow jackets, and they did not even know what would happen to us next. Even though I hadn't slept much for two days, with all the uncertainties facing us, it took me a long time to fall asleep.

The following day, an excited Gábor woke me up and told me he had heard an announcement calling for those who had relatives living in the United States to gather in the courtyard. My friend recalled that he had a distant aunt who lived in California, and he carried a letter sent by her to prove it. The three of us immediately ran to the meeting. What we heard there sounded like a miracle. "A bus is waiting outside to take everyone with American relatives to the Vienna airport so they can fly to the United States later today." We dashed outside and showed an official the letter from Gabi's aunt. He briefly looked it over and let us board the bus. Other happy refugees quickly filled the vehicle, and we departed. All of our past fears suddenly disappeared. After all, we would be in the United States by the next day when the Soviet Army could not reach us. Nothing could go wrong now—we thought.



Left: Refugee camp at Eisenstadt, Right: New arrivals prepare for the night.

As the bus approached Vienna, our excitement increased. When we reached the exit sign pointing toward *Schwechat Flughafen* (Vienna Airport), to our surprise, our driver kept on going straight. A passenger who spoke German informed the driver that he had missed the exit, but he replied, “Our destination is a village several hours away— not the airport.” Arguing with him did not help; he continued driving until we arrived at a small snow-covered village. Ybbsitz was at an elevation of 1,200 feet in the foothills of the lower Alps in central Austria. Some curious residents, led by their *Bürgermeister* (Mayor), greeted us. Shortly after we exited the bus, the local police placed us into various *Gasthofs* (guest inns). Although our *Gasthof* was probably only a two- or three-star facility, it felt like the Ritz compared to the former Soviet army base at Eisenstadt.



A partial map of Hungary and Austria, showing the path of our travels: 1) Budapest, 2) Our border (indicated by white trace) crossing, 3) The refugee camp at Eisenstadt, 4) Our final destination, Ybbsitz.

Ybbsitz was a small, quiet village with a population of about 3,000, primarily catering to tourists. The temperature on our arrival in the evening was already below freezing, and I felt the cold wind blowing through my jacket. The ski season had not yet begun, so our innkeeper, Frau Peschaker, was happy to house about fifteen of us in her *Gasthof*. A young Hungarian man—a mechanical engineer from Budapest who spoke fluent German—was also in our group. We felt lucky to have a translator among us. Frau Peschaker checked our documents, entered our names into the registry, and assigned two men, or a married couple, to each

room. My two friends and I told her we wanted to stay together, so she gave us a larger room and guided us to our new residence on the second floor.



Winter view of Ybbsitz.

Our room had a double bed, a divan, an armoire, a table with chairs, a cuckoo clock, and a stove with a small woodpile next to it. The innkeeper first seated Boriska and Gábor on the bed that had already been made up for the night. Next, she led me to the divan and indicated that I would have to sleep there using her bedding. Seeing that we had no luggage, she also brought three flannel nightshirts for us to wear in bed. Finally, she pointed to a specific time on the clock and told us we would have *Abendessen*. Sensing we did not understand the word, she mimicked eating and pointed downward. Then, it became clear that her words meant having dinner downstairs later. We nodded and thanked her in German, *Danke schön* (thank you). Finally, she took us outside the room and pointed to the WC (toilet).

After she left, Gábor, who always loved to clown around, asked his wife if she wanted to wear formal attire for dinner. We all laughed heartily, knowing that our outfits represented our entire wardrobe. Then, in more serious tones, we reviewed our situation. Hopefully, the Bürgermeister will tell us when our flights to the United States will leave. We did not feel safe being so close to the Soviet troops, and we hoped they would not cross the Austrian border. In the meantime, our *Gasthof* was clean, and it appeared we would be fed regularly. The toilet facilities, which we had to share with several others, looked clean, although pretty cold. Even though we all needed a cleanup, taking one in that chilly bathroom did not appeal to us. Our room was also cold, so we started the fire on the stove and headed downstairs for dinner. Most others were seated at the tables, and we quickly joined in.

After our first meal at the inn, we all agreed that Hungarian cuisine was superior to Austrian cooking. Our other observation was that Austrians ate much less than we were used to, or Frau Peschaker wanted to keep us from gaining weight. Although she and her helper brought the food to the tables in large bowls, they returned the leftovers to the kitchen after serving. We also missed having lots of bread with the meals and quickly learned the German phrase, *Einige Brot bitte schön* (some more bread, please). Hearing that repeatedly, she shook her head with disbelief but provided more bread initially. However, after the first few days, she disappeared after serving lunch or dinner.

In 1956, I was nearly six feet tall; the divan where I slept was at least six inches shorter. In addition, it had very firm padding. I was concerned about the size of my sleeping arrangement, but I told myself that it was much better than the burlap-covered hay we had in Eisenstadt. We loaded more firewood into the stove to keep the room warm, put on our flannel nightshirts and said good night to each other.



**Small *Gasthof* in Ybbsitz,
similar to where we stayed.**

The hard divan was probably intended for seating people with ample padding in their rear ends. My 145-pound body, lacking any extra fat, was extremely sore after lying on the hard, short, narrow divan in a crunched position. To make things worse, once the fire in the stove burned out, the room cooled down rapidly, and I was shivering under the comforter. Although I stoked the fire once in the middle of the night, it ran out of wood and soon went out again. Hearing the cuckoo clock strike every hour did not help either. My friends woke up in a cheerful mood the following day, but I was sore and grumpy.

When I saw the breakfast buffet downstairs, my bad mood quickly disappeared. Loading up on cold cuts, cheeses, crunchy bread, and hot chocolate helped me to forget the lousy night. After we gorged ourselves with food, we decided to investigate the outside world. Before we could leave, however, a policeman asked all refugees to gather in the Village Center. We were excited and hoped to hear that the detour to Ybbsitz was an administrative mistake and a plane was already waiting to fly us to America.

To our disappointment, the *Bürgermeister's* announcement was quite different. After contacting the Austrian Immigration Bureau, he learned we would stay in his village until further notice. Through our interpreter, we explained that we appreciated all assistance, but we were afraid of the Soviet Army and wanted to leave Austria soon. He replied that we had his sympathy, but our destiny was not in his hands. He had, however, some good news for us: village residents had donated clothing and toiletries for us. He ushered us into another room and told us to help ourselves. Gábor was lucky and found a pair of boots that fit him. His wife gathered a few pieces of clothing, and I came across a nice ski sweater. We also picked up toothbrushes and toothpaste. I did not have enough of a beard to shave, but Gábor found a razor with actual Gillette blades—something we had only seen on the black market in Hungary.

Leaving the meeting, we went onto the main street, looked in the store windows, and were overwhelmed by various products. Compared to the sparsely equipped Budapest stores, everything seemed available here. We could not judge if the products were expensive without knowing how much a typical Austrian earned, but the wide range of goods was impressive.

People on the street were well-dressed, relaxed, happy, and friendly, a notable contrast from the gloomy attitude of my countrymen back home. What we saw was completely different from the image created by the Communist media at home — wealthy capitalists and unhappy poor workers.

Gábor asked for and received stationery from Frau Peschaker. He sent a letter to his great aunt in Hollywood, California, describing our uncertain situation in Ybbsitz. We had high hopes that she would find a way to help us immigrate to the United States. Not knowing how complicated the procedure could be, we assumed that she could make a phone call and the visas would be sent to us by express mail. We had seen a precedent in a similar situation back in Hungary. During the late 1940s, the Greek Communists tried to overthrow their government. A civil war resulted, leading to massive casualties. With Western intervention, the attempt was eventually defeated, and many Communists escaped from Greece. Like other Eastern Bloc countries, Hungary accepted refugees and provided them free housing, education, and jobs. Based on the Greek incident, we naturally assumed that all Hungarian refugees would receive similar aid from the anti-Communist Western nations.

In the evening, the three of us walked across the street to a social hall where the active nightlife of the Austrian youth mesmerized me. Since I was unfamiliar with arcade games, watching young men and women playing various action games was new. Even though I had learned the theory and operation of television in technical high school, seeing real-life TV programs was another first-time experience. Being raised as a “city boy” in Budapest, I had always considered country folks unrefined and unsophisticated. After witnessing the fun-loving lifestyle of people in such a small village, compared to what we had in the capital city of Hungary, I realized what colorless lives we had lived under Communism.

The young people in the social hall displayed a natural curiosity toward us. Occasionally, they gave us money to play arcade games. The entertainment helped us temporarily forget our concerns about the future. When they showed interest in learning about us, we attempted to communicate with them using our limited German vocabulary and sign language.

By today’s standards, the arcade games of 1956 vintage would be very primitive, but at the time, they looked very impressive. Action games such as *Soccer* and *Ice Hockey* require two opponents manipulating movable “players.” The opponent scoring the most goals won the game. Other games showed short films behind glass screens, presenting various challenging tasks to the player. My favorite game, *The Driving Test*, simulated road trips. A small movie screen showed a winding road that moved at a varying speed. The object was to keep the car on the road by steering well.

Because I had never driven a car, I was curious and often watched young people testing their driving skills. One evening, while observing a group of boys playing that game, one of them offered me a turn. I gladly accepted the offer, and a small crowd quickly gathered behind me to watch my performance. When I watched others pass the test, I was confident I could do well, but my driving was disastrous. No matter how hard I concentrated, my car crashed constantly, bringing laughter from the spectators. My score was a fraction of what most other players achieved. I stood up at the end and apologized for my poor driving. That brought even more laughs. Finally, one of the men pointed out that the player’s level was selected after dropping the coins into the machine. They had set the highest level for me. He then gave me

another chance at the lowest level. Although I did not do well on that run, my score was good enough to repair my bruised ego.

While brushing our teeth in the evening, we noticed the strange taste and texture of the toothpaste, but we assumed that was how the Austrians liked it. We asked the others the following day if they liked the new toothpaste, but nobody noticed anything different. Our translator then asked to see our toothpaste. After looking at it, he broke out laughing. He then told the group that we had brushed our teeth with shaving cream! They all teased us for the next few days about not knowing the difference. After hearing about our experience, Frau Peschaker gave us a tube of toothpaste. Touched by her gift, the three of us no longer considered her a Scrooge, although we still hoarded food from breakfasts and smuggled firewood into our room to keep it warmer.

The 1956 Olympics began in Melbourne, Australia, on November 22—the day after my friends and I escaped from Hungary. Our little group in the *Gasthof* watched the news on Austrian TV and occasionally caught glimpses of Hungarian participants. Our country did exceptionally well despite the interruption of their training during the revolution and the defection of many star athletes before the Games. The Hungarian athletes had the sympathy of most of the world and always received cheers from spectators.

