

## Chapter 2: Joining a Canadian track club

The harsh winter ended in late April when spring weather finally arrived. I learned Montreal had two large track and field clubs, St. Lambert and Mount Royal Athletics. The latter was closer to where we lived. I stopped by to visit there as soon as the snow melted.

The head coach greeted me warmly. After I filled him in about my running background, he told me, "I'll be glad to work with you. But our club has no outstanding hurdlers for you to practice with." Seeing the disappointment on my face, he added, "Our sprinters, however, are among the top in Canada. You'll enjoy being part of our team." He stepped next to me to compare our feet when he heard I did not have spike shoes. "Looks like we wear the same size," he said. "Tomorrow, I'll bring you my old shoes from home. You can have them. My running days are over."

I began working out the next day. After several months of inactivity, I had to start up gradually. Coach Carroll, a former Canadian 440-yard champion, was extraordinarily patient and understanding. He prepared a separate training schedule for me. I hoped to work out with the team members in a few months.

The following week, the coach waved me over. "I have something you'll enjoy reading," he said, handing me a Montreal newspaper. He pointed out an article in the sports section with my name in it. "I talked with one of their reporters yesterday and mentioned that you've joined our club. Now, you have to live up to their expectations."



Portion of the article that appeared in the *Montreal Gazette's* sports section.

I was happy to see the article and proudly showed it to my boss the following day. Knowing that he was an ice hockey fan, I assumed he would be happy to see he had an elite athlete working for him. Perhaps he would even allow me to leave work a little earlier every day to be at the track sooner. The factory was located south of downtown, about 40 minutes from the Mont-Royal track by streetcar. I was always one of the last to arrive for practice.

Mr. Ward was not impressed. "Be sure it does not interfere with your work," he grunted. "Running hurdles is not like playing ice hockey. You can't make a living from it." He handed back the article, shaking his head disapprovingly. His reaction was far from the praise I expected.

A week later, my friend John Fischer also joined the track club. His fastest 100-meter time back in Budapest, 10.8 seconds, was respectable even in Canada. However, he had not worked out for over six months, so he also had to begin carefully. I hoped that by the end of the summer, we could be part of the same relay team again.

The first major track meet occurred in June in Valleyfield, Quebec, along with the Scottish Highland Games. Instead of metric distances, all races were measured in yards and miles. One of our club sponsors drove us to the meet.

After changing into our tracksuits and walking to the small stadium, John and I had a big surprise: the running track had been laid on the grass! The only hurdle event for men was the 120-yard race with 42-inch-high hurdles, and the coach did not want me to run that on the grass. Instead, he entered me into the 440-yard sprint. Although the coach was not entirely convinced that John was ready to compete, he agreed to let John run the 100-yard dash.

I expressed my concern about not being able to run a good time on the soft grass. Coach Carroll, however, reminded me that everyone else would have the same handicap. "Don't worry about the time. Run to win!" he said.

I was uncharacteristically nervous before this track meet, my first in Canada. John's event was first on the schedule, well before mine, so we warmed up separately. Finding a quiet place to concentrate on the busy field was challenging. Scottish bagpipe players were everywhere, practicing their instruments. The strange sound bothered me, and I struggled to block it out. I wanted to stay close to the track to observe John's race so I could not escape from the pipers.

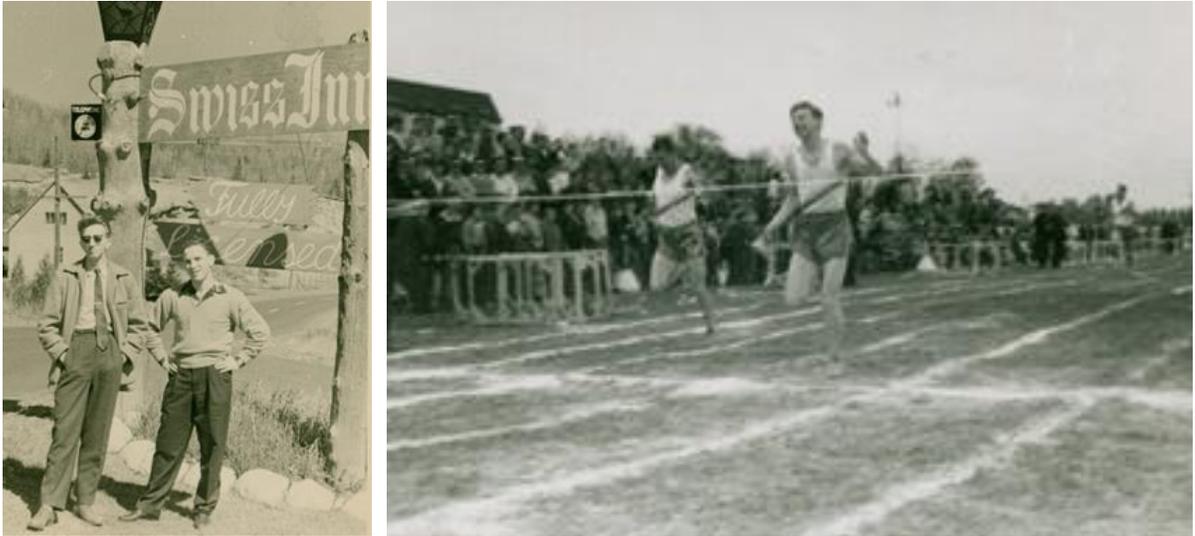
John had a good start, leading in his heat for the first 50 yards. Suddenly, his legs buckled, and he fell. As the other runners passed him, his facial expression showed he was in pain. I ran over and helped him stand. "My hamstring is hurting. I think I tore a muscle," he told me as I helped him off the track.

