

ESCAPE – THE MOST IMPORTANT DAY IN MY LIFE

“Stop! You son of a bitch!” Bang, the first shot rang out. I was sprinting through the snow-dusted, moonlit vineyard, trying to put more distance between us. He couldn’t chase me and shoot at the same time; to aim, he had to stop. Running was no contest; he was bulky in his heavy winter overcoat while I was just in shirt sleeves. Besides, I was running for my life, and he was just running. Dashing into the courtyard, I zeroed in on the seven-foot-high plank fence on the other side. Ten meters to go - “Bang!” - another shot; another miss. I knew the gate would be locked for the night, so I just reached up, stepped on the door handle, and vaulted over, momentarily out of sight. Only a few hours ago I was walking on this same sidewalk thinking about supper.

It was cold and dark on the streets that mid-December evening; light snow had fallen earlier, dusting everything in white. There was nobody around, no pedestrians, no cyclists, no cars, no horse-carts, nothing, - no streetlights either. Szank, a village 150 km south of Budapest, had no electricity. It was past curfew, and I was in a hurry to get home from my girlfriend; it was only two blocks, I should be OK.

Suddenly I froze and flattened myself into a shallow doorway; dark figures were moving ahead, silhouetted against the snow. They approached slowly, bending down periodically, muttering to each other in low voices; one of them had a flashlight, but the battery was almost dead, giving a meagre yellow beam. This was where I should have turned around and tiptoed back where I had come from. But by the time I realized that they were “padded-coats” on patrol, it was too late. They were too close and would have seen or heard me. (“Padded-coat” was the nickname of the “Workers’ Guards,” the newly formed communist Hungarian secret police, the instrument of reprisals after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*). I had two choices: stay where I was, flat against the doorway and hope that in the dark they would pass a step or two in front of me without noticing me (not very likely), or step out and start walking toward them as if I had nothing to hide. I chose the latter and startled them with a loud “Good evening!”

“Stop!” one of them yelled. Now I could see that there were three of them, an officer and two privates. Two submachine guns and a handgun; of course I stopped.

“Where are you going?” asked the officer.

“Home,” I said. “I was at my girlfriend’s and just realized that it was curfew time”.

“Oh yeah? And what are these?” He pointed to a bunch of handwritten leaflets they were collecting off the sidewalk.

“I don’t know; as you can see, I just got here,” - I said.

I was pretty sure he was waving “Russians go home!” leaflets that students scattered those days at night, in public places all over Hungary, as a last desperate act of defiance against the Soviet Army who by overwhelming force, quelled the Revolution four weeks ago. My brother and I also sneaked out one night to paint similar slogans on the walls of public buildings. However, I was sure that my friends wouldn’t scatter leaflets without warning us first to make sure we were off the streets on such a night. These were the times for reprisals; one had to be careful.

“You better come with us,” the officer said, and we set out towards the town hall half a block away. None of them looked familiar, so they were not local. Since it was after office hours, there was nobody around in the building. The officer led me into a cold, barely furnished office, placed a portable kerosene lamp on the table, told me to sit down and empty my pockets. The others remained in the corridor. He sat down across from me and started to sift through my belongings. Luckily, I had my photo ID booklet with me. By law, one had to have it at hand all the time. He asked me a bunch of questions, such as: Where do I work?

How many siblings did I have? What do they do? What does my father do? etc. Finally, he pushed a sheet of paper in front of me and told me to write down my life story.

"Nothing elaborate, just a page, page and a half "- he said and left the room. I did what I was told; I even wrote the date in the upper corner (Friday, December 14th, 1956), then waited and waited. Eventually he came back with some of the leaflets in his hands and was comparing the two handwritings. He sat at the table across from me, tilting the sheets so that I could not peek at the writings. I tried to explain to him that if I had scattered those leaflets, I wouldn't have hung around to be picked up. He told me to shut up and left the room.