Perhaps the event that received the most publicity was the men’s semi-final water polo match. With long-established dominance in that sport, the Hungarian team met the Soviet Union. The brutal putdown of the revolution was still fresh in the minds of the Hungarian players, and they were eager to pay back the team representing the oppressors. Fights erupted among the players. Before the official end of the game, the swimming pool’s water began to turn red from the bloody skirmishes. The referee halted the match. At that point, the Hungarians were leading 4–0, and that score was used for the records. In the final match, the Hungarians defeated Yugoslavia for the gold medal.

Rank	Nation	Gold	Silver	Bronze
1	 Soviet Union	37	29	32
2	 United States	32	25	17
3	 Australia	13	8	14
4	 Hungary	9	10	7
5	 Italy	8	8	9
6	 Sweden	8	5	6
7	 Germany	6	13	7
8	 Great Britain	6	7	11
9	 Romania	5	3	5
10	 Japan	4	10	5

By winning nine gold medals, Hungary finished fourth at the Melbourne Olympics, behind the two superpowers and the host nation.

Another highly celebrated winner was thirty-year-old László Papp, who won his third consecutive gold medal in light-middleweight boxing. Although he received numerous offers from Western countries to defect and turn professional, Papp decided to return home after the Olympics. For the rest of his life, he remained one of the most respected athletes in Hungary.

In the 3,000-meter steeplechase final, Brasher of Great Britain won the race, and my high school PE teacher, Sándor Rozsnyói, came in second. However, Brasher was disqualified for improperly passing one of the runners before the medal ceremony, and Rozsnyói received the gold medal. Later, when the Olympic committee reviewed a movie of the race and heard

Rozsnyói's testimony, they reversed their decision. The medals changed hands, and Rozsnyói ended up with the silver.

Besides watching the Olympic events on TV, we had little to do in Ybbsitz. Our days passed slowly. We were still without warm clothing and spent most of the time inside the *Gasthof*, feeding the large fireplace to keep warm. The only meaningful activity I could find was playing chess with Otto, one of the other refugees. A middle-aged man, Otto continuously smoked Hungarian cigarettes. That annoyed me greatly because the thick fumes Otto exhaled smelled disgusting and burned my eyes.

"How many more cigarettes do you have left?" I asked, hoping he was running out. To my dismay, he proudly showed me his backpack, still half-loaded with packs of *Munkás*—the cheapest tobacco product sold in Hungary. Since none of the others in our group showed any interest in playing chess, I had to tolerate my opponent's smoke as the price of entertainment.

Not being able to inform Mother about my safety or well-being troubled me profoundly. Before leaving Budapest, we had agreed she would tell everyone that I was staying at *Tatabánya*, the National Track Team training site. Even if the authorities questioned her, she would stick with the same story, pretending she did not know about my escape. Otherwise, she could face harsh retaliation for not reporting my departure. As it turned out, due to the large number of escapees, the government did not prosecute the family members of those who left Hungary illegally after the revolution. We also agreed that if I could send a message through Radio Free Europe (RFE), the disguised text would say, "From Laci to Panni² néni—I am safe," but I could not reach RFE. Sending a letter home could raise a red flag (excuse the pun). Mother did not have a telephone in the apartment, and even if she did, where would I find money to call international long distance?

Otto must have noticed my troubled expression because during one of the chess games, when I made a wrong move that led to a quick loss, he said, "You are not concentrating on the game. Is something bothering you?"

"Yes, I have been troubled about not being able to notify my mother that I am safely in Austria. She must be very anxious to find out where I am."

Hearing my predicament, Otto had a brilliant idea. "Send a letter and confess to your mother that you lied. Tell her that you escaped from Hungary instead of going to the training camp. Ask for her forgiveness and send her your love. She would then have proof for the authorities that her ungrateful son left without telling her the truth."

"Thanks, Otto! That's a bright idea to protect her. I will do that right now," I said. I immediately wrote a letter to Mother, as he had suggested. After that time, I somehow found his smoking less offensive.

Gábor was not interested in chess but frequently encouraged me to play with Otto. I noticed that he did not stay around to watch our games. After a while, I realized that my rooming with my young married friends meant they had no privacy at night. The lengthy chess games gave them opportunities to be together. As proven nine months later, they made good use of their time.

² Although my mother's first name was Anna, her friends used her nickname, Panni.

The entire week following our arrival in Ybbsitz went by without hearing any new information regarding our departure from Austria. Finally, my two friends and I decided to take a bold step. With our interpreter in tow, we walked to the *Bürgermeister's* office and asked permission to visit the American Consulate in Vienna to apply for immigration visas. After hearing that the Eisenstadt officials had promised us immediate passage to the United States and seeing the letter from Gábor's aunt, the town chief granted our request. He also drafted travel papers asking people to help us because we were political refugees. Finally, he gave us directions to Vienna and wished us good luck. Excited by our success, we planned to leave the next day.

At the *Gasthof*, the opinions of other Hungarians regarding our quick departure were divided. Some felt we should wait longer instead of giving up the free housing and meals. One couple told us our action was irresponsible and might alienate the local officials. Others cheered our courage and wished us a *bon voyage*. The three of us put up a good front, although deep inside, we wondered if leaving Ybbsitz was the right step.

The following day, after an early breakfast, we were on our way, carrying the lunch Frau Peschaker had packed for us. The nearest town with a train station was Waidhofen, an eight-mile walk from Ybbsitz. From there, we planned to ride a local train to Amstetten and then take another train to Vienna. Having no money, we hoped the conductor on the train would accept the letter we carried from the *Bürgermeister*.

The first segment of our trip turned out better than expected. After a short walk through the outskirts of Ybbsitz, a big BMW passenger car passed us and stopped. The driver stuck his head out the window and yelled something in German. We did not fully understand what he said but recognized the name Waidhofen, our immediate destination. We ran to his car and told him the sentence we had already learned well: "Wir sind Ungarische Flüchtlinge" (we are Hungarian refugees). We showed him the *Bürgermeister's* letter. The man waved to us inside his car, and we gratefully accepted his offer. Boriska and Gábor sat in the back, and I took the front seat. A heating vent was directly in front of me—it was terrific.

Back in Budapest, I was familiar with the BMW brand name because one of my classmates often participated in motorcycle races. He referred to that brand as "the fastest in the world." As for automobiles, they were so far out of my realm, and I did not even know that BMW also made cars. In my entire life, I had only been inside a passenger car once before, when our former bed-renter gave me a ride in his taxi. I was excited to sit inside the spacious vehicle this time, looking at its impressive instrument panel. I tried to picture myself one day owning a car—perhaps not as nice as that BMW, but still something others would envy.

As the driver started the car, I noticed him pulling and adjusting several levers mounted on the steering wheel. After seeing my puzzled expression, the man pointed to his leg and said something I did not understand. Gábor also looked at the unusual driving arrangement, and we finally realized that the man had an artificial leg. The levers on the steering wheel replaced the functions of some foot pedals. We then learned from our driver that he had lost a leg in Russia during World War II. Despite his disability, he drove smoothly and delivered us to the Waidhofen train station.

Waidhofen was a tourist town four to five times larger than Ybbsitz. Since the ride had saved us about two hours of walking, we had time to look around. The cars there looked much

nicer than the East German *Trabants* and the Polish-made *Ladas* we had seen on the streets of Budapest. They also made much less noise, something we had already noticed during our ride with the disabled man.

The train station was relatively small, and we quickly found the track where the Amstetten-bound train awaited. We boarded nervously, not knowing how the conductor would react when he discovered we did not have tickets. Our fears were unfounded because we were not asked for tickets at any time during the one-hour trip. We ate the sandwiches Frau Peschaker had packed for us and, with great relief, left the train at our destination.

Hearing us converse in Hungarian, a nearby passenger began to address us. Word spread and all those sitting close to us soon learned that we came from Budapest. Their reaction was beautiful; many of them shook our hands and said that they did not like the Soviet regime either. Several people gave us fruit, chocolate, and even some money. We felt very grateful for their display of empathy.

During our trip, every transfer took us to progressively larger towns. We wanted to look around in Amstetten but did not have enough time. Our connection to Vienna was ready to depart when we found the right track. We jumped into the car nearest to the stairway from the underpass. While we were still catching our breath and looking for seats, the train departed. We found adjacent seats and commented on how much nicer this train, with its soft velvet-covered seats and quiet ride, was compared to the previous one.

Suddenly, our happy mood ended. The conductor appeared and asked everyone for tickets. When he reached us, we showed him the *Bürgermeister's* letter. That led to a lively discussion between him and several passengers. We did not understand much of the conversation, but finally, he returned our letter with a resigned look. He indicated, however, that at least we should not have boarded the first-class car!

Our trip ended in the late afternoon at Vienna's West Bahnhof Station. We said farewell to several passengers and headed to the streets. Our first view of a major foreign city, with its automobile traffic, fancy stores, well-dressed people, and buildings free of war damage³, was overwhelming. It took us hours to absorb this new experience. If Austria could look like that only one year after the Soviet Army had left, what awaited us in America?

Hunger pangs reminded us it was time for dinner. After counting the money we had received from the passengers, we looked for a place to eat. Restaurant menus posted outside showed that our funds would not cover complete sit-down meals, but we could afford three small dishes and one Coca-Cola at a corner bistro. I don't remember what we ate, but sharing the Coke was an experience we would never forget.

In Budapest, we had heard about how people in the United States loved Coca-Cola. Socialist movies and theater plays often made fun of the typical American, showing him wearing a cowboy hat and plaid pants, holding a gun in one hand and a Coke bottle in the other. Naturally, we had all eagerly awaited our first taste of that magic drink. Finally, that moment had arrived.

³ Vienna had not been bombed by the Allies and did not go through a long siege like Budapest did during World War II.



The partial railroad map of Austria shows our travel path: 1) Ybbsitz, 2) Waidhofen, 3) Amstetten, and 4) Vienna.



Photos taken in 2010 at Vienna's West Bahnhof station show the train scheduled to depart for Amstetten.

We asked for three glasses, and Boriska split the bottle's contents among us. We toasted and emptied the glasses. Next, we looked at each other, waiting to hear who would be the first to judge the wonder of the West. It took a while to come up with words, but the look on our faces indicated our disappointment.

Boriska spoke first, "I am not crazy about this."

"I don't like it at all," said Gábor.

"The taste is awful—like lukewarm cough medicine," I added bravely.

At that point, we laughed and agreed that not everything made in America was great. Perhaps the fact that the drink had been served at room temperature contributed to our dissatisfaction, but since that day, I have avoided drinking Coca-Cola.

Next on our agenda was finding a place to sleep, preferably near the American Consulate, where we planned to go early the following day. To our surprise, we saw a young Hungarian man heading in our direction on the other side of the street. We recognized him as Gyuri Teleki from our eighth-grade class. We had often played soccer together.

“*Szia Gyuri!*” I shouted.

Gyuri was equally astonished and almost dropped the large paper-bound book he carried under his arm. He rushed across the street to greet us.

“What a small world. I cannot believe we are meeting here. What are you doing?”