Our coach rushed to us with a trainer. They tied an icepack to the back of John's thigh and had him lie down in the grass. The coach was blaming himself for letting John race with so little preparation. I was praying to St. Anthony to protect me during my run.

The 440-yard race had timed heats. The officials put me into the first heat based on my fastest time. I did not know any of the other runners except for George Gluppe, who was also a club member. George and I had trained together during the past weeks, and I knew he was the faster of the two of us. I was to run in Lane 3, and George had Lane 5. My strategy was to stay close behind him.

After the starting gun sounded, George took off very quickly. Halfway through the race, he was at least 15 yards ahead of me, and I gave up any hope of staying close to him. By the 330-yard mark, his lead had increased. I felt surprisingly strong, however, and began to stride faster. George faded in the last 50 yards, and I passed him!

After the race, he told me that he had underestimated the effect of the soft track. “The fast pace of the first 220 took so much out of me that I could hardly lift my legs at the end. This is probably the only time you’ll beat me,” he said with a smile. He was right. I could never beat him again in the 440 dash.



**Left: John Fischer and I during a stop on our way to the track meet. Right: Winning the 440-yard race held on a grass-covered track. Finishing a close second is George Gluppe, who became another long-time rival and friend.**

A few days later, John showed up at the track, walking with a limp. “I tore my right hamstring, which will take months to heal. My running days may be over,” he said with sadness.

The news hit me hard. We had been running on the same Hungarian team for four years. We were both national junior champions—John in the 100m sprint, and I won the 400m hurdles. I ran the third leg, and he was the anchor of our champion 4x100m relay. The experiences we had shared cemented our friendship. Now, that camaraderie might not be as strong. I expressed my sorrow and the hope that his injury would not prevent him from running again. Unfortunately, my wish did not come true.

In August, our coach informed me of a significant two-day track meet soon in Toronto. He planned to drive several of us down on a Thursday so we could compete on Friday and Saturday. Toronto was Canada’s track and field capital, and I looked forward to running at the famous East York club.

The next day, I asked Mr. Ward if I could take two days off for the track meet. He was not happy to hear my request. “You don’t earn any vacation until you’ve worked here for a year.”

“This meet is crucial. I’ll have a chance to run against the top Canadian hurdlers,” I protested.

“What is more important, your work or running?”

“Running. Someday, I hope to compete in the Olympics.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll just have to let you go.”

“Thank you very much,” I replied happily, misunderstanding his statement. “I’ll work extra hard after coming back.”

“You won’t be back. You are fired!”

I was unsure what “fired” meant, but his facial expression told me it was not good. I was correct. He led me to Personnel, where I received my pay that day. Then, he walked me out of the plant.

*What am I going to do now? If I return to the Employment Bureau, I must admit that my boss fired me. They may not help me find another job.* I did not know what to do next.

That afternoon, I told my coach what had happened. He was sympathetic but reminded me that track and field was an amateur sport. “Some of our club members have well-to-do parents, so they don’t have to worry about paychecks. Some of the others attend American colleges and only come home for the summers. Those who work must coordinate their jobs with their sports activities.” He advised me to look for work in the newspaper’s classified ad section.

For several days, I called different companies without any luck. Then I saw a promising advertisement for a technician-foreman experienced with record changers and audio amplifiers. “Apply in person,” the ad stated. Although I had only worked with single-record players and not record-changers, I went to the company the following morning with high hopes.



**A single-record player compared to the record-changer, where multiple records could be stacked for an extended period of play.**

The Norel Electric Company was a relatively small operation constructing portable record changers. The owner, Mr. Kucharsky, walked me through a small production area and assembly line. Next, he took me to the test station and explained that his technician was leaving soon. “His children live in Toronto, and he wants to be near them. I need someone to take his place.”

I confessed that I had no record-changer experience but assured him I would learn fast. The rest of the job—electronic circuitry—I could handle immediately. He asked me to come and work with his technician for a few days. After the trial, he would decide whether to hire me or not. He would not pay me for the trial period.

For several days, the technician trained me to operate record changers. They used two different British-made products that handled up to twelve records. Troubleshooting their mechanical operation challenged me, but I was determined to learn enough to work there independently. At the end of my trial, the owner hired me at a monthly salary of \$200. In addition to supervising the production people, my responsibilities included the final testing and repair of the products. Because the other technician was leaving soon, there was no way the boss could let me have time off for the Toronto track meet. It was hard to skip the meet, but I did not want to risk losing another job.

The change of employment was most fortunate, though. My work was no longer tedious. Solving problems that occurred on the production line, as well as testing and fixing the products, kept me very busy. In addition, I picked up some French words and expressions. All the women working on the line were French Canadians who always spoke in French among themselves. I had more trouble understanding their rapidly accented conversation than understanding English.

My brother-in-law was fluent in Parisian French, which was quite a bit different from the dialect used in Quebec. He and my sister had only a limited understanding of English. On Sundays, we usually went to see Hollywood movies, where I acted as a “translator.” Talking during the movies annoyed others in the audience, and most of the time, we had to move away from the other people. We could watch three movies for 25 cents per person!

Not far from the movie theater was a steakhouse on Saint Catherine Street. We saw two chefs near the window preparing the steaks over open flames. One day after the movie, we decided to try it. The restaurant offered a complete meal with steak for 99 cents. None of us had eaten a steak before.

The person taking orders asked us how we wanted our steaks prepared. Not knowing what to answer, we asked him what choices we had. The man replied, “Rare, medium, or well done.” At that point, I suddenly recalled what I had heard about steaks a few years earlier.