Shortly, a middle-aged loudmouth came in wearing civilian clothes. He reeked of alcohol and badly needed a shave. I didn't recognize him, but he must have been local since he knew of me and my friends. He tried to intimidate me by yelling and banging the table with his fist, saying he was going to show me I was lying, that he was smarter than me, and that he was going to beat the shit out of me. Finally, he gave me a sheet of paper and told me to write my life story.

"I just did! Didn't you read it?" I asked.

"Shut up and do it!" he said and stormed out of the room.

I was pissed off. It was past nine P.M., and I was sure my parents were getting worried. My Mom was liable to start looking for me, curfew or no curfew. I quickly wrote a page-full and waited. Loudmouth came back, picked up the sheet and left. I waited some more. Finally, the door opened and in came one of the village's policemen. I knew his son slightly. He talked very quietly.

"They want to keep you here till tomorrow so that the higher-ups could talk to you, but I asked them to let you go home to sleep. If you promise to come back in the morning to clear this up, you can go home now. If you don't come back, I'll be up shit creek for letting you go. So, what do you say?"

"Don't worry, I will come back in the morning," I said.

They let me go, but kept my papers and ID card - just in case. Mom was waiting outside; she said they tried to chase her away, but she wouldn't budge. We started to walk home. Only a block away, the moon was shining on the crisp snowy landscape; it was so light you could almost read by it.

"Are you going to take the powder?" she asked.

"Aw, no; I didn't do anything. Besides, I promised the policeman that I'll come back in the morning. He would get into trouble; anyway, they kept my ID card."

We went home where my father was anxiously waiting. We all went to bed right away. I wasn't nervous or anxious. I didn't have to deny anything because I didn't do anything. Of course, I approved of any resistance toward the Russian occupation; I eagerly participated in such "illegal acts" many times but not this night. Tonight, I was completely innocent, and with that knowledge I blissfully fell asleep. Naively, I didn't realize that truth had nothing to do with this; the regime needed arrests to terrorize the populace into submission. Shortly after midnight, banging on the door woke us up.

"Open up! Workers' Guards!"

My father opened the door, and five uniformed and armed men swarmed into the room. (Due to a shortage of firewood, all three of us slept in the one heated room). They told me to get dressed and go to the town hall with them to finish the interrogation. They were not local but came by truck from the provincial headquarters some 40 km away. They didn't shout or act threatening, nor did they hurry me. They even made some small talk with my parents while I was getting dressed. As we stepped out to the street, other "padded coats" joined us; they had been posted at the front gate. Some were officers, some without apparent rank; some spoke Russian, some Hungarian, some both; some wore army uniforms other were

dressed as police. Nobody held me, no handcuffs, nothing; walking on both sides of me and behind me, all were armed, no one said a word as we walked to the town hall. There they ushered me into the same office I had been in earlier. I didn't feel threatened; it was as though "Let's clear up this bureaucratic paperwork and go home." One of the officers told me to sit down at the table, gave me paper and pen telling me to write down my life story. The rest stood just inside the door. Some of the local police were standing around out in the corridor. I hardly wrote two lines when the officer whisked the paper away, walked to the middle of the room, and ordered me to stand before him.

"Who helped you to write those leaflets?!" "Who helped you to scatter them on the streets?!" he shouted.

As I started to reply that I didn't, I couldn't even finish the sentence before he punched me in the face. As I staggered, the rest of them joined in - they formed a semi-circle behind and beside me, and whichever way I staggered there was always someone with a blow to send me in the opposite direction. Finally, I stopped staggering and collapsed. I was conscious but filled with horror. I felt totally defenceless, totally vulnerable, totally afraid.

"Stand up!" yelled the officer.

I tried but apparently not fast enough. Someone grabbed me by my hair and pulled me upward whilst someone else booted me from behind. As soon as I was more or less standing, the pummeling from all sides started again. When I collapsed, nobody told me to get up; they just stood in a circle and started to kick me from all sides. Finally, a vicious kick behind my right ear knocked me out. The next thing I remembered was cold water being poured on my face. I had to stand up again. I was desperately afraid that eventually I would crack and give them a name (any name) just to have them stop.