“We plan to see the American Consul tomorrow and ask for visas for immigration.”

“It is hopeless; don’t waste your time,” he informed us. “The annual Hungarian immigration quota for the United States has already been filled.”

“How do you know?”

“Other Hungarians told me.”

“What are your plans?”

“I have already obtained a visa to Canada. Their government will fly me there next week.”

“Why Canada—what is so special about it?”

“My uncle immigrated to Canada right after World War II. He works as an auto mechanic in Toronto, earning eighty dollars a week. Look what he can buy for that much money.” With that, Gyuri opened his book—a Sears & Roebuck catalog—and flipped through several pages. He showed us the cost of various items of clothing. We were astonished at the low prices. A pair of shoes, a suit, and an overcoat each cost much less than a week’s wages—very different from the overcoat I yearned for, which required more than two months’ salary.

“Let’s go to Canada,” I exclaimed.

Boriska and Gabi agreed. We quickly changed our plans and decided to visit the Canadian Consulate the next day. It took only a few seconds to make one of the most important decisions of our lives. After all, if we could not go to the United States, perhaps the next best place was Canada!

“Where in Vienna are you staying?” we asked Gyuri.

“An Austrian family took me in, along with two other boys from Budapest,” he answered.

“Is there any possibility of our sleeping there tonight?”

“I am afraid not. Three of us are already staying in their living room.”

Seeing our disappointment, Gyuri added, “Try a police station. They allow Hungarians to sleep in empty jail cells—when they have any. If not, perhaps the train station would have something for you.”

He gave us directions to a nearby police station. Before parting, he also told us where to find the Canadian Consulate. He added that Hungarian refugees had free access to all public transportation and movie theaters. Wishing us good luck, he left. The evening was settling in, so we anxiously headed for the police station.

Gyuri had given good directions. Soon, we located the station and entered, although the idea of asking for a jail cell bothered us. The smiling policeman behind the desk helped to

ease our concern. Showing him our papers, we asked, with the help of sign language, if we could sleep in one of the cells. The man laughed sympathetically and motioned us to follow him into the next room, where we saw several jail cells with their doors ajar. Pointing to beds already occupied by Hungarian men, the policeman apologized that their “hotel” was already booked for the night. Next, he offered us refreshments from their cooler. Remembering our prior unfavorable experience, all three of us picked drinks other than Coca-Cola.

While we consumed the drinks, we noticed something new: the Hungarian “residents” were watching a soccer game on the TV set adjacent to their cells. Although none of us had seen the inside of a jail in Hungary, we knew prisoners would never watch television programs.

From the police station, we walked back to the large railroad station, hoping to find some quiet place to rest. The waiting room’s wide benches looked ideal to stretch out on, but the cleaning crew ushered us out shortly after midnight. Recalling the nice train car we had traveled in from Amstetten, Gábor suggested we look for a vacant car and sleep on the velvet-covered seats. Searching across the open tracks, we located a section of train cars with “1” on the sides, indicating first-class cars. Boarding one of them in the dark, we found the inside even more luxurious than the one we had traveled in. This car had separate compartments with plushy seats. We decided to camp there for the rest of the night.

Although we were exhausted, the thought of securing passage to North America kept us awake for a while. We had heard about American cities, like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, but Canada presented many unknowns. We knew little about life in that country other than the brief glowing picture Gyuri had painted for us. Questions popped up, but we did not know the answers.

Since Canada lies north of the United States, does it have severe winters?

Where in Canada would they take us?

Would they fly us there or send us on ships across the Atlantic Ocean?

Would we eventually have to pay for the long journey?

Would the Canadian government provide housing and teach us English?

Would we find work in our technical fields without speaking English?

Finally, we agreed to ask these questions the next day at the consulate. Gábor and Boriska settled in one compartment, and I took the one next to them. The inside of the cabin felt cozy and warm, and I fell asleep instantly.

A sudden jerk awakened me from a deep sleep. I felt our train moving. Jumping to my feet in panic, I stepped outside my compartment and heard my friend’s door sliding open.

“What is going on?” I asked.

“We just woke up, and it looks like we better jump off this train before it starts going any faster.”

We ran to the end of the car, quickly leaped off, and walked back to the station. Although the train cars were only being rearranged, we did not feel like trying out another one. The clock inside the almost deserted station showed that we still had several hours before the consulate would open. We located it on the large street map posted in the station and decided to walk there and get in line. Although Gyuri had told us about Vienna’s free public transportation, we figured walking would be better because we did not know which subway or tram to take.

I could feel the cold wind blowing through my clothes as we crossed the bridge over the Danube. Walking close to the buildings on the other side of the river felt a little better, but Vienna was cold in November. After walking several blocks, we found ourselves lost and asked a lady who had just stepped out of her car for directions to the consulate. She asked if we were lost because we were not clothed adequately and were obviously feeling the cold. Although our combined German vocabulary was probably under a hundred words, somehow, we managed to make ourselves understood. The kind lady, who happened to be a doctor, offered to take Boriska to her apartment for the rest of the night. Next, she woke up the caretaker of a nearby school and asked him to let Gábor and me sleep in the gymnasium. The arrangement was made quickly, and we finally had a place to rest.

The caretaker woke us early, indicating that *Frau Doktor* would meet us soon. He handed us a tray outside the gymnasium containing hard-roll sandwiches and hot chocolate. After we gulped down our breakfast, he led us outside, where Boriska and the doctor were waiting inside her car. She drove us to the Canadian Consulate, kissed our cheeks, and waived *Auf Wiedersehen*. We will never forget her kindness.

Whenever I meet Austrians, regardless of their ages, I always thank them for the unselfish help their countrymen gave the Hungarian refugees in 1956. Just a little over a decade following the devastating damage caused by World War II and only a year after the Soviet troops left Austria, the sudden flood of refugees presented a tremendous financial and administrative burden to that small country. Even though Austria had asked for and received promises of immediate assistance from all Western European nations and the United States, their commitments were not always followed by swift action. Financial aid eventually came through, but many countries were unwilling to accept refugees. Despite such setbacks, Austria had unselfishly risked its neutrality by openly helping the anti-Communist refugees and refusing Hungary's demands to turn back any additional escapees. For that, all other former refugees and I will always be grateful.

We found about one hundred Hungarians, including families with small children, waiting at the consulate. We joined them at the end of the line that stretched nearly the length of the block. We soon learned that some people had been there since the previous night, and the three of us wished we had done the same. All those near us had stayed with Viennese hosts who had volunteered to provide temporary housing to refugees.



Hungarian refugees outside the U.S. Consulate, and waiting for immigration processing inside.

After we had waited patiently for a few hours, the line began to move at a painfully slow pace. Counting the number of people ahead of us and timing the rate of the line's movement, I became concerned that we might not be processed that day. My fear was soon realized. A Hungarian-speaking official came out of the building and began handing paper tags to those standing at the beginning of the line. About halfway down the line, he stopped and announced that their staff could not handle more people that day. He asked the rest of us to come back the following day. People moaned and cursed; one woman began to scream with frustration. Affected by the outpour of emotions, the official promised to give out tickets to guarantee priority handling the next day.

The three of us felt demoralized.

"Where will we stay tonight? We don't know where the lady doctor lives," cried out Boriska. "Do we have to walk all night on the streets again?"

Gábor and I took charge. We grabbed Boriska's hands and pulled her over to the official who was already retreating into the safety of the consulate.

"Sir, we came a long way to Vienna and are without any shelter. We wandered through the streets last night, cold and exhausted. Have pity—please don't turn us away."

Boriska started to cry, and the tears rolled down her face. Looking for a handkerchief in her purse, she accidentally pulled out her powder case, which fell to the ground, shattering its small mirror. The loss intensified her crying, and the man could not ignore it any longer. He reached out to comfort her and quickly guided us into the building. He led us to the second floor and asked a caseworker-translator team to process us. The couple asked many questions and entered our personal information into a large book. Satisfied that we were not Communist agents, they directed us to the third floor for physical examinations. One more round of questioning followed, including a photo session. The entire procedure, including the physical exam, probably took less than an hour. Ultimately, we heard the good news: Approved for immigration to Canada! Nothing could go wrong now!

The final step was to schedule our departure from Austria. After flipping through the pages of another large book, a uniformed immigration officer typed our documents. He handed us envelopes with our names and long numbers on the outside and travel documents inside. When passenger shipping resumed, an interpreter explained that we would be taken to Halifax, Canada, in early April next year. They shook our hands and instructed us to return in April.

I was grateful for the speedy processing, but the idea of waiting in Austria for nearly four more months scared me. What if the Soviet Army followed up on its threat to re-occupy Austria? Could we stay in Frau Peschaker's *Gasthof* or be sent back to a refugee camp? Where and how would I continue my track workouts? Questions like these raced through my mind. Although I felt lucky to be going to Canada, I desperately wanted to leave much sooner. Looking at Boriska and Gábor, I could sense they were also unhappy.

The immigration officer finally looked up with surprise. He asked the translator to find out if we wanted something else. Gábor stepped forward and said, "Sir, my wife is pregnant, and by April, she would be very uncomfortable during a long boat ride. Would it be possible for us to take an airplane instead?"

I did not think Boriska was pregnant or that Gábor's clever scheme would work. To my surprise, the officer accepted his story!

"We would not want to take a chance and have the baby born on the ship."

With that, he took back our travel documents and changed them. Our new plans meant we would be flying from Vienna to Vancouver only ten days later! The officer congratulated my friends and once again said goodbye. We left the consulate before he could change his mind.

We didn't notice the cold wind or our lack of lunch; we were leaving for a safe new life in Canada in ten days. Our steps were light, and as we left the consulate, we reviewed our two options for the next ten days. We could stay in Vienna and find an organization, such as the Red Cross or Caritas, to provide a place to stay. Alternatively, we could travel by train to Ybbsitz, hoping to stay in Frau Peschaker's *Gasthof* again.

From talking with other Hungarians who had received temporary housing in Vienna, we learned that finding a host family could be difficult without a referral from the immigration authorities. Our fellow countrymen felt we would have a better chance with the Red Cross, but we could not find its office quickly. We decided to return to Ybbsitz and headed for the West Bahnhof Station, where we found a train scheduled to stop at Amstetten. Fearing that the same conductor we had met the previous day might also be aboard, we quietly settled in a third-class car. Our caution was unnecessary because the conductor was a different person. We showed him our newly acquired Canadian documents and explained that we needed to return to Ybbsitz to sleep. He accepted our presence, as did the conductor on our next train connection. We arrived in Waidhofen late in the evening.

On the previous day, the one-legged man had driven us from Ybbsitz to the Waidhofen station, and we had not paid attention to his routes. Not knowing how to find our way back, we asked the stationmaster's help. He was a large man with a long mustache who happily drew a map showing us how to reach the highway leading to Ybbsitz. Thanking him for his assistance, we began the last segment of our journey on foot.