*After the Hungarian national soccer team defeated England 6-3 in London in 1953, one of the players gave a talk in our clubhouse about their stay in the British capital. He was impressed with nearly everything except the English cuisine. He described his worst experience when their hosts ordered the specialty of the fancy restaurant—beefsteak served rare—for the team.*

*“After the waiter brought the huge piece of meat, I cut into it, and blood oozed out on my plate,” the soccer player said. “It was repulsive. Naturally, I refused to eat it.”*

*Hearing that, most of us in the audience looked at each other with disbelief. How could civilized people eat raw meat? That topic had been the subject of discussion for a long time.*

Not wanting to have blood on my plate, of course, I ordered my steak well done. Tibor and Éva followed my example and asked for the same.

Our 99-cent steaks were disasters. They were hard and badly burned. The three of us concluded that we would never try steak again. After that awful experience, with a few exceptions, such as when we splurged in a Hungarian restaurant, we ate the food Éva cooked for us at home.

I competed several times throughout the summer and gradually bettered my previous personal records (PRs) in every event. Several of my teammates became good friends. Most of them had cars, and I looked forward to having one. Saving money, however, was not easy. Every month, I paid to the dentist and Mr. Leahy, my former employer in Nanaimo. In addition, I occasionally sent money to my mother in Budapest. I did not have much left after paying one-third of the rent, utilities, and food.

Attending one of the gatherings of newly arrived Hungarians, I met a man my age, Tom Wollitzer, who had already purchased a car. Tom was very good-hearted and offered to teach me to drive his car, equipped with a manual transmission. During the following months, we practiced in a large parking lot. I had trouble manipulating the clutch and gas pedals simultaneously and often stalled his car's engine. After I obtained a learner's permit, he allowed me to venture out on the streets. Gradually, I learned to drive.

Snow began to fall in late October, and the track season ended. By November, snow covered the already icy pavement. The major thoroughfares received heavy doses of salt, but it was treacherous to drive elsewhere. Running outdoors was also dangerous. Our coach arranged for the team to work out on the upper walkway of the Montreal Canadiens' large ice hockey arena. In addition, I joined a dozen other young Hungarians to form a club basketball team.

I did not know much about ice hockey, although I once saw the Soviet team play an exhibition game in Budapest after their return from a North American tour. After interviewing the team, a reporter asked their impression of the Canadian team. The players' unanimous response was, "They were brutally tough." After watching the Soviet team play a tough physical game in Budapest, I could not imagine how another team could be even rougher. However, when I watched the Montreal team's hard body checks during practice, I agreed with the Soviets.

In December, I received a letter from Boriska and Gábor, who stayed behind in Nanaimo. Their four-month-old baby's crying bothered some of the motel guests. After repeated complaints, the motel owner fired the young couple. Because Gábor had experience with electronics test instruments, they hoped he would find suitable employment in Montreal. We offered to let them stay with us until they found jobs. Before Christmas, after driving their old car across Canada, they arrived with another refugee couple. Boriska, Gábor, and baby George took my bedroom. I moved into the living room. The other couple moved in with their friends.

Having five adults in the apartment was tight. Gábor also had trouble finding a job. After nearly two months of unsuccessful searching, he began to drive a taxi. He learned to drive during his military service in Hungary and obtained a driver's license in Montreal. Within a few weeks, they rented an apartment and moved.

In early 1958, an advertisement in the local Hungarian newspaper caught my eye.

"1953 Ford sedan with low mileage, in excellent shape. Manual transmission, radio, heater, and whitewall tires. Price: \$850. Easy payments can be arranged. Call Mr. Silverman!" The ad also showed a picture of the car.



**A 1953 Ford, similar to the one advertised in the Montreal newspaper.**

With \$50 in my pocket on the weekend, I asked Tom to drive me to the dealer. I fell in love with the car the moment I saw it. Mr. Silverman prepared the contract, I signed it, and the car was mine. That over 95 percent of it still belonged to the finance company did not bother me. I had an automobile! That was something that had been far beyond my wildest dreams in Hungary. There was only one problem. I only had a learner's permit, not a regular driver's license. The salesman assumed that I was legally licensed and gave me the key.

After Tom left, I carefully drove the car out of the dealer's lot and headed home on the snow-covered Côte des Neiges Boulevard. Driving slowly and carefully uphill, I reached an intersection where the traffic lights were not operating. Two police officers directed traffic. They stopped my car to let the vehicles move in the other direction. When they waved me to start, I stalled the car and could not move it upward on the steep slope.

Cars behind me began to honk their horns. One of the police officers noticed my plight and yelled something to me in French. I desperately tried to engage the clutch again without success. One of the policemen came to my car, opened the door, told me to move to the passenger side, and drove us across the intersection. I was petrified that he would ask for my driver's license. *If that happens, I could be arrested and lose my car!* Fortunately, he was too busy handling the traffic jam I had created. I managed to drive home without any further problems.

At first, Éva and Tibor could not believe I bought a car. Tibor was concerned that I had too much debt. He was correct. I was barely able to pay the operating expenses and insurance. However, the most important thing to me was that I had a car!

I passed the driver's license exam a few days later and was ready to drive to work. First, however, I had to find a parking place downtown. I learned quickly that parking in the downtown area was expensive. An uncovered parking lot a few blocks from my workplace offered space at a monthly rate of \$25, equal to one-eighth of my salary. I knew riding the streetcar would cost much less, but a car owner must drive!

My next problem was parking the car overnight on our street in winter weather. After every major overnight storm, the snowplows cleared the center of the roads by throwing the snow sideways—on top of the parked cars. When I stepped outside our apartment building in the morning, all the cars were covered with snow. I borrowed a shovel from the building manager and looked for my car. I was half frozen when I cleaned the snow off the top and scraped the ice off the windshield. Shivering, I sat in the car and turned on the ignition.