"Who are your friends? What are their names?" asked the officer.

That was easy; all the kids in the village between 15 and 20 years of age were my friends. So, I rattled out about a dozen names, boys and girls as well. There was no point in not telling since the local "padded-coats" (some of whom were now in the room) knew who my friends were. The officer went over to them for a brief huddle. I couldn't hear what was said, but when he came back, he told me to put on my overcoat.

"You are going to take us to your friend Bela," he said.

Bela was a good friend of mine; 19 years old, only a year younger than I, his parents were school teachers, and he, with two younger siblings, lived only a half a block away. The local police knew where he lived; they could have led the way - so it would have been pointless and suicidal for me to lead them to the wrong address. Two officers and four soldiers accompanied me as we stepped out to the street. There was only a truck out front and some "padded coats" standing around smoking. The cold fresh air, the moonlight, the snow, the village sleeping with a dog barking here and there in the distance- it was so unreal, so peaceful compared to the violence I experienced inside just a few minutes ago. Two parallel realities. As we were walking, one of the officers turned to me like a concerned father and quietly advised me that I better confess while they were here; otherwise, they would take me to the Provincial Headquarters where others would take over until I talked. I didn't reply but resolved to escape at the first opportunity. I wasn't going to go to any provincial headquarters. As long as they didn't shackle me, I was confident that escape was possible en route. I knew the terrain; they didn't. My fear was that under more "systematic treatment" I would crack and implicate someone. I wouldn't be able to live with myself after that.

When we got to Bela's house, one of the officers banged on the window and ordered Bela's father to open the gate. Whilst we were waiting, the "padded-coats" forming a circle around me, one officer asked me if I ever handled weapons. I said no. At this, he pulled out his revolver and told me to take it and fire it toward the sky. I was sure he wanted to see if I

would release the safety catch first; if I did, then I was lying when I said that I didn't know how to handle weapons. So, I slowly pointed the gun skyward and pulled the trigger. Of course nothing happened. They all burst out laughing.

"You can't do it like that," he said, "you have to release the safety first" - and he took the gun, released the safety, and fired into the air. Suddenly they saw some of their colleagues coming on the run with guns ready. By the time explanations were given and understood, Bela's father was turning the key in the gate. Two officers, two soldiers, and I went into the courtyard; the rest stayed outside, and the gate was re-locked.

The layout of Bela's house was in the typical Hungarian village style. It was a single-level (no basement) family dwelling. Most of the frontage was taken up by the house, which came out right to the edge of the dirt sidewalk (no front lawn); four windows were facing the street at about shoulder height. The rest of the frontage was a seven-foot-tall brick wall with a solid wooden gate set in the middle; at the end of this wall the front of the next house began. Inside the gate was the courtyard from which one could enter the house. The courtyard itself, about 20 by 20 meters, had a wheelbarrow and bicycle shed, a walnut tree, and was surrounded on two sides by brick walls and in the back by a seven-foot-tall wooden plank fence.

The two officers went into the house with Bela's father. I was to stay in the courtyard with two soldiers guarding me. Both of them wore bulky, long overcoats with leather belts. Both had rifles slung over their shoulder, but no submachine guns. Thank God for small mercies. They wouldn't be able to move fast or "spray" bullets after me when I took off. Not knowing how long the officers were going to be I didn't have any time to waste. It was time to split! I nonchalantly asked them if it was OK for me to take a leak. They said to go ahead but to do it right where I was. So, I unbuttoned my overcoat and my jacket, turned away from them, fished for my pecker, and took a few steps toward the back fence. It is human nature that when men pee in the open, they always want to pee against something, like a wall, a tree, a fence whatever, -so there was nothing suspicious about me stepping up to the fence. The innocence of my action was further reinforced by the sound of the splash as my stream hit the wood. Just a guy pissing against a fence in the moon-lit night, things couldn't be more pedestrian. On the other side of the fence was the end of the vineyard of my girlfriend's house, and we kids kept one of the planks loose, so when going from one house to the other we wouldn't have to go around half the block. The loose plank had been only fastened at the top and could be swung aside like a pendulum, giving a gap in the fence. As I was holding my pecker with one hand, I was gently poking the planks with the other to find the loose board. Before I finished dribbling, BINGO! I found it. With one motion, I let both my jacket and my overcoat slide off my shoulders and drop behind me. Before they hit the ground, I swung the plank, was thorough, and ran like hell!