Luckily, the skies were clear, and the bright moonlight helped us follow the map. No one offered us a ride, and by the time we reached Ybbsitz, we were freezing and hungry. The *Gasthof* was dark, and a sleepy maid answered the doorbell. She seemed surprised to see us back but quietly led us upstairs to our former room. Perhaps Frau Peschaker had psychic abilities and expected us back because our nightshirts and bedding were still in the room where we had left them the previous day. We started a fire, put on the nightshirts, and slept.

The following day, Frau Peschaker and the other Hungarians greeted us, wanting to know what had happened in Vienna. Hearing the details of our adventures, our countrymen had more appreciation for their situation in Ybbsitz, even though they envied us for having our visas to Canada. We still did not know who would pay for our long flight or what would happen to us after our arrival. Besides being as far as possible from the Red Army, such details were minor.

Unknown to us at that time, J.W. Pickersgill, Canada's Minister of Immigration, ordered their Vienna Consulate to give priority to Hungarian refugees so they could be taken to Canada before the harsh winter set in. The minister faced serious challenges from labor

groups and security agencies. The lack of available chartered transport, the cost of transportation, and the fact that Hungarians were classified as “non-preferred” immigrants due to their exposure to Communism also presented problems. Mr. Pickersgill convinced his government to cover all the expenses of bringing new immigrants into the country and simplify the medical and security screenings. As it turned out, Canada spent more money per capita helping the Hungarian refugees than any other Western country!

Our group in the *Gasthof* represented an interesting cross-section of the 1956 refugees. About half were married couples; the rest were single men like me. Most of us came from Budapest—quite a few from the district where I had lived. My friends and I were the youngest, but everyone was under forty. We had many occupations, from unskilled laborers to college graduates. We all had two things in common—a strong dislike of Communism and a desire to live under better economic conditions.

I especially remember one married couple because, behind his back, we called the husband “*Papucs*” (hen-pecked). By today’s standards, we would classify his queen-sized wife as a forceful feminist or a bossy woman and not pay special attention to her. Considering the macho mentality of the male-dominated Hungarian society, she stood out in those days. Whenever we discussed a specific topic, this woman told us her opinion, loudly suggesting we should share her views. The few times the wife did not immediately state her beliefs, *Papucs* meekly asked for her opinion. After her reply, he wholeheartedly endorsed it, repeating it several times so we all heard he was not afraid to speak up.

We told the *Bürgermeister* about our success in Vienna, showed him our visas, and asked him to thank the villagers for their kindness. The chief was touched and promised to drive us to the Waidhofen train station when we left Ybbsitz.

The following eight days passed quickly. Nothing memorable took place except the English lessons given to us by our multilingual translator, who focused primarily on memorizing words and expressions. He cautioned us that he only knew “British English,” and the Canadians might not understand what he had taught us. His warning surprised me. I remembered that, although in Hungary, we had districts where the locals spoke in dialects different from what we used in Budapest, I never had a problem understanding the country folks. A few days later, however, I realized the form of British English we had learned from a Hungarian was quite different from the Queen’s language.

Two days before our scheduled travel to Vienna, Gábor received an airmail envelope bearing an American postage stamp. The letter from his aunt contained a crisp \$20 bill, a small fortune to us. My friend exchanged it for Austrian *schillings* and promised to treat us to something special in Vienna, where the stores offered a much more comprehensive selection of goods. On our last evening, Frau Peschaker prepared a special farewell dinner, complete with wine, to celebrate our departure. We truly appreciated her efforts to make our last evening in Ybbsitz memorable. She and her staff even provided some entertainment by singing Austrian folk songs. After the performance, our young translator shared his desire to follow our example and seek a Canadian visa rather than wait for the unknown in Ybbsitz. Then, to our surprise, *Papucs* spoke loudly to his wife for the first time, “My dear, we need to do the same! Who knows how long we’ll have to stay here!”

“Are you drunk?” asked his wife, stunned by such unprecedented behavior.

“Maybe I am, but I want some action,” he snapped back at her. Perhaps having had too much to drink gave him courage. Sensing our silent approval, he said, “I am sober enough to know that instead of only sitting, eating, and sleeping, a touch of walking would do some good for your....”

We all stared at her, waiting for the roof to fall in, but she quickly regained her composure and controlled herself. Instead of continuing the drama before us, she jumped up, grabbed his arm, and pulled him toward their room. At that point, his courage waned, and he meekly followed her, although they were still arguing loudly on their way to their room.

We did not see them the following day at breakfast and wondered whether they might have killed each other during the night. We left for our final Austrian journey after saying goodbye to everyone else in the Gasthof.

Fresh snow covered the streets, and snowflakes were still falling. The *Bürgermeister’s* car was not as fancy as the BMW we had ridden in on our previous trip, but any vehicle was better than walking a few hours in the snow. We promised to write the mayor from Canada and boarded an early train to Amstetten. The train conductors had become accustomed to allowing Hungarian refugees to ride free. As soon as we explained our status, our conductor waved his hands and went to the next passenger.

Our connection at Amstetten went smoothly, and we arrived in Vienna around noon, a few hours before our appointment at the consulate. Gábor kept his word and divided the money he had received from America among the three of us. Thinking we would not have any financial needs in Canada, we recklessly splurged and spent every last *schilling*. I had always wanted a wristwatch, and I spent my portion of the money to buy one. Enjoying my new possession, I glanced at the watch frequently. My friends noticed and teased me by constantly asking for the exact time.

On the way to the consulate, we passed a movie theater and remembered Gyuri telling us about free admission. The billboard outside showed scenes in color from *Pony Express*, and we decided to see it. After 1948, the Communist government of Hungary banned all forms of Western news media and entertainment, including movies. Still, we remembered how much we had enjoyed “cowboy films” in our youth and were eager to see another one.

We were fascinated by the movie, which starred Charlton Heston. I do not remember the plot, but I can still visualize the red-headed female co-star, Rhonda Fleming. She looked stunning in her Western outfit, complete with a pointed bra, something I had not seen before. Although I did not understand her lines in the movie, she made a deep impression on me. After leaving the theater, I was in love with her and wondered if any Canadian girls would look like her.

Cold, foggy weather awaited us outside the theater, and we walked rapidly to our destination. At the consulate, we again saw the familiar scene of Hungarians lined up outside. This time, however, we gained immediate entry after showing our documents. We were on a large bus with 40 or 50 other Hungarians within an hour, heading to the Vienna airport. Again, we thought nothing could go wrong!

Our group’s mood on the bus was jovial. We did not know what part of Canada would become our new home or what would happen to us after our arrival, but all that no longer

concerned me. I told myself that my knowledge of radio and audio equipment would enable me to find technical work, even without speaking English. After all, the fundamental laws of electronics and schematic diagrams were universal, so knowing English or French would not be imperative. On the other hand, missing several weeks of running worried me. I knew that the American indoor track season would begin during the early part of the following year. Canada, next door to the United States, probably had a similar schedule, so I needed to start running as soon as possible. Although I had never seen an indoor track stadium, I had already visualized myself running under the cover of a large dome protected from the winter climate.



This photo was sent to me by Rhonda Fleming in 2010, after I wrote her a letter saying how much I loved her in the movie. The inscription reads:

**To Les,
So glad you liked me so much in *Pony Express* when you saw it in Vienna in 1956. Blessings,
Rhonda Fleming**

Thick fog greeted us when we arrived at the Schwechat airport in Vienna, and somebody in our group said we might not be able to fly out that day. Well, one more day would not matter, I thought; the next would be just as good. As we stepped off the bus, uniformed Dutch Royal Airline (KLM) personnel directed us toward a large departure hall. After a short wait, one of the officials who spoke Hungarian announced that our flight would be delayed “by a day or two” due to poor weather conditions. He continued by saying that during the Allied occupation of Austria, the airport was in the British zone, and the former residence of the British troops was available to us until our departure.

Hearing about the indefinite delay rekindled our frustration, and we feared that the British army residence would be no better than the Soviet barracks where we had stayed at Eisenstadt. However, after seeing the building assigned to us, our fears disappeared. Instead of haystacks, nice clean beds, toilets, showers, and a cafeteria with an impressive buffet dinner awaited us. The men stayed on the ground floor while the women and children were placed upstairs in what had previously been the officers’ quarters. KLM also gave everyone an overnight bag with slippers and night robes bearing the KLM logo. After finishing a great dinner with Austrian beer, we put on our robes and went to bed. After crunching myself up on the short divan of the *Gasthof* for nearly two weeks, I thoroughly enjoyed the luxury of stretching out on a regular bed.

I hoped that Rhonda Fleming would appear in my dreams instead of the recurring visions that had troubled me in Ybbsitz. Since the first night spent at Frau Peschaker’s *Gasthof*, I had been haunted by dreams with a common theme:

After successfully escaping from Communism, I decided to sneak back through the border for various reasons—to carry coal up from our cellar or to buy a Christmas tree. The return to Hungary is much more complicated than my recent escape; I climb through barbed wire, dig my way under thick shrubs, swim through cold rivers, or hurdle through fields full of explosives. I am in constant fear of being captured by the border patrols. Shortly after reaching the Hungarian side, another revolution broke out, and I found myself in the middle of a war zone. Young fighters with bleeding wounds ask me to pick up arms and join them. Then, I ask myself, “How could I have been so foolish as to return after already being safe in the West?”

Generally, my pounding heart awakened me, and even in the cold room of the Gasthof, I often found myself soaked with sweat.

My wish to dream about Rhonda Fleming did not materialize in the Vienna airport, and the nightmares continued. That night was even more terrifying because, in my dream, a Soviet tank chased me. My legs moved at an agonizingly slow pace, and as I tripped over a pile of cobblestones, the tank closed in on me. I woke up shaking, and it took some time to realize I was no longer in Budapest.

Those dreams stayed with me for two or three years, although their frequency gradually decreased. They ended only when I moved to the United States to attend college and stopped regularly conversing in Hungarian.

The next morning, the thick fog intensified instead of lifting and stayed throughout the day. The KLM spokesman announced that the weather forecast predicted much of the same for the following days, and air traffic would most likely be halted until the skies cleared. Although we were all somewhat disappointed, staying a few more days at a facility where our basic needs were well cared for did not seem so bad. Of course, the fear that Nikita Khrushchev might decide to drag us back to Hungary still lingered in our minds, but at a much lower level. As we watched the news on Austrian television, we saw that the Suez Canal crisis had become the dominant issue in world politics; we heard less and less about Hungary.



Heavy fog in Vienna.