The motor made a painful grinding noise while slowly turning over a few times. Then, it stopped completely. My additional efforts to start the ignition were fruitless. In the meantime, well-heated taxis passed by, their drivers looking for easy fares. Already late, I swallowed my pride and flagged one of them down to take me to work.

“Why did you buy a car in the winter?” my boss asked after hearing my story. “You should have waited until the summer when the roads are clear. But even then, you should not drive it to work and pay for parking.”

He was right. I should have asked for advice before deciding, like purchasing a car. Gradually, I was beginning to learn that it is unwise to make hasty decisions.

On the days when the ice hockey arena was unavailable, our track team ran cross-country in the snow. Winter temperatures in Montreal often dipped well below zero degrees Fahrenheit. Breathing was painful in such cold weather. I remember that after running several miles outdoors, it took some time before I regained my normal voice.

Playing basketball was fun, and my friend Gábor joined our team. One of the older players did the coaching. He found a prominent sports institute to sponsor us. We took on their name and used their spacious indoor court for practices and home games. One of the added benefits of the facility was its attractive receptionist—a young, blonde French-Canadian girl with a mesmerizing smile. Several of our players had asked her out without success.

During one of the practice sessions, as I was in the air shooting for the basket, the player who covered me tried to knock the ball away. He missed the ball, but his elbow sideswiped my nose. I heard a crunching sound. When I landed on my feet, the other boy looked at me with an alarmed expression. My face was numb, and blood poured from my nose. One of the boys quickly removed his shirt and held it to my face.

Our coach guided me out of the court to the front desk. The receptionist was ready to go home but offered to take us to the nearest hospital. She showed genuine concern and escorted us into the emergency room. A doctor stopped the bleeding and informed me that my nose would need surgery. He made an appointment with the hospital for the following day and sent me home. Before leaving, I looked in the mirror and saw my flattened nose taped to the right side of my face. I looked like the boxer who lost the fight.

The coach took me home in a taxi from the hospital. When Éva saw me, she nearly fainted. “What happened to you?”

“One of our players accidentally elbowed me,” I answered. Then I gave her and Tibor the details of the accident. “Tomorrow morning, a surgeon will fix my nose. In six weeks, I can be back playing basketball again.”

Éva was noticeably unhappy to hear that I planned to return to playing after what had happened. Tibor was concerned about how I would pay for the hospital expenses. I had no insurance, and until he brought up the subject, the thought of medical bills had somehow escaped my mind. Back in Hungary, every citizen had national insurance coverage. In 1958, that kind of coverage did not exist in Canada. I went to bed worrying about the hospital charges—in addition to the actual surgery.

I took the streetcar to the hospital the following day. Everyone stared at me when I boarded. It was strange initially, but it no longer bothered me after a while. Attracting all that attention made me feel like a celebrity.

When I checked into the hospital, the clerk said, "The sports center's insurance will cover all your expenses." His statement lessened my concern, although I still worried about having surgery. Next, the staff took me to the operating room area and prepared me for the operation. Within a short time, I was asleep.

"Wake up, Mr. Besser, wake up," I heard a woman say. When I opened my eyes, they gradually focused on a pretty nurse. "Your surgery went well, and your nose will be fine again."

I touched my face and felt something covering my nose. "That protective mask will stay on for a while," she told me. "We don't want you to touch your nose."

As the anesthesia wore off, I remembered I had not gone to work that day. Although my brother-in-law had promised to call my boss and explain what had happened to me, I became concerned about my job. "How soon will I go home?" I asked the nurse.

"If all goes well, you can leave in three days, but you must wear a nose guard for six weeks." She also told me she would help me call my work after the doctor saw me. Later, I phoned my boss and apologized for not being there. He was very understanding. "Don't worry," he comforted me. "I'll take your place while you're in the hospital." He sounded much kinder than my previous boss, and I appreciated his support.

That afternoon, I had a surprise visitor. The sports center's receptionist, Pierrette, stopped by. "I'm going to work now, but I wanted to see how you are doing," she said with her cute French accent.

Suddenly, I felt great and assured her that everything was fine. We talked briefly, and she promised to return the next day. Éva and Tibor visited later and smuggled in a piece of Hungarian pastry. My first day in the hospital had gone well.

Pierrette kept her word and visited until the hospital discharged me. I built up my courage and asked if we could go on a date later. "I want to see first what you'll look like when that nose guard comes off," she said jokingly. However, she agreed to go out with me.

I was thrilled and already thought about how my teammates would envy me. It turned out to be true. After hearing the news, one of the boys said, "If I knew that she would be so sympathetic, I would have asked someone to break my nose!"

The nose guard came off six weeks later, but the doctor still taped my nose for a while. I started to play basketball again, and the other players showed extra caution not to touch me. It helped my scoring. I took advantage of their concern and wore the tape for the rest of the season, even when the doctor no longer required it.

Pierrette and I began to date regularly, and I quickly learned that her father did not like me. The first time I arrived at their house and knocked on the door, he opened it and stared at me. "Bonjour, monsieur," I greeted him in French. Not wanting to risk saying something incorrectly, I introduced myself in English. Before I could say anything else, he yelled back into the house, "L'Anglais est ici!" (The English guy is here!). Then he slammed the door in my face.



**Left: Part of the Ivan Cutue Institute basketball team, showing me with my nose taped. Right: two photos of Pierrette and me (still with a swollen nose but without the tape).**

Pierrette apologized for her father's behavior. "Please don't take it personally. He is frustrated about my dating someone other than a French Canadian."