The other end of the vineyard was about 40 meters away from where there was a low picket fence to separate it from the courtyard (to keep the chickens out), and another 20 meters further was a tall wooden plank fence and the street on the other side. Once I am over that fence, I am out of sight. How long would it take the soldiers to negotiate Bela's fence? Bulky overcoats would prevent them from squeezing through the hole. They would have to climb over it, probably only one; the other would have to give him a leg-up.

The terrain was against me. A thin layer of snow and moonlight, you could almost read by it; also, there were no bushes, no natural cover in the vineyard. By the time I got to the picket fence, I heard a yell and the first shots rang out. I was tempted to jump over the picket fence like a hurdler to save time, but what if I crash? Don't even think about it. The fence had a little gate with a push lock; I groped for it, found it, and I was in the courtyard. "Bang!" - one

more missed shot as I dashed across. I vaulted over the plank fence, landing on the sidewalk. Now my chaser couldn't see me, but I couldn't count on him giving up.

The street I was on was at the Western edge of the village. You could see a long way up and down the street in the bright moonlight. There was a dirt sidewalk on my side and a dirt road, but there were no houses on the other side, only wide-open fields with no cover except the railway station 2-300 meters away. If I could reach it before the guy got over the fence, then he wouldn't know which way I went; the station would be between us, and I would have a chance to figure out what to do next. Bolting towards the station, I couldn't hear anything except my maxed-out panting; it was so loud I was sure half the village heard it. I felt conspicuous, a dark figure running in the moon-lit snowy fields. Easy now, don't twist your ankle! No problem. Fifty meters more! Ten meters! No dangerous noises from behind. Good, home free! Then a shot rang out, and I heard a buzzing sound zip by my ear. If you ever heard hummingbirds buzzing by your head, that's the way it sounded. Damned moonlight! Hey, this is just like in the books! The hero always gets away even though bullets are whistling by his ear. I turned the corner and stopped to catch my breath. I tried to listen, but I was panting too hard, and my heart was pounding in my ear. I was elated. I got away. I escaped! I did it! I did it! It took me a few seconds before I could hear other noises. There were distant shouts and occasional shots from the direction of the village; dogs were barking everywhere. Oh boy, dogs! I am glad they didn't have tracking dogs with them!

That shot told me that the soldier must have seen me ducking behind the station; therefore, even if he first goes for reinforcements, this is where they will be heading eventually, so I couldn't linger. There was the solitary rail-track going in a North-South direction. Across the rails ahead of me opened snowy fields; behind me the village and guns. I turned South. The snow was only 1-2 cm, deep enough to show footprints. I noticed that just beside the rails, in the lee of the breeze, there was no snow, so I ran along this dark strip for a while. Finally, there were some bushes and trees, some vineyards on the left but no houses. The road that leads to the village from the South, ran parallel with the railroad tracks but a good km East of it. At the South end of the village there was an old brick factory with a tall smokestack which, thanks to the moonlight, I could make out in the distance. Once I passed it, I left the rails and turned East, then after a few kilometres turned North; thus, I walked a big half-circle around Szank. By this time, I wasn't running but kept a brisk pace to keep warm; I was in shirtsleeves, bareheaded and no gloves. The occasional shots that rang out from the direction of the village kept reminding me that this was not just a nocturnal adventure or playing "cowboys and Indians"; this was as serious as it could get. Nervously, I was enjoying myself. I knew that I had got away and the "padded-coats" didn't really know where to look for me; there was no way they were going to catch me, not tonight anyway. Tomorrow was too far to think about.