During the next few days, we refugees became acquainted and shared our experiences escaping from Hungary. A large part of our group came from Sopron Forest University, located in a city near the border, where almost the entire school—fifty faculty members with families and over four hundred students—had decided to leave the country. One of their professors told

me that Mr. Pickersgill, the Canadian Minister of Immigration, had visited Austria about two weeks earlier. During his trip, he found out about the presence of the college members in a refugee camp near Salzburg. In a few days, Mr. Pickersgill established a program with the University of British Columbia's School of Forestry to enroll the students immediately and allow them to continue their studies in Canada, using old Army Huts in night shifts. He also arranged to have the group adopted by a nearby pulp mill town. The minister stated:

Most of the countries of refuge wanted to receive Hungarians who could start to work immediately. However, Canada had a bigger vision: We also encouraged students to come here to complete their studies. We believed, in the long run, their additional qualifications would increase their contribution to their new homeland....

Fifty years later, a full-length CBC documentary entitled *The Fifty-Sixers* described the story of the "Soproners." The movie begins with their decision to escape and follows them through as they become active members of communities in British Columbia. Over eighty percent of the students graduated from UBC, and about a third also achieved advanced degrees.

Of the various stories of escape I heard from the group, the most ingenious scheme to pass through the forbidden border zone of Hungary was told by a 55-year-old man. Knowing that every community had a cemetery, he bought a large wreath, placed it around his neck, and walked toward Austria. If anyone questioned where he was headed, he answered, "I am going to the cemetery in the next village." The story worked, and he eventually walked out of Hungary. After hearing this story about his clever accomplishment, we called him *Koszorús bácsi* (Wreath Man).

Our days passed slowly, and the weather did not improve. After the second day, walking through the passenger terminal was no longer exciting, and we became restless from the lack of activity. KLM gave us playing cards, but I found a more active recreation by playing Ping-Pong. I recall that only one man in our group could beat me in singles. In addition, Gábor and I teamed up to dominate the doubles tournament. We played for hours every day.

On the third day, another group of Hungarians joined us, and I immediately recognized János, our translator in Ybbsitz. Boriska, Gábor, and I rushed to greet him. We learned that the day after we left the *Gasthof*, he had also received permission from the *Bürgermeister* to visit the Canadian Consulate. It took him two days to gain entry, but after demonstrating his language skills, he immediately received an immigration visa and a quick trip to the airport. The three of us were delighted to have him with us and continued benefiting from his English language instruction. As a result of his teaching, when I arrived in Canada, my vocabulary included over one hundred English words and about two dozen expressions. I still remember two words János taught me phonetically: "stumak" (stomach) and "korkscrew" (corkscrew). Why he felt we should know corkscrew, I don't know, but I learned it anyway.

On the fourth day, KLM decided to bus our group to Munich, where the continent-wide fog posed less of a problem. From Munich, they would fly us to Amsterdam, and from there, another KLM plane would take us to Vancouver, over the Arctic Circle. Neither my two friends nor I had ever flown before, so we were apprehensive about this first airplane ride. One of the

Sopron professors had already flown and warned us that the trip could be unpleasant in bad weather. During a previous domestic flight, he had suffered a bout of airsickness and vomited when the plane flew into turbulence. His distasteful experience left such an impression that we ate very little that morning or at the lunch served at the Munich airport. After lunch, we boarded a large four-engine propeller-type KLM plane and buckled our seatbelts. After taxiing a short distance, the plane took off with a tremendous engine roar. When I finally stopped praying and opened my eyes, I watched through the window as our aircraft climbed above the clouds. Although the plane shook a little after takeoff, reaching the cruising altitude was not such an unpleasant experience.

Once the plane leveled off, the pilot's voice came over the PA system, and he wished us good luck in Canada. János sat in the row behind us, so we were well informed. I observed the entire cabin and even checked out the lavatory. Everything looked clean and luxurious. A pretty flight attendant brought us food and drinks—all free. We were very impressed with KLM's friendly service, and Boriska even commented on the attendants' lovely smiles. The crew's appearance and attitude represented something new; Hungarian public transportation system employees had never smiled at us. Ever.



Picture of a four-engine DC6 propeller-type KLM plane that flew us from Amsterdam to Vancouver.

Chapter 14: Heading to the New World

The flight was short, but we experienced several scary altitude-drops during our descent. The pilot apologized and explained that air pockets caused the bumps. After we landed at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport mid-afternoon, KLM informed us that a storm was coming and our connecting flight would be postponed until the next morning. We were escorted through Dutch Immigration and bussed to a hotel. Actually, we welcomed the delay because it allowed us to see another major Western city. Staying in a hotel was another new experience; its luxurious interior deeply impressed me. KLM paid for our accommodation, and we were paired into double rooms. The nice, elderly Wreath Man asked if I would share a room with him. I felt honored that he chose me and gladly agreed.

During our stay, the Park Hotel's personnel treated us as if we were their most valued guests, even though we obviously did not look like wealthy travelers. Everyone greeted us congenially. Once again, I witnessed an example of businesses treating their customers politely. I wondered why such policies had not been practiced in the Communist world. It would certainly not require more effort to be friendly, and perhaps they could even throw in a smile occasionally!



The Park Hotel in Amsterdam, with its newly added wing on the left.

A uniformed bellhop led us into the elevator, where a smiling operator welcomed us. After arriving at our floor, the bellhop guided us into a nicely furnished room overlooking a busy street. The heavy flow of bicycle traffic on the streets amazed me. The nearby intersection did not have traffic lights, yet the cyclists cruised fairly high speeds from all four directions. I expected to witness a crash at every moment, but none occurred. Their flowing movements reminded me of ants running in opposite directions without bumping into each other. Perhaps the Dutch cyclists had a special collision avoidance system that I did not know, but their riding skills impressed me tremendously.

Somebody knocked on our door. It was Boriska and Gábor.

"Let's go window shopping before dinner," said Gábor.

"It's drizzling outside, and I don't have a raincoat."

"We saw the doorman offering umbrellas to people going outside."

"In that case, I'll go with you."

We rode the elevator downstairs and, using sign language, asked the doorman for umbrellas. With a big smile on his face, he opened a closet full of colorful umbrellas and handed one to each of us. Without knowing the loan procedure, we thought we might need to leave some security deposit, but he indicated it was unnecessary. We left the hotel with renewed wonder after witnessing another example of a business assisting customers.

The stores and the automobiles looked even more impressive than those we had seen in Vienna. People on the street were well-dressed and happy. Most of the store windows had colorful Christmas decorations, often combined with animated displays that attracted large crowds of spectators. I had some vague recollection of what the same season looked like back in Budapest before World War II, but during the past ten years, the Communist leaders had gradually eliminated public religious displays, including Christmas trees. Instead of Santa Claus, "Father Winter" brought presents. They also attempted to change Christmas to "Pine Tree Holiday."

Seeing the many wide canals was also new to us. Budapest had one large river, the Danube, that separated Buda and Pest, but we had never seen anything comparable to the canals of Amsterdam. Small boats, water taxis, canal buses, and canal cruisers filled the busy water thoroughfares, and frequent bridges provided picturesque views. I would have loved to have had a camera to record the scenery.

The drizzle gradually changed to steady rain, but that did not discourage the bicycle riders in the least. Some cyclists even carried sizable boxes on the back of their bikes. Observing the festive environment made me very happy, although the thought that I could not put anything under the tree for my mother lingered in my mind. I hoped that she and my sister were faring well and had not been harassed by government authorities about my unexplained disappearance.



Upper left: Aerial view of Amsterdam, showing its extensive canal network. Upper right: Typical canal view. Lower left: Canal taxi. Lower right: Canal bus.

We went into several department stores to admire the wide range of consumer goods, comparing them to the scarce selection in the shops of Budapest. Whenever we stopped to admire something, a salesperson immediately offered assistance. Again, that was so different

from Budapest, where the customer generally approached the sales clerk to ask for help while apologizing for the interruption. I recalled an incident I had witnessed a few years before in *Keravill*, a government-owned electrical appliance store. Two elderly ladies approached a group of clerks who were smoking and talking among themselves. One of the ladies asked politely, “Excuse me for bothering you. Please turn on one of the radios on display for me.”

“Are you ready to purchase one today?” the clerk replied rudely.

“No, I don’t have enough money yet, but I want to hear its sound quality.”

“Come back when you have the money to buy it!” barked the salesman.

He turned his back to the lady and continued talking with his colleagues. Highly embarrassed, the two ladies walked quietly away. Unfortunately, I had witnessed the common reaction of store employees who had no personal incentive to sell their products.

We enjoyed riding up and down the escalators and elevators like small children. Gábor’s apartment building in Budapest had an elevator, but it was small, noisy, stinky, and unreliable. When I visited him, I always took the stairs to their fifth-floor apartment instead of the scary, bumpy ride in that contraption. The elevators in the Amsterdam stores were quiet and spacious; riding in them felt like floating on air.

We came across another incredible sight at the railroad station—a multilevel bicycle parking lot. I had never seen so many bikes in my entire life. Amsterdam was overwhelming, filled with surprises, and more were yet to come.

Darkness settled in. The evening panorama of Amsterdam was spectacular—brightly lit store windows and flashing neon signs. Their reflections on the surfaces of the canals shone through the rain. We had eaten very little that day to avoid possible air sickness, and our empty stomachs reminded us it was time for dinner. A look at my new wristwatch confirmed that we needed to hurry. The cold wind encouraged us to walk quickly, and we were relieved to find our way back to the Park Hotel. After returning the umbrellas to the doorman, we huddled around the large ceramic fireplace to warm our chilled bodies.



Multilevel bicycle parking in Amsterdam.

János joined us in the lobby and headed to the main restaurant together. The maître-d’ directed us to a table next to our Hungarian group. With János’s assistance, we ordered a full-course dinner. Though we enjoyed every bite, Gábor and I felt we could still eat more. When the manager came by every table to inquire whether the meals were satisfactory, we replied, “Yes, but we are still hungry.” Looking at our tab, the manager seemed to be puzzled

at first. Regaining his composure, he called for our waiter and asked him to bring a second portion. Other customers who overheard the conversation stared at us while we also put away the second dinner, feeling somewhat embarrassed. Finally, full and happy, we joined our countrymen in the lobby to share our experiences in Amsterdam.

The general theme of our discussion focused on the obvious misrepresentation of the lifestyle in Western countries by the Communist government. The propaganda we had heard was that a handful of capitalists held all the wealth, and the proletariat lived poorly. What we had seen so far in Austria, particularly in The Netherlands, contradicted that claim.

Someone also brought up a subject that generated an interesting discussion. We all noticed the high quality of paper—ranging from toilet tissue to hotel room stationery—and asked why the same grades did not exist in Hungary. Not having luxury items like cars was one thing, but more than a decade after the end of World War II, we considered ourselves lucky when toilet paper was available in the stores, regardless of how rough it was. Finding any in a public bathroom was even more difficult. The Marxist-Leninist doctrine had to be wrong if Communism could not provide something as basic as soft toilet paper.

We concluded that when the theme song of the socialist-progressive Soviet musical *Szabad Szél* (Freedom Wind) requested, "...Wind, wind, come to us from the East," it had definitely asked for the wrong direction. We needed Western influence instead of what Moscow forced on us!