Nothing I could do would change his mind. The door-slamming routine remained the same when Pierrette and I saw each other.

By the end of April, milder weather arrived. Before my spring running training began, John and I drove over 300 miles to New York City during a long Easter weekend. He had distant relatives living in Brooklyn who offered us a place to stay.

With our escapes from Hungary still fresh in our minds, we could not believe how simple it was to pass through the Canadian border. The uniformed guard waved at us as we passed by. The U.S. border agent wanted to know how long we would stay and wished us a pleasant visit. John looked at me and said, "Laci, we're now living in a different world."

We saw the skyscrapers, Harlem, and Times Square in New York. It was a busy trip, but we both wanted to find out if there was any difference between Canada and the United States. At the end of our journey, we concluded that the Americans lived more hectic lives than the laid-back French Canadians did. What we immediately liked about the U.S. was that people spoke English. John and I could handle conversational English well by then, but French was still difficult. We commented that perhaps one day, we would have the opportunity to move to the States.

The most exciting part of our trip was seeing Harlem. Before that day, I had seen only a few black people and never had talked with one. We could walk in downtown Montreal all day and only see white faces. On the streets of Harlem, John and I stood out.

During our walking tour, we stepped into a shop to buy film. After we said a few words, the clerk wanted to know what country we came from. We talked with him for a while and learned he had been stationed in Austria with the U.S. Army. He remembered seeing the menacing guard towers on the Hungarian side of the border. When we left, he told us, "You two are the first Hungarians I've met." I did not dare to say to him that he was the first black man with whom I had had a conversation.

After our return, seeing Niagara Falls was next on my list. Éva, Tibor, and I took time off in July and drove to the Ontario side of the Falls. They were fascinating—far beyond our expectations. We could walk through caves to an opening behind the largest waterfall that flowed at a rate of 65,000 cubic feet per second. The thundering noise of the water hurt my ears. We could not hear each other even when we shouted.

After staying overnight in a motel, we headed home on a different route to see more of the Canadian countryside. About halfway home, we stopped to refuel. In those days, the station attendant automatically checked the oil and water levels of the car. He informed me that the oil was dirty and needed replacing. “This week, we have a special for an oil change and a complete lube job,” he added. I agreed to finish the work while we had lunch in a café next to the station.

Following lunch, we continued our journey. During a long section of road repair, the highway's surface changed to gravel. We returned to the paved road after driving on the rough surface. Then, I heard a strange noise coming from underneath the car. I pulled off the road and looked under the hood. Everything seemed to be OK. As I continued driving, the grinding noise remained, and the car felt sluggish. Tibor recommended stopping.

We were within sight of a small town. I walked there and asked for help at the nearest service station. They dispatched a tow truck that took me back to our car. The mechanic lifted the hood and looked at the radiator and the fluid levels. “Your car has no transmission fluid,” he informed us. “Most likely, your transmission is gone.”

“We just had an oil and lube job a few hours ago,” I protested in disbelief.

The man placed a jack under the rear bumper, hoisted the car, and climbed under it. In a few seconds, he reappeared. “The transmission fluid plug is missing. It probably came loose on the rough road.”

“What can we do?” Tibor asked.

“I’ll tow you into our garage to see what’s wrong with the transmission.”

Finding no alternative, we agreed. He asked us to sit in our car and towed it facing backward to the service station.

He and another mechanic spent some time diagnosing the problem. The owner of the shop told us that our transmission was dead. A replacement would cost around \$200. The bad news devastated us. We did not have that kind of money.

“How much do you have?” the owner asked.

We added up what we had jointly, and it came to \$44.07.

The owner scratched his head. “That won’t do it.” Seeing our dismay, he added, “There is a junkyard not far from here. I will send my man over to see if they have a Ford like yours. If so, we could take out the transmission and put it into yours for forty bucks.”

That sounded promising. “Please go and take a look,” I said to him. I silently asked St. Anthony for another miracle.

Two men left with the tow truck. We waited anxiously for the news. They returned smiling. “We found one for you,” one of the men announced. “Come back in the afternoon.”

We wandered aimlessly around the small town. Knowing that four dollars would have to be enough to cover all our expenses for the rest of the trip, we decided not to eat anything

and save our money for gasoline. Of course, everything depended on the transmission of a junk car.



**Left: Éva and I at Niagara Falls. Right: On our way back when the car problem developed.**

The two men finished the work as we returned to the station around mid-afternoon. One drove the car around and announced that the transmission replacement worked fine. We handed \$40 to the owner, thanked him for being so helpful, and left. Although he did not tell me to do so, I kept the speed at 50 miles per hour. Our money was enough to fill the gas tank, and we made it home without problems. The next day, I went to church and thanked St. Anthony for his help. After payday a week later, I put two dollars into the collection box before his statue.

“Cousin” Pista and I kept up our regular correspondence via postcards. I was careful not to write anything that could have led to problems with the Hungarian authorities. Instead, I carefully described my new experiences in Canada. Occasionally, I even discovered events that we had always believed to be Communist propaganda turning out to be true. One of them was when I first saw an armored car in Montreal.

As I strolled along one of the major boulevards during my lunchtime, admiring the pretty young women, I noticed an unusual van parked across the street. Two uniformed men stepped out of the vehicle, carrying large bags in one hand and revolvers in the other. I assumed it was a movie set and looked for the cameras, but I did not see any. The two men entered the bank.

“It looked like they were making a film on the street,” I told my boss after returning to work.

“What makes you believe that?”

When I explained what I saw, he shook his head. “No, those men are guards delivering money to the bank.”