I planned to get to the farm of Uncle Ben; he was a colleague of my father, an ex-reformed church minister from Kiskunhalas (because he criticized the communist government from the pulpit, he was kicked out of his manse and sent into internal exile the way my father was sent to Szank from Budapest). Uncle Ben was a bachelor and crazy about animals. He had a goat, a sheep, cats, geese, chickens, and he rented a dilapidated farmhouse where, in the winter, the animals slept indoors with him (you had to get used to the smell when visiting). He had an old housekeeper who cooked for them if she wasn't drunk. Everyone called her Madam. Uncle Ben often dropped by my parents when he came to the village to buy provisions. His place was in a swampy area, and his nearest neighbor was about half a km away. As I was circling the village in a wide arc, I was following a footpath that was leading North. I could see Uncle Ben's farm in the distance on my right, its whitewashed walls glowing in the moonlight. I got off the path and made a beeline for the farmhouse.

Suddenly the ground started to sag, and if I stopped, my shoes would sink into the mud. I quickly backtracked and tried further up; no go either. I knew that there was a footpath leading to the house, but with the fresh snow covering everything I couldn't make it out. After a few futile tries, I gave up and continued North because I remembered that a little further up there was supposed to be a one-room schoolhouse with the teacher (Mr. Balazs) and his family living in the back. He was a rabid anti-communist and used to drop in on my parents where he could safely rant against the regime long and loud. I knew he would help me if only I could find the schoolhouse; I had never been there before. In a little while, the path I was on joined a dirt road, and here and there I could see lanes leading off to farms further away. Soon I was nearing a building that was right by the road, with a flagpole in front of it, and sure enough, when I got close, I could see the plaque saying such and such district elementary school. Bull's-eye!

I walked up to the patio and banged on the door; luckily there was no dog. Finally, Mr. Balazs came out and shone his flashlight in my face. When he recognized me and saw that I was alone, he relaxed and asked me to step inside. That was as far as I got; there, standing in the kitchen, I told him what happened. When I mentioned the leaflets, he gave a chuckle and said it was his two boys that did it (around age 10 and 12); he was very proud that they pulled it off. With tomorrow being market day, people will find and read the leaflets. I didn't tell him that the soldiers had already collected them. I was royally pissed off. Even though his kids were too young (and lived too far out) to belong to our village youth gang, they (or at least their father) should have warned us to be off the street that evening. Of course, I kept my mouth shut; I didn't want to antagonize him. I needed his help. I needed to hide somewhere. He gave me an overcoat to put on and led me out to a shed where he kept his chickens. There was an empty compartment with some straw I could lie on. He said I would be safer there than in the house in case anyone came looking for me.

"Have some rest; we will talk in the morning," he said and went back to the house.

I could see his point; he had a family to protect. If they find me in the shed, he can deny any knowledge. I just walked in from the road and hid in the chicken coop while they were all sleeping. Now that I was no longer "in flight mode," the adrenaline rush was over, and I started to ache all over as if I had been beaten up, which of course was true. I felt feverish, and it was pretty cold. I tried to doze off but couldn't. Outside, the snow, the moonlight, the distant barking of dogs; I could see my breath in the air. I was aching and shivering with a splitting headache. It felt like the night would never end. I had no watch. It was still dark when the rooster a meter away started to crow, just what my headache needed. Kukkuriku-u-u-u! It was earsplitting in the confined space, and he really stretched the end out. Then he waited for the neighboring farms' roosters to answer him. They did. Then mine let one go again. Of course you can not tell a rooster to shut up. I could have wrung his neck, but it didn't occur to me. Besides, Mr. Balazs wouldn't have approved. This avian conversation went on and on. It probably woke up Mr. Balazs because after a while he came out and told me to follow him. He obviously wanted me to clear out before daylight; I couldn't blame him.

"I figured it out," he said, "the best place for you to be is at Uncle Ben's farm. Nobody ever visits him; nobody would suspect him. Later I will go to the village as if I was going to the market and find out what's going on. I will drop by your parents (as I usually do) and tell them where you are and bring you some warm clothes. OK?"