The most interesting story of the evening came from two Sopron college students who walked through a section of the city where shop windows displayed provocatively dressed live women instead of mannequins. At first, we did not want to believe their tale, but some of the older people in our group confirmed that Amsterdam's red-light district truly operated that way. Prostitution had been forbidden in Hungary since the mid-1950s; the ladies of ill repute had to sell their services through the black market. I recalled seeing women wandering aimlessly among the bushes in *Népliget* (Folkpark), a large recreational area where we trained for cross-country during the winter. Occasionally, women would approach men, and after some discussion, they disappeared into the thick, heavy shrubs. I had some vague ideas of what took place there but could not imagine any less appealing place for seeking pleasure. The marketing technique used in Amsterdam sounded much more practical.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. Turning around, I saw the Wreath Man behind me. "We've all had a long day. Are you ready to retire?"

"Yes, I am. Let's go," I replied, and we headed to our room for the night.

Our room had European-style twin beds pushed together. The Wreath Man told me he might need to use the toilet at night, so he chose the bed near the bathroom. After turning the lights off, we talked about various subjects, and eventually, he asked, "Did you have a girlfriend in Budapest?"

"Yes, but I broke up with her. Dating interfered with my track training."

He then continued asking intimate questions about my sexual experience. I felt very uncomfortable and tried to change the subject. Determined to pursue his desires, he said, "Sounds like you haven't been with her for some time. Let me make your night in Amsterdam memorable forever."

I felt very awkward because throughout my childhood, I had always been taught to respect my elders and not talk back to them. Speaking harshly to a grandfather figure was unthinkable, even though his proposal was totally offensive to me. Instead, I said, "I am sorry, but I am not interested."

"I also felt like you a long time ago. Then, someone helped me to take the first step. Since then, I have felt like a liberated person. You should give yourself a chance to try something different," he persisted.

Without answering, I stepped out of bed and slipped into the bathroom. After a long stay, I carefully opened the door and heard him snoring. Quietly, I climbed back into bed, wrapped myself in the comforter, and fell asleep.

"Besser László, Besser László," I heard someone calling my name in Hungarian. Looking in the direction of the voice, I saw a bellhop carrying a sign with my name on it.

"I am Besser László," I said, and the bellhop gave me an airmail letter addressed to me with a Hungarian postage stamp in the upper corner. Fearing bad news, I quickly opened the envelope and found a handwritten note.

"Unless you return to Budapest immediately, your mother will be put on trial for helping you to escape from the country." I recognized the signature at the bottom as Cousin Pista's.

Without hesitating, I ran from the hotel to the street and asked people "Bahnhof" in German because I did not know what the railroad station was called in Dutch. To my frustration, nobody understood me. I saw train tracks on the street and followed them to the station. My legs, however, grew very heavy and eventually stuck on the pavement. I heard a loud roaring noise behind me that sounded like the engine of a Soviet tank. Finally, after a long struggle, I jerked my leg loose, and the sudden movement awakened me. To my relief, I realized I had just been dreaming.

Covered with perspiration, my heart pounding, it took me several seconds to realize that I was in bed at the Park Hotel of Amsterdam. The disturbing loud noise was the snoring of the Wreath Man!

The room was still dark, but I clearly remembered the events that had taken place before we went to sleep that night. Early morning, I dressed quietly and went to the sparsely populated lobby to minimize my contact with the Wreath Man. At breakfast, I shared the distressing experience with my friends. The story quickly spread through our group, and after that, we all shunned our former hero. I avoided eye contact with him for the rest of our trip.

En Route to Canada

Feeling like an experienced traveler, I was no longer afraid of airsickness and fully enjoyed the wide selection at the hotel's breakfast buffet. A short time later, a large KLM bus showed up in the pouring rain to take us to the airport. As our group departed the hotel lobby, about a dozen staff lined up to sing farewell in Dutch. Even though we did not understand the words, their action touched our hearts. I promised myself visiting Amsterdam as a tourist in the future and stay at the Park Hotel.

About thirty years later, I fulfilled that pledge and stayed in the renovated Park Hotel for a week during a business trip. The restaurant manager had already retired, but the hotel's personnel office had his contact information. Upon my request, they phoned him, and he agreed to meet me for a drink one evening. As I expected, we did not recognize each other, but he exploded with a loud laugh when I told him the story of our double-order dinner. Yes, he remembered those skinny young men who ate that incredible amount of food in his restaurant. He told me that our incident became a legend, and for many years, they talked about the "starving Hungarians" who stayed one night in their hotel.

Shortly after leaving the hotel, an excited elderly man from our group rushed to the front of the bus and babbled in Hungarian to the KLM representative. János stepped in to assist, communicating that the man had left his vital heart medication at the hotel. After a short conference between the KLM lady and the driver, our bus turned around and returned to the Park Hotel. János hurried in with the visibly upset man, and 10 or 15 minutes later, they appeared together with smiles. Without further delay, our bus proceeded to the airport.

At the airport, our group marched through the terminal and soon boarded a four-engine DC-6 propeller-type plane even larger than the one that had carried us from Munich. We heard that our trip would take 16–18 hours of flying. Traveling west, we would "gain time," so we were to set our watches back by nine hours. Such a time change was another new experience for us.

Once again, our flight was choppy right after takeoff but smoothed out after a while. Our group comprised about half the passengers on board; the rest were mostly Canadians returning home for Christmas. The flight attendants handed out free KLM stationery, and I spent several hours listing the English words I had already learned phonetically. English spelling did not make sense to me. Hungarian pronunciation was always consistent. Maddeningly, the same letters had to be pronounced differently in some English words. For example, "university" and "understand" both began with the same two letters, "un," but they were pronounced differently. "Idaho" and "idiot" both begin with the letters "id," and again they sounded different. I constantly had to ask János to help me.

Lunch was served with a selection of beer and wine. I felt very important that lovely young ladies in uniform would ask for my food and beverage preferences, an experience I hadn't had in Hungary. I began to write down my new adventures on that flight. Everything was very pleasant until some passengers began smoking. Perhaps we had been seated in a non-smoking section during the first flight because I had not noticed the fumes then. This time, a Sopron professor behind us constantly blew his pipe smoke in our direction. At times, I felt nauseated. Fortunately, I fell asleep and was only awakened much later by the engine noise change. I could sense that our plane was descending. My two friends were still sleeping, leaning on each other's shoulders. So, I asked János, who was reading a magazine, "Are we arriving in Vancouver?"

"No, the pilot announced that we need to make a stop to refuel. He chose a somewhat longer path to avoid a strong headwind by flying further north. But even in calm weather, our plane could not have flown all the way to Vancouver without refueling."

"Will we fly over the North Pole?"

“We won’t travel that far north. Our stopover will be at an American military base at Thule, in Greenland.”

“What language do they speak there?”

“I am not sure, but the American Air Force occupies the airfield where we will land. They speak their own version of English.”

I did not want to show my ignorance and reveal that I did not know what he meant by the different versions of English. Still, I asked, “Will they understand the English words you taught us?”

“I hope so,” he replied, laughing. “Otherwise, you’ll have to start all over.”

When Boriska and Gábor awakened, I relayed what I had heard from János. Soon, our plane touched down. The pilot then announced that the plane would take off again in about two hours. During our layover, the U.S. Air Force would host all the refugees.

I had not seen American airmen in person before, but I still remembered the American B-17 planes carpet-bombing Budapest during World War II. I wanted to see what their pilots looked like. My expectations had been tainted somewhat by the Communist news media’s description of various inhumane acts committed by American flyers over North Korean population centers—dropping napalm on civilians, infiltrating crops with germ warfare, etc. Even though we did not believe everything we read in the Communist press, I still anticipated those pilots to be somewhat monstrous.

Jetways did not exist in 1956. After descending the stairs that had been rolled out to the plane, we had to walk about 150 yards to the terminal. It was dark, windy, and very cold. By the time we reached the building, my entire body was shivering. My face was numb. How could humans survive in such an environment?

After I walked through a double set of doors into the well-heated building, it took me a couple of minutes to regain my sense of feeling. One by one, the rest of the passengers staggered in, all of them moaning and complaining about the unbearably cold weather. We heard the evening temperature was -45° F (about -43° C). That was by far the coldest weather I had ever experienced. I hoped that Vancouver’s climate would not be so severe.

I noticed a huge, beautifully decorated Christmas tree in the hall’s center. Neatly dressed, good-looking uniformed soldiers—actually airmen—mingled among the passengers. To my surprise, an officer stepped up on a chair and, in broken Hungarian, invited all the refugees into an adjacent room. Once we gathered there, he introduced himself as an Air Force captain, a second-generation Hungarian born in the United States. He pointed to a large buffet table loaded with sandwiches and fruit and encouraged us to help ourselves with everything. Airmen handed out stamped postcards so we could send greetings back to Hungary. Most of us quickly took advantage of their offer. I stuffed myself with food and sent two postcards to Budapest, one to my mother and another to Cousin Pista, wishing *Boldog Újévet* (Happy New Year) from a place near the North Pole.

All the Air Force personnel were attentive, personable, and courteous; they went out of their way to make our short stay as comfortable as possible. When several of us surrounded the Hungarian-American officer, one of the professors asked him if the news we had heard in Hungary about their North Korean missions was true. The captain assured us that most of the stories were not. As in all wars, he said, there were unavoidable civilian casualties, but the

U.S. military had always been careful to minimize them. As for using germ warfare in North Korea, he firmly stated that it was simply Communist propaganda. I was glad to have the opportunity to correct my preconceived negative image of the American Air Force. The men who hosted us at that base certainly did not look or behave like the monsters I had expected.



Path of our flight: 1) Takeoff from Amsterdam, 2) Stopping in Greenland, and 3) Ending at Vancouver.

We left the base with positive impressions about Americans and hoped Canadians would be just as pleasant. The second half of our flight seemed much longer, and I became increasingly restless as the minutes and hours passed. I was eager to be in Vancouver.



Another group of Hungarian refugees arriving in Canada.

Prime rib was served for dinner, but Gábor did not like it. I thought it tasted fine and finished his portion. Feeling satisfied, I was beginning to work on my list of English words when the professor behind me lit up his pipe again. We flew over the Rocky Mountains about the same time, and our plane ride became very bumpy. I felt nauseous and was ready to run to the lavatory if I needed to throw up. After several violent shakes and drops, the flight attendants came by to tell everyone to buckle their seatbelts. One of them must have noticed that I did not look well and asked what was bothering me. In my best English, I replied, "My stumak no good."

Seeing her puzzled expression, I realized that people might not understand me when I used some of the words János had taught me phonetically. I kept repeating the same sentence, pointing to the center of my body. Finally, she understood and asked sympathetically, "Stomach?"

After I nodded, she reached into the seat pocket, handed me an air sickness bag, and showed me how to use it. A few minutes later, highly embarrassed, I vomited into the bag.