“But why do they carry guns?”

“So they won’t be robbed.”

I had difficulty believing someone would attempt to hold up a bank in broad daylight. When I told him that unarmed “money mailmen” delivered cash in Budapest without anyone bothering them, it was his turn not to believe me. He concluded that if that were true,

Budapest, under Communist control, would be a safer place than Montreal. *In those days, that was actually correct.*

During the summer, I participated in two major track meets in Toronto. In the first one, at the East York track club, I met several American runners from various universities. They told me about college athletics and suggested I consider attending college in the United States. "We have an indoor track," said one of the University of Michigan runners. "You wouldn't have to run in the snow."

"I attend UCLA. In California, we train outdoors all year round," added another boy. "You're crazy to stay in Montreal."

"I don't know how I'd apply. I went to high school in Hungary and don't have any papers to prove it," I replied.

"We have many students from other countries. As for your papers, write the school and ask for a copy," advised the Michigan runner.

Running my fastest time, I finished third—behind the best 440-yard Canadian hurdler and one of the American visitors. In Montreal, I had run that race only once without strong competition. I realized that to do better in that event; I should either move to Toronto or find out if there was a chance to attend an American college.

Back in Montreal, I asked my coach for advice. "You are already 22 years old. Most kids begin college at 18," he told me. "Your limited English would also be a handicap. However, it would help your hurdling significantly, so look into it."

"How should I do that?" I asked him.

"Next month is the Canadian Interprovincial Championship in Toronto. It is a major track meet organized by the Canadian Legion. Many American track coaches come there to scout new talent. Maybe one of them could help you."

I thanked him for his suggestion. Perhaps I could go to college and become an engineer. Although college education had been free in Hungary, the thought of going to college had never entered my mind; being the first high school graduate in my family had been a significant accomplishment.

The next day, I wrote to my mother and asked her to mail me my high school certificate. Having graduated from a four-year technical high school instead of a regular one worried me. However, I hoped a technical school background would be acceptable because I planned to study engineering.

My high school certificate, however, never arrived. I suspected the censors had confiscated it, so I wrote to the school directly and asked for a copy. They did not even answer. I assumed it was due to my blacklisted status. I doubted a college would accept me without proof of high school graduation.

Coach Carroll felt sorry for me and wrote a supportive letter to explain my circumstances. His letter, addressed "To Whom It May Concern," described my refugee status and the reason for my inability to obtain my high school certificate. "Considering your political background, the college might make an exception and allow you to enter," he told me, trying to comfort me. I could only hope that he was right.

I had never heard the statement, "To Whom It May Concern." It sounded impressive, but even with the help of a dictionary, I did not fully understand its meaning. Still, I appreciated the coach's writing this letter to help me.

Before the interprovincial track meet, the Canadian Legion sponsored a one-week-long Olympic Training Plan in Toronto. Business during the summer was slow, and my boss allowed me to take the week off—without pay—to participate.

In Toronto, about 150 young men and women from all over Canada participated in the training program. A Legionnaire escorted a dozen athletes from Montreal, almost evenly split between my club and St. Lambert. We stayed in a college dormitory and used the school track for our workouts. We ate in the school's cafeteria. I liked the food and never went hungry.

In addition to the Canadian team coaches, various American universities also sent coaches "to scout." I talked with several of them about my desire to attend college. They all encouraged me and did not feel my age would be a problem. I still hoped to receive my high school records from Hungary, so I did not mention that subject. I began formulating a plan to become a college student the following year.

I particularly liked a black coach who worked with hurdlers. He gave me several helpful tips to improve my hurdling. I asked if I could enroll in his college. To my surprise, he did not show any interest in me.

At the end of the week, we all looked forward to participating in the Canadian Legion Interprovincial Championship. A two-day meet was initially scheduled, but a massive storm on Friday forced all the events to be held on Saturday. In the absence of the Canadian hurdler who had beaten me the previous month, I won the 440-yard hurdles. After the race, I confidently approached the black coach who had watched the race and conveyed to him my strong desire to go to his school.



**Winning the 440 yard hurdles made the headlines in one of the Montreal newspapers.**

"Well, that may not be easy, but I'll ask one of our administrators to contact you," he said after some hesitation. "Our school is unique, and you may not fit in," he added.

His statement puzzled me, and I doubted I would hear from him, but he followed up on his promise. After returning home, a letter came from the Admissions Office of Howard University. The first sentence began, "As one of the white faculty members, I want to

explain why Coach W. did not encourage you to apply to our school.” Then, he explained possible racial conflicts that might make it difficult for me to blend into the student body.

After reading the letter, I became more confused and asked our coach to explain what it meant. He laughed first and said, “Howard University is a prestigious Negro school. I doubt that they have many white students. You definitely don’t want to go there.”

Completely unaware of the racial tension that existed in the United States, I still thought it would be unique to be a white student at the school. I imagined how popular I would be with the girls. However, when I shared my story with others on my track team, their replies were uniformly negative. “You’d find yourself in a lot of trouble there,” said one boy who attended college in Iowa.

*What kind of trouble is he talking about?* My friend John and I had visited Harlem already, and we had not encountered any problems. I was perplexed but did not go into the subject further.

The same boy thought for a minute and then said, “Come to the University of Dubuque in Iowa. It is a relatively small school, but the administration wholeheartedly supports athletics,” he explained. “In a big school, you’ll be just another number, but at Dubuque, most students will know you.”

His recommendation made sense. During the next track meet, he introduced me to others who attended the University of Dubuque. I learned that a significant number of their track team originated in Canada—about half a dozen from Montreal. I thought I would not be alone if I went to school in Dubuque. Although the university did not have an engineering school, it offered a two-year pre-engineering curriculum. They told me that after my second year, I could transfer to a large university to complete my degree. It sounded like an ideal combination to me.