I told him that's where I wanted to go in the first place but got bogged down in the swamp.

"We will go the back way; don't worry, I know my way around here."

Sure enough, we got there before it was full light; we had not seen anyone, not even in the distance. Uncle Ben and Madam were already up and about. They let the chickens out;

the goat and sheep were munching some hay in the kitchen where the wood-burning stove was lit. It was nice and warm, and smelled of sheep and chicken shit, very cozy. I didn't have to say anything; Mr. Balazs gave Uncle Ben the lowdown in agonizing detail. Finally, Uncle Ben turned to me and asked: "What do you need? Eat? Sleep? Wash?"

"I need to go to bed," I said. "I am aching, I am cold, and have a blinding headache."

"Sit down and eat this first," he said, leading me into the only other room of the house and placing a mug of hot milk and a piece of bread in front of me - "then you can get under the duvet in my bed; it should still be warm. I just got out of it." And with that, he went back into the kitchen.

Ah, beautiful warm milk, nothing like breathing into a hot mug of drink when one is cold and feeling the steam caressing your eyes and forehead, swallowing and not taking your lips from the mug but breathing through your nose and feeling the steam sweep over your eyelids again. Just wonderful. I heard a noise and looked up over the rim of the mug: a goose was sitting, as if nesting, on the top of the radio on the other side of the room. Cozy. I was still chewing the last bite of the bread while I was already taking off my shoes. Without taking my clothes off, I got under the duvet and went out like lightning.

It was late evening when I woke up. The kerosene lamp was lit, and Uncle Ben was reading at the table. Madam was in the kitchen making domestic noises. The goose was still guarding the radio.

"Ah, you are awake! How do you feel?"

"My body still aches, but my headache is gone."

"Hungry?"

"Very."

Madam brought in a bowl of steaming goulash and some bread. While I was inhaling it, Uncle Ben told me that Mr. Balazs had already been and gone. He had brought me some clothes and some instructions as to where to go next. The village was buzzing with rumours as to what happened the previous night. Apparently, after I escaped and the wild shooting was going on, my parents were standing at the gate of the manse to see what the commotion was about when one of the search parties trotted by.

"Your son has escaped!" one of them yelled, "but we will catch him; if not tonight, then the next day or two. There is no way he can reach the Austrian border without being picked up".

Amazingly, they had not searched our house, not even the yard or garden. I could have gone home and into bed as far as the chase was concerned. The message from my parents was that someone would come by with a horse-drawn cart to take me to another farm. Sure enough, a middle-aged man pulled into the farmyard at around 10 PM to pick me up. I said goodbye to Uncle Ben and Madam and hopped on the cart beside the driver. That was the last time I saw Uncle Ben; he died before I visited Hungary eight years later.

The driver, whom I didn't know, told me we were going to the Modok farm near Tazlar. I knew Mr. Modok and his wife; they were active in my father's congregation; they had no children. Tazlar was a good 12 km away on the other (West) side of Szank, so we had to go around the village on seldom-used rural paths. It had rained earlier while I slept and washed away all the snow, which wasn't much, to begin with. It was overcast, therefore no moonlight either; ideal weather for fugitives. We carried no lamps and the sandy paths muffled all the cart noises. In this darkness it would be hard to see us, but we couldn't see far ahead either. I was wondering what I should do if we ran into a patrol. When I voiced my concern, the driver said: "Just hang on tight and pray 'cause I am going to whack the horses hard; there is no way anyone on foot could catch us; also pray - that if they shoot - they miss." Fortunately, the trip was uneventful, and we arrived safely at the Modoks, who were expecting me since they

were in Szank in the morning and had met my father and heard what happened. Actually, it was Mr. Modok who offered to put me up for a few days and relay messages between us.