When our plane finally landed at the Vancouver airport, I was relieved to be on solid ground again.

A New Canadian Emigrant

Dawn was breaking when Canadian Immigration officers escorted us into the airport terminal. My awful experience near the end of our flight still haunted me and nearly spoiled the excitement of arriving in my new country. Throwing up in the presence of a planeload of people was humiliating. My friends tried their best to console me, but I just wanted to be left alone. Then, my humiliation magnified. One of my fellow refugees added insult to my misery and said jokingly, “I know how bad you must feel—I throw up every time I am drunk.” I did not even dignify him with an answer, recalling an early experience when some older boys had tricked me into getting drunk at a New Year’s Eve party in Budapest. I always wondered why anyone would go on boozing if the aftermath were so disgusting.

After we left the weather problems behind, our arrival on Thursday, December 20, 1956, was well planned by the Immigration Office. Since it was very early in the morning, they bussed us to the sleeping quarters of a processing area in Vancouver. In a few hours, we would officially become landed immigrants.

Looking through the bus windows, I did not see any snow on the ground, so I felt reassured that the winter here would not be as cold as we had experienced in Greenland.

As we approached the city, the glow of lights surrounding the buildings became brighter. When our bus turned off the expressway, I saw Christmas trees through the windows of homes. Surprisingly, the downtown area was not as dazzling as I expected. I later learned that in contrast with European cities, few people lived in the city center. Businesses owned most buildings, and the employees went home to the suburbs at night.

The Immigration Center was large, and its sleeping accommodations were simple but clean. Being tired, we went to bed soon after our arrival. My stomach was finally feeling better, and I hoped that by morning, it would be ready to accept food again.

In bed, I recalled the events of the past four weeks and thanked God for helping us safely through our long journey. Only a month earlier, my two friends and I had been trying to find a way to leave Hungary. We are now on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean in Western Canada. Except for the sports stars, the people I knew in Budapest never left our native country. For many years, I had hoped to visit other European cities by becoming part of the Hungarian National Track Team. Even in my wildest fantasies, I had never imagined traveling this far, so I was proud and happy about my accomplishment. Then, the reality of being thousands of miles from my family suddenly hit me. Would I ever see my mother and sister again? I visualized them preparing for our traditional Christmas dinner—a spicy fisherman’s stew containing carp with clusters of

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roe¹—one of my favorite meals. Thinking about the consequences of my actions made me feel regretful and kept me awake for quite a while. Eventually, I fell asleep.

In my dream, I was in an airplane headed to Budapest but didn't have any travel documents. I worried whether I would be allowed to stay in Hungary. Then, our plane rapidly descended, and I braced myself for a crash. Instead of the expected impact, I found myself in Republic Square, the site of the memorable siege of the District Communist Party Office. Suddenly, a shooting erupted. I tried to find cover in the large theater at the center of the square, but the building moved away from me and began to shrink. Eventually, the entire structure completely disappeared. I was totally frustrated because it would have been a perfect place to hide.

The following morning, we had a buffet breakfast in the cafeteria. The biggest surprise to us was the bread. It was white, soft, and squishy—quite different from the firmer European type. I learned that toasting gave it some texture and liked it better that way. I liked Canadian bacon. Not knowing when we would eat again that day, I packed my tray with lots of food. My stomach was back to normal, and when the three of us walked out of the cafeteria, we felt ready to face the new world.

The immigration process took much longer than it had in Austria. The Sopron University group was immediately taken to another floor, and we did not cross paths with them again. On our floor, we were initially seated at the side of the room, separated by a low partition from the other side where the questioning occurred. Behind each desk sat a uniformed Canadian officer. Next to him was an English-Hungarian interpreter. The officer asked lots of questions:

Why did you leave Hungary?

Where did you live and work?

What type of work did you perform?

Who did you leave behind in Hungary?

What serious illnesses have you had?

Were you a member of *DISZ* (Democratic Youth Organization) and/or the Communist Party?

Another uniformed person walked among the desks, randomly stopping at a desk and becoming involved with the questioning. I suspected that he worked for the Canadian equivalent of the FBI, and his task was to prevent Communist spies from sneaking into the country. When it came to my turn to be questioned, he looked into my eyes and asked if I knew how to operate an amateur radio (HAM) transceiver.

“No,” I replied.

“How come?” he asked.

I told him about one of my technical high school classmates who had illegally built and operated an amateur shortwave set. The government zeroed in on his transmission within a few weeks and caught him red-handed. He was first charged with espionage—a crime

¹ An inexpensive version of caviar: carp eggs.

that generally led to a death sentence. Fortunately, the charge was later reduced to illegal use of the airwaves. He and his entire family were deported from Budapest, and I had never heard of him again. That set an example for the rest of us in our school. After that, I had never even considered building a radio transmitter.

I also thought of telling the official about frequently listening to the forbidden Voice of America broadcast, but it occurred to me that he might not be impressed by my illegal activity, so I kept my mouth shut. The story about my classmate must have satisfied him because he did not ask any more questions. The immigration officer, however, told me that if I wanted to change my first name, László, I should do so during processing; my documents would show my new name.

“What’s wrong with my name?” I asked defensively.

“Nothing is wrong, but experience shows it is easier to obtain interviews if you have an Anglo name on your job application forms.”

I did not know what a job application was. When I finished high school in Budapest and received my Electronic Technician diploma, the school sent me to Audio, and their managers seemed to already know everything about me. I naively asked if Canadian Immigration would do the same for me.

“No, you’ll have to find a job yourself,” he replied.

At that point, I began to worry and figured I had better do everything possible to be employable.

“What similar-sounding Anglo name would you recommend?”

After a short conference with the interpreter, he answered, “Leslie.”

“Do I also need to change my last name?”

“You don’t need to go that far. Leslie Besser sounds good enough.”

He completed my immigration form, signed it, and handed it to me along with a crisp new Canadian five-dollar bill. With a big smile, he shook my hand.

“Welcome to Canada, Mr. Leslie Besser!”

I felt very important because he called me “Mr.” In the past ten years, in all socialist countries, the proper form of addressing other adults had been “*Eltárs*” (Comrade) instead of “Mr.” I had never liked *Eltárs* and had always avoided using it. “*Szaktárs*” (Colleague) was tolerated at work, so I used it when talking with older coworkers. As for my new first name, I guessed it would take some time before I would react to someone calling me Leslie.

For the next ten years, including my time in college, I was known as Leslie. Then I saw Gigi, featuring the French actress Leslie Caron. Horrified by the idea of having a feminine name, I immediately shortened it to “Les.” Of course, Hungarians still use my native nickname, “Laci.”

Boriska and Gábor received their papers and money from another officer. Boriska also received suggestions about her first name and changed it to Barbara. We were given two hours of free time in Vancouver, after which a ferry would take us to Vancouver Island. None of us had heard of the island and were eager to see Vancouver. We did not see János and concluded that with his knowledge of English, he probably already had an interpreter job lined up. The three of us braved bustling, busy downtown Vancouver without him.

First Impressions of Canada

Our first surprise was seeing the height differences among the various downtown buildings. European cities had a more uniform skyline. Most buildings were four to five stories high except for a few tall structures. In Vancouver, skyscrapers and single-story buildings often stood next to each other. Many of the tall buildings had strange-looking iron stairways on the outside. Later, we heard they were fire escapes—a new concept for us. Except during the war, I had never heard about or seen a city dwelling on fire in my entire life. Buildings were constructed of noncombustible material—bricks and mortar. Every apartment building in Budapest had two internal stairways, so the ugly outside stairs in Vancouver did not make sense.

The next new experience was seeing food served inside a drugstore. People sat on round stools at a food counter, some reading large newspapers while eating. Various products, ranging from sunglasses to clothing items, were on display. Our drugstores in Hungary carried only pharmaceutical items; the staff always wore white lab coats and behaved professionally. Seeing waitresses dressed in colorful uniforms and chatting informally with customers while serving hot dogs and hamburgers was so appealing that we contemplated ordering something. However, we decided to make better use of our five-dollar bills and moved on.

After visiting several large department stores where everyone spoke English, we were overwhelmed by the differences and returned to the Immigration Center. Clouds were moving in, and a cool wind blew through the streets. I was still wearing my entire wardrobe—including the ski sweater given to me in Ybbsitz—and without a heavier jacket, I felt cold. I noticed that most men wore smart-looking car coats and decided to buy one as soon as I had more than five dollars.

After lunch, the twenty of us who had been assigned to families on Vancouver Island were taken to the harbor and boarded a large multilevel ferry boat—another new experience for us. The largest boat I had ridden in before was a rowboat, and I could hardly contain my excitement about becoming a passenger on such a large vessel. Our boat had two ramps, one for people and another for cars being stored underneath the deck. Once on board, we descended the stairway to see the parking area, where the cars were tightly packed in three or four adjacent rows. I envisioned myself one day driving my own car onto the ferry. Then we went back upstairs and stared at the vast body of water we were about to cross.

Soon after we left the harbor, the boat began to rock. It was non-violent but a steady up-and-down motion that made me realize I was no longer standing on firm ground. My stomach also recognized this and became upset. I wished someone had warned me about seasickness before I'd eaten a huge lunch. Then, my nasty experience happened again—this time, heaving over the boat's railing. My first ocean cruise was not the joyful ride I had hoped for. Arriving in the Nanaimo harbor, wearing the same wrinkled clothing I'd had on for about a month and with a slightly green cast on my face, I must have looked pitiful.

A small group of people waving red-white-and-green flags greeted us as we disembarked. We learned later that the group consisted of Hungarians already living in

Canada. Some of them had emigrated during the 1920s, leaving behind the hardship and famine that followed the First World War. Others had come by more complicated paths, escaping from Hungary shortly before the Soviet Army took over in 1945. Together they formed a close-knit group, *Turu*², that always tried to help newly arrived compatriots. Their Hungarian-speaking leader gave a short speech, welcoming us to Vancouver Island and explaining the temporary arrangement under which some of us would stay in their homes while the rest would stay with Canadian host families. All those placed with families not speaking Hungarian would be driven to the designated homes by a member of his group. During that journey and regularly thereafter, they would introduce us to the Canadian lifestyle to ease our adjustment. They would also help us find jobs. Finally, he and the immigration officer, who had escorted us on the boat, called our names and told us with whom we would stay.

My two friends and I hoped to reside together, but I was assigned to the Kirkpatrick family, who owned a small motel in Parksville, while Boriska and Gábor were to stay with the Turners in Qualicum Beach. Both towns were located a short distance from Nanaimo, and the three of us were taken to our destinations by a jovial elderly man named Miklós. After introducing himself, he told us that he was an ethnic Schwab³, who had immigrated to Canada over thirty years ago from a small Hungarian village.

“What part of Hungary did you come from?” he asked.

“We lived near each other in Budapest, *Miklós bácsi*.”