Éva and Tibor liked my idea. A mechanical engineer himself, Tibor agreed that I should study engineering. “When you become an engineer, you will no longer have to repair electronic products,” he told me. “You’ll be designing them and earning much more money.”

That sounded great! I decided to proceed with my plan.

Several teammates returned to American colleges at the end of the summer. Those who attended the University of Dubuque promised to bring up my case to the track coach. They took a photocopy of Coach Carroll’s letter, and I eagerly awaited a response.

A month later, the head coach wrote to me. He suggested I contact my high school again and request a transcript. “I may be able to have you admitted without it, but it would be much easier if you had proof that you have completed high school.”

When I asked my mother again, her careful reply blamed the post office for “losing the shipment.” I was convinced, however, that the Hungarian authorities had confiscated it. My hopes of attending college began to fade.

One of my mother’s letters caught me by surprise. Usually, we both avoided writing about politics, knowing that censors might read our correspondence. In this letter, however, she wrote the following:

*My Dear Lacika,*

*It still pains my heart that both you and your sister left your motherland. I am also sorry that you are not receiving the kinds of athletic benefits the Hungarian Socialist Government*

*provided to you. Under the conditions in which you live, your dreams of going to the Olympics might never be fulfilled.*

*By now, you should have realized that it was a mistake for you to leave Hungary. Make me happy by returning home! Your track club teammates and coaches will receive you with open arms. You could also have a chance to study at the Budapest Technical University and try out for the Hungarian Olympic team next year.*

*Your loving Mother*

That did not sound like my mother! She knew how happy I was in Canada. Other than having me there to help her, why would she want me to live under the Communist Party's rules again? I did not know how to respond and had several restless nights trying to figure out how to reply. Finally, I decided not to answer.

About two weeks later, I received another letter from her with a Swedish postmark on the envelope. One of my former teammates, traveling with the national team to Stockholm for a track meet, had mailed my mom's letter from there. Mother explained how a district Party official had visited and told her what to write. She added, "I have been so worried that you would not receive this letter in time and fall for their trick."

Relieved by her clarification, I wrote to her immediately, knowing that she would have to show my reply to the authorities. First, I thanked her for her concern. Next, I explained that running was no longer important to me. I included a picture of Pierrette and told her that we would be married soon. After the wedding, we would remain in Montreal.

The Party officials must have bought my story because Mother had no follow-up letters on that topic. I had to stop writing her about my track participation to be consistent with my blatant lie.

In early 1958, Pista asked his girlfriend's father for the honor of marrying his daughter. The father agreed, and the marriage took place in the fall. Pista sent me photos taken at the wedding. I was happy to hear the good news and wished them a long life together.



**Left: Pista and his brother "nagy Laci," celebrating Pista's engagement to Kuki. Right: The smiling young couple at their wedding.**

*Eight years after the revolution, the Hungarian government issued an amnesty to those who left the country illegally. Shortly after that, I went back for a visit and learned about the harsh questioning my mother and Pista had faced after my escape. Pista also told me that*

*his water polo team had participated in a tournament held in Amsterdam, but the Hungarian authorities had not allowed him to leave the country. They kept track of our connection and did not want to allow him to defect.*

### **Corruption in a Capitalist Society**

Corruption in the Montreal police force was common knowledge. After I began to drive my car, one of the women at work advised me on how to protect myself from a traffic citation. “Keep a five-dollar bill inside your car registration. If you are stopped for a driving violation, hand your license and the registration to the policeman. He’ll take the money and let you go.”

“But if he is an honest policeman, won’t he think I am trying to bribe him?”

“No, just pretend that the bill slipped in there accidentally.”

She sounded so convincing that I decided to follow her suggestion. A few weeks later, a policeman stopped me for speeding on a city street. He walked to my car and told me to roll down my window. He lectured me about speeding and the possible consequences I could face. “You’re in a lot of trouble. You will have to take time off work and go to court. You’ll have to pay a fine when you’re found guilty.” Then, he added sympathetically, “I hate to see all that happening to you.” Finally, he asked for my driver’s license and car registration.

With trembling hands, I handed him both. After unfolding my registration, he saw the money. He quickly handed everything back to me. *I am in real trouble now.* My heart was beating rapidly.

He dropped one of his heavy gloves inside my car and said quietly, “Put the money into my glove and hand the glove back to me.”

I did what he told me. “Next time, obey the speed limit!” was his parting comment as he returned to his patrol car.

I drove away with mixed feelings. Avoiding both traffic court and a fine for a five-dollar bribe made me happy. At the same time, I had become a cheater—something I had always loathed. I recalled what my mother had told me after I stole an apple from a classmate, “We’re poor, but we’re not thieves.” In my eyes, a cheater was equally bad or even worse. My coaches always emphasized fair play without cheating, and I have violated that principle.

After some deliberation, I decided not to tell anyone about this experience and promised never to do it again.

Paying income tax was new to me because the socialist Hungarian government did not collect any. The women at work explained how the system worked in Canada. They also gave me advice on how to save money. “Go to the church and give them ten dollars,” one of them told me. “The priest will give you a receipt for two hundred. You can then claim that amount as a donation to reduce your taxes.”

What I heard blew me away—a priest would collaborate in such a fraudulent scheme? Back in Budapest, I had heard rumors about corrupt Hungarian government officials who accepted bribes. They received severe sentences when caught because the government

wanted to set examples to show it would not tolerate dishonesty. But those officials were ordinary people who could easily be bought. This time, however, the allegations were against the men of God. I could not believe the claim until some other people confirmed it. It shook my faith in the Church.