The next morning, I saw what a perfect location it was. The farm sat on top of a hill with freshly plowed fields on all sides for miles. From the kitchen window, I could see the path, the only one that led to the farm from the dirt road more than a mile away. There was hardly any traffic on the dirt road, only the occasional cyclist or a horse-drawn cart. After breakfast, Mrs. Modok told me to sit by the window to watch the road while they went about their business feeding the animals, chopping firewood, sweeping the yard, drawing well water, and other stuff farmers usually do. It was a dreary, drizzly, overcast, and damp mid-December day. There I was sitting by the window, nice and dry and warm, reading pulp fiction I found lying around, looking up occasionally to check the road. After lunch, a lonely horse-drawn cart turned into the path from the road.

"It's all right," said Mr. Modok, "it is one of my neighbors".

As it turned out, he was coming from Szank with a message from my parents for me to go to a certain address in Soltvadkert (a small town about 7 km away) and be at the railway station to meet the Kiskunhalas-Budapest train next morning. My mother will be waving from one of the windows; I was to get on, and she will have my ticket.

So after supper, Mr. Modok harnessed the horse, and we were off to Soltvadkert. The house was an ordinary family bungalow. I didn't know the couple who lived there, but they were a relative of a girl from Szank whom I knew slightly; she was also there, and she was also running from the "padded coats" as well as my friend Gunar. I heard earlier that he was on the run because the "padded coats" searched his house (he lived with his widowed mother) and found a handgun under his mattress; luckily, only his mother was home. He was two years younger than I and was trying to finish high school at night while working during the day. He was active during the revolution in village politics, and now that the reprisals began the communists were after him. He told me that the handgun was planted, just an excuse to arrest him. All three of us wanted to escape to the West and planned to take the morning train to Budapest.

Early the next morning, we were at the railway station as the train pulled in. I spotted my mother right away, and Gunar and I climbed up; I lost sight of the girl. The first thing Mom did was to give me my ID booklet; she got it back in a roundabout way. As it happened, the appointed mayor of the village was the local communist party secretary. During the revolution, he thought he was going to be lynched by the local peasants and did not dare to sleep at home. My parents let him sleep at the manse a couple of nights. After the revolution was put down, he was reinstated, and after my escape, as a show of gratitude, he lifted my ID booklet from the town-hall office and gave it to my mother. It was very important for me to have it with me at checkpoints. No ID meant immediate lock-up at the nearest detachment until my identity was verified. (Even in "peacetime", not being able to produce the ID booklet involved a heavy fine). Since I escaped from custody, I was now on the "wanted" list, but I also knew that not every checkpoint would have that list on hand. The idea was to avoid checkpoints whenever possible.

It was past noon when the train pulled into the Eastern Railways Station of Budapest. At this point, Gunar suddenly declared that he had changed his mind and was going to go back to Szank and hide out at various farms of his friends, changing locations often, until the authorities "forgot" about him. He was the only child of his widowed mother and didn't want to leave her. I told him I thought it was a bad decision, although I understood how he felt. We said goodbye and shook hands. (I was already in Canada when I heard that he was captured and spent two years in prison; after that, he was blacklisted and could never get a decent job).

My mother and I went to the Jeneys (an old friend of the family) where my mother “parked me” while she went to check out my Budapest address. (My oldest brother and I rented a room from our great aunts in one of the suburbs, two spinsters living by themselves.) She came back with the news that the “authorities” were already there looking for me, so it was important for me to stay indoors as much as possible while she was running down various leads to locate a “guide” who, for money, would smuggle me across the border to Austria.

I did sneak out once and went to the hospital where I used to work as an Operating Room orderly in the “Nose, Ear, and Throat” ward. There I told Dr. Szalkay what had happened to me and that I could hardly hear with my right ear where the “padded coats” had kicked me. He examined me and said there was no major problem. My hearing will improve with time, but it would never be as good as the left one. He turned out to be right on both counts. I returned to the Jeneys and waited for Mom to come back.