“Yeah, I could have guessed you are city folks. By the way, call me Miklós only because hearing *Miklós bácsi* makes me feel old. English has only one form of ‘you,’ so we’ll drink ‘per-tu’⁴ sometime later.”

Although I felt honored, it was hard to accept the idea of addressing a much older person with the informal version of that personal pronoun.

“What kind of work did you do in Hungary?”

We explained that both Gábor and I had worked as technicians in factories making electronic equipment while Boriska had had a job on an assembly line. Of course, we hoped to find work similar to what we had done before.

“We don’t have factories on this island, so you’ll have to do something different. However, you are lucky to have us old-timers here to help. I didn’t know anyone when I came to Canada and had to work long days on a farm for years with very little pay. I couldn’t pick and choose what I wanted to do.”

“What will happen to us?” we asked, alarmed by what he had said.

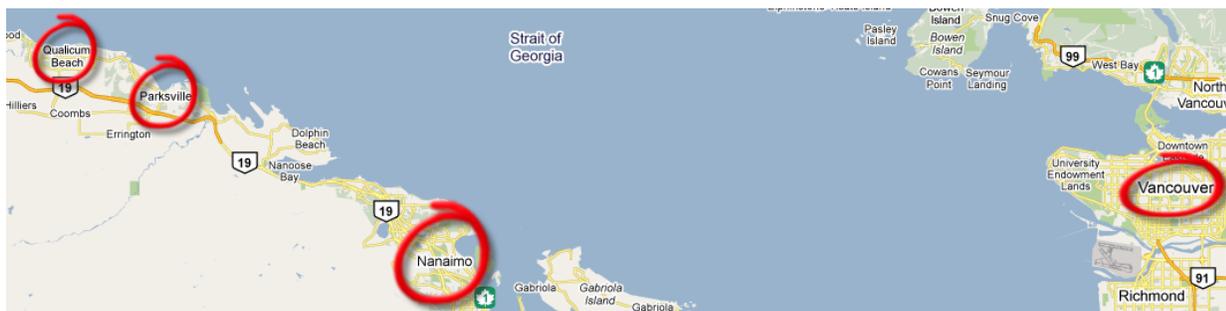
“Well, don’t worry, you’ll have a roof over your head and won’t be hungry. The host families taking you have already committed to keeping you until you find work. You’ll be all

² According to Hungarian mythology, in the 9th century, a large falcon-like bird called *Turul* led the Magyar tribe to settle in the Carpathian base, where Attila was buried.

³ During the 18th century Schwab farmers settled in Hungary, maintaining their German dialects.

⁴ The Hungarian language has two forms of the pronoun “you.” Children among themselves, and close friends, use an informal version. Children to adults, as well as strangers to each other, use the formal version. The older adult may invite a younger one to switch to the informal “you,” either by a handshake or by having a drink together, called “per-tu.”

right. Eventually, someone will hire you. Staying with Canadians will force you to learn English. I also had to learn that language the hard way.”



Map showing Vancouver Island and the towns where we stayed.

Miklós frequently mixed English words—most unfamiliar to us—into his still-accented Hungarian conversation. Even more confusing was that some English words we assumed we already knew he pronounced differently. For example, János taught us that the short word for automobile was “car,” but Miklós pronounced it “caree.” The word to express agreement we learned was “sure,” but according to him, it sounded like “sheer.” I feared we would need to start all over with our English lessons.

When we reached the town of Parksville, Miklós steered his car toward the beach and soon stopped at a small motel. The two of us entered the office, and he introduced me to the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Kirkpatrick, who were expecting me. Their two small children, Peter and Kristy, who were about two and four years old, also appeared. They looked at me curiously. After a short conversation with the Kirkpatricks, Miklós told me he would return in a few days and left to transport Boriska and Gabor to their destination. I ran after him and said farewell to my friends, realizing I might not see any familiar faces for some time.

My host family did everything possible to make me feel comfortable. First, Mr. Kirkpatrick took me around to show me their property. His two children trailed after us. The family resided in the main building, which also included the motel office. Surrounding their central living quarters, 15 to 20 small rental cottages, accented by picnic tables, were scattered under large trees. The entire property extended to the beach. The site was impressive, and I assumed the owners must be quite wealthy.

Mr. Kirkpatrick led me to Cottage #1, handed me a key, and asked me to open the door. As we stepped inside, he indicated that it was my place to sleep. I was momentarily overwhelmed by the size of the unit—a spacious living room, a bedroom with a huge bed, a small kitchen area, and a bathroom—all to myself. The inside was cold, and he showed me how to operate the thermostat to heat the place. The numbers on the heat controller did not make sense until I realized they referred to Fahrenheit rather than Celsius temperatures. Mr. Kirkpatrick continued talking to me, and after some difficulty, I understood that I would have my meals in the main building with them. He also pointed to my clothes and said something I did not understand. Next, he pulled a notepad from his pocket and wrote down the time for dinner. With that, he and the two giggling children left me.

Seeing temperature and distances expressed in the English measurement system was new. Although we had learned English units in high school, the metric system seemed far more logical. For example, defining the freezing temperature of water as zero degrees and its boiling point as 100 degrees Celsius always made sense to me. Using 32- and 212 degrees Fahrenheit instead did not. However, I remembered the old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” and figured I would just have to adjust my thinking.

I took off my shoes and jacket and stretched out on the bed. For the first time in my life, I felt entirely alone. The realization of it hit me particularly hard, perhaps because it was almost Christmas. Being entirely dependent on strangers and their handouts bothered me even more. I prayed to St. Anthony and asked him to help me find a job so I could soon support myself and make new friends. I also asked him to let my mother and sister know I was safe and living in a nice place.

Both my body and mind also missed the rigorous workout schedule I had maintained during the past six years, and I was eager to run again regularly. Even though Mr. Kirkpatrick did not look athletic, I wanted to ask him if he had a running outfit I could borrow.

Looking at my watch reminded me it was time for dinner. My stomach had completely recovered. I hoped Canadian cooking would not be too different from my mother’s and headed to the main building.

When I was in the office earlier, I had not noticed the large Christmas tree in their living room. Under the tree lay lots of beautifully wrapped boxes—presumably containing presents. All that was new to me because, in Hungary, both the tree and the presents appeared only on Christmas Eve. Peter and Kristy already had their eyes on two large boxes.

Mr. Kirkpatrick seated me between the two adults at their dinner table. After he said a short prayer, his wife served food from a large bowl to everyone. My first meal with them was some kind of stew that tasted very good. I missed eating bread with the meal but did not have the courage to ask for it. After I quickly cleared my plate, the lady of the house asked if I would like more.

Although I came from a poor family, and we seldom had enough to eat, my mother taught me good table manners. She told me if a well-to-do family invited me to eat and they offered seconds, I must answer, “No, thank you.” A typical Hungarian hostess would then say, “Oh, please have more.” I should not accept even the second offer to show that I had class. Next, she would say, “You hurt my feelings by eating so little.” At that point, the proper reply is, “Well, perhaps...” The next offer is typically, “Go ahead; we have lots more.” Then, I should say, “It was so good. I can’t resist,” and take a lot more.

I faithfully followed Mother’s instructions and replied to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, “No, thank you.” To my shock, she did not repeat the offer and put the bowl away.

After that day, I never made that mistake again!

Following dinner, we watched television for a while. Canada’s election was set for the following summer, and politics seemed to dominate the news. Although I did not understand most spoken words, one scene captured my attention. The TV footage showed a group of people parading in Vancouver, carrying a sign that included the word “Communist.” Disturbed by what I saw, I asked Mr. Kirkpatrick with dismay, “Communists in Canada?” He tried to explain, but I could not comprehend his answer. Finally, he pulled me to the window and

pointed to the beach. Next, he took me to the kitchen and turned on the faucet gently so the water was only dripping. He switched continuously between pointing to the water droplets and pointing outside. Completely confused, I could not see what water had to do with Communism. Two days later, when a *Turul* group member visited me, I finally understood the connection. My host had tried to tell me that the total number of Communists living in Canada was insignificant, “like a drop of water in the ocean.”

Kristy went to bed before Peter, and I watched Mr. Kirkpatrick playing lovingly with his son for quite some time. I envied the little boy for having an experience I had never had. Growing up without a father, I had always fantasized about what it would be like to have someone to teach me things my mother could not—like wrestling or playing soccer. Though Braun bácsi had always treated me kindly, I knew he was our boss—and I wanted a father.

I asked my hosts for airmail stationery and wrote a long letter to my mother, telling her about my first impressions of Canada—most of which were favorable—and giving her my new address. I hoped she had received the mail I sent from Austria and was not worried about my safety.

When I returned to my cottage, I found pajamas and towels on the bed. After climbing into the large, comfortable bed, my thoughts returned to my childhood. The farthest back I could remember was probably when I was between two and three years old, living with Cousin Pista’s family. I remembered my kind surrogate *nagymama* and her bedtime stories. I also thought of my mother and *her* stories about growing up as part of a large family struggling during the First World War years. Although she had only a third-grade education and no special skills, she survived the hardships and raised me and my adopted sister. She had also taught me how to endure adversity.

The events of the past weeks had brought me to a new country where people speak a different language and have customs unfamiliar to me. *Like my mother, I must also find ways to succeed in my life. I am a hurdler who knows how-to pass-through obstacles. I will apply those athletic skills to my personal life. I shall survive!*

Following the Hungarian custom taught to me by my Mother, I counted the corners of the room until I eventually fell asleep.

THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS AWARD

Presented by Consul General of Israel Dr. Andy David in honor of the late Anna (Besser) Valkar. Anna's son, Les Besser, will be accepting the award on her behalf.

Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to those who perished during the Holocaust, presents the Righteous Among the Nations award on behalf of the State of Israel and the Jewish people to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Persons recognized as a "Righteous Among the Nations" are awarded a specially minted medal and a certificate of honor both bearing their name. Their name is also added to the Wall of Honor in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.



Anna (Besser) Valkar Anna Besser, the eldest of five siblings, was born on June 14, 1911, in Szekesfehervar, Hungary. In 1939 she became the housekeeper of a Jewish man who allowed her to move into his residence with her young son. She worked there for three years until Fascist laws forbade Jews to employ Christians. Sympathetic to her former employer and other Jews, she helped them obtain "letters of protection" from the consulates of Switzerland and Sweden, neutral nations.

As World War II raged on, the German army occupied Hungary and the Hungarian Nazi Party took control of the government. Anna, now living in her own apartment, helped Jews to escape persecution by giving them her own identification papers and those of her deceased family members. During the war's final months, she hid two elderly Jewish men in her small apartment, putting herself and her son at grave risk.

Anna continued to work in domestic service after the war. She raised her son and adopted her 12-year-old orphaned niece. After the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, her children escaped to Austria and immigrated to Canada. Anna remained in Budapest and visited her children and four grandchildren in the United States, where they eventually settled. Anna passed away in Budapest in 1993 at age 82, her son at her bedside.