As the 1958 Christmas season approached, the company where I worked received a large order from a department store. My boss allowed me to temporarily hire an unemployed Hungarian engineer to help me with the final test of the products. The man had also come from Budapest. After hearing what high school I had attended, he told me that he and his wife frequently spent time with one of my teachers, Mrs. X.

“Mrs. X, that dirty Communist,” I stated with disgust.

“Oh, no! She was only putting on an act.”

“What do you mean? She was one of the leaders of the local Communist party cell!”

“After the war, her husband was convicted and jailed for being a member of the Arrowcross Party during the fascist era. She joined the Communist Party and became extremely active in freeing her husband.”

The news shocked me. Because of her solid political stand, most students disliked Mrs. X. Behind her back, we tried to cause her as much trouble as possible. I recalled the day she proudly showed us a large stack of typed sheets representing the manuscript of a new book she had just completed on Marxist-Socialist management. She was called out of the classroom for a short time. One of the students quickly removed several pages from the stack and distributed them among us. We clowned around for days, making fun of her writing while she was no doubt searching for the missing pages of her manuscript.

After discovering that her unpopular behavior had been a deception used only to save her husband, I felt guilty for making her life more difficult. Since that day, I have often wondered how many seemingly devoted Communists only pretended to follow the Party lines for various unknown reasons.

### **College Plans**

During his college Christmas vacation, one of my teammates brought me an envelope containing an application for admittance to the University of Dubuque. “Our track coach convinced the school administration to accept you without your high school transcripts,” he told me. “Complete the forms, and I’ll take them back with me next semester.”

That was good news! I carefully filled out the forms and passed them back to my teammate. A month later, I received a large envelope from the school. In the packet, I found a confirmation of admittance, a hefty college catalog, and, to my complete delight, a notice that I would receive an athletic scholarship to pay for most of my tuition and expenses for the school year. The university wanted me to apply for a student visa at the American Consulate and to show up for freshman orientation in the early part of September 1959.

I shared the information with Éva and Tibor. We celebrated that evening by having dinner at a Hungarian restaurant. At that age, I could eat a complete *Fatányéros*<sup>1</sup> (Wooden Platter) by myself. Éva and Tibor struggled to finish a second one together. During dinner, Tibor agreed to buy my car and the furniture I owned. He would take over the remaining payments for everything.



**Photo of a *Fatányéros* meal in present days. It used to have more variety and larger portions.**

My dream had always been to be an Olympian, and now I saw my hope rekindled. One day during track practice, I asked our coach, “If I significantly improve my 400-meter hurdles time while competing at Dubuque, could I be considered for the Canadian Olympic Team?”

“I’m afraid not. You would have to be a Canadian citizen,” he said. “It takes five years before you can apply for citizenship. You’ve been here less than three.”

My heart sank; in an instant, his answer killed my Olympic dream. *By the time of the next Olympics in 1964, I will already be 28 years old—over the hill for Olympic competition.* But then my thoughts rebelled. *No, I will not accept defeat so easily!*

The following day, at lunchtime, I visited the Immigration Center to inquire further. “Unless you’ve been a legal resident of Canada for five years, you are not eligible,” they told me.

“But I may have a chance of going to the Olympics,” I argued. “They won’t take me to the Trial unless I am a Canadian citizen.”

“It makes no difference. Even if you want to become the Prime Minister, you still need five years. Come back in 1961!”

I was frantic. The thought of returning to Hungary flashed through my mind. But the price would be high—too high. Pretending to be a devoted Communist was something I could not bring myself to do, not even if it would take me to the Olympics.

Gradually, I had to accept that my greatest dream would never come true.

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<sup>1</sup> A large meal served on a heaping 18-inch-long wooden platter. It included two large Wiener schnitzels, two small Gypsy-steaks, two pork chops, two roasted kolbasses, various forms of potatoes, steamed red cabbage, and salads.

In addition to learning to live with that bad news, another problematic task remained: explaining my college plans to Pierrette. I loved her dearly and did not know how to break the news of my departure. I kept putting off the announcement, but the months passed quickly. Eventually, I could not wait any longer and had to admit to her that I would be leaving soon.

“My father warned me about dating foreigners,” she told me with teary eyes. “How can I face him after you leave me?” she added, crying. “Couldn’t I go with you?”

I felt awful watching the tears rolling down her pretty face. I tried to explain that this was a once-in-the-lifetime opportunity to better myself. In college, I would be busy and not have time for dating. Hearing that I might be back for Christmas vacation did not comfort her. Abruptly, she asked me to take her home. After that day, I never heard from her again. I was heartbroken and hoped she would eventually find happiness.

Once I decided to live in the United States, I began to pay more attention to news events in that country. Election fever was running high, and the American voters had to choose who would replace Dwight Eisenhower as president. All the women at work liked the handsome Senator Kennedy, but one of them commented, “He could never be elected in America.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because he is a Catholic.”

Her reasoning puzzled me. “What’s wrong with being a Catholic?”

“Most Americans are Protestants. They’re concerned that the Pope would influence someone who is Catholic.”

That reasoning would not have crossed my mind. Because I had spent so much of my life under the Communist regime in Hungary, where religious faith was discouraged, I did not realize how important religion was to most people in North America.

I informed my boss about my college plans at the beginning of August. He understood my reasons for leaving Montreal and wished me good luck. Within a week, he found a replacement for me. I tried to train the new man and pass on all my experience. Two weeks later, I left Norel Electric, my eyes on the future—I was ready to become a college student in the United States.