Escaping from Hungary in those days was an ever-changing scenario. After World War II, Austria had been under a four-power occupation but in 1955 was declared neutral and the English, French, U.S., and Russian occupying forces were pulled out. As a “goodwill gesture,” the anti-personnel mines along the “Iron Curtain” were picked up, although the barbed wire fences and watchtowers remained, together with a 50 km-wide restricted-entry “security zone” on the Hungarian side. One could enter only with special written permission unless one actually lived in the zone and could prove this with an ID booklet. During the revolution (Oct 23-Nov 4, 1956), the army sided with the people, the border police left their posts, and the “Iron Curtain” was open. When the Russian tank and artillery offensive began on Nov 4th, people began escaping to the West. Whole trainloads would go to the border towns of Sopron and Hegyeshalom, and from there people simply walked across to Austria. The Russians and the “padded coats” desperately tried to re-seal the border, but it took time. IDs were checked on Westbound trains and buses, but when caught, after checking against the wanted list, people were simply shipped back to Budapest by trucks (arrests were impractical because there were too many escapees). Later, when the free-for-all was over, “guides” were showing up in the railway stations of the capital. They lived near the border and knew the lay of the land and, for a certain fee, would take groups of people across to Austria. These people-smugglers made a great deal of money, but as time passed, it was more and more difficult to avoid the checkpoints and the border patrols, so “guides” were hard to find and the price kept going up. By the time we arrived in Budapest, it was almost hopeless. Christmas was getting close, and people-smuggling came to a virtual halt. “Not till after the holidays” was the refrain. (As it turned out, by New Year’s the only way out was through Yugoslavia and by the end of January even that border was sewn up).

A friend of ours suggested taking the train to Győr (a large town halfway between Budapest and Austria) and talk to the local Reformed Church’s minister to see if he knew someone who could help. Since the minister knew my father, we knew we could trust him. Prudently, we took the “local” Westbound commuter train to Győr; it was called “local” because it went only as far as Győr, not all the way to the border. There was no ID check on this train. We found the church and the manse and spoke to the minister. His suggestion was for me to get to Ujronafo somehow and find Peter Kovacs, a longtime friend of my father, and ask for his help. Since Ujronafo was only 18 km from the border, he could probably find me a local “guide”.

I remembered Uncle Peter although I hadn’t seen him for 6-7 years. Whenever he visited us he wore shiny black boots that came up to his knees and talked very loudly since he was virtually deaf. The conversation with him was a shouting match. I knew he lived in the countryside, but I didn’t know exactly where. The minister showed me on the map where

Ujronafo was and told me to make sure to take a “local” commuter train that left from Gyor to Hegyeshalom, not the one that comes from Budapest. Document checks were less likely on the “local” trains. So we went to the station, I bought a ticket and waited for the early afternoon train. West of Gyor one needed a “zone permit”, so we decided that this was as far as my mother would accompany me.

It was very hard for her to say goodbye. She felt the dangers ahead and, thinking further into the future, envisioned me trying to start a life in a new country (or even a new continent) where there was no family, a new language, and where I knew no one. When would she see me again? She stood there with a heavy heart and made me promise to send a telegram as soon as I reached Austria. She gave me a folded U.S.\$1 bill full of needle holes. My father had brought it with him as a souvenir when he had returned to Hungary from his studies in the U.S. in the late 1920s. When, after the war, it became unlawful to own foreign currency, my mother wrapped a thread around it and stuck her sewing needles into it like into a pin-cushion.

“That money is no good,” I said. “It’s too old, it’s from before the war!”

Since after the war new currency was introduced in Hungary, I thought that all other countries changed their currencies after 1945. I was 20 years old and had never seen any kind of foreign currency in my life. My mother assured me that it was still a valid dollar bill. Boy, did I have a lot to learn!

Otherwise, I was not anxious at all. Ever since my escape from custody that night, I was observing what was happening to me as from the outside. It was like watching a movie or reading a book; I identified with the escapee and was interested and excited as to what would happen next, but it didn’t feel like it was happening to me. I was cheering for the “guy” and was curious how he was going to get across the border. Other than getting to Austria, I didn’t think any further. Similar to when one tries to matriculate, one doesn’t think about life after high school. Leaving Hungary didn’t feel permanent. The fact that I would not see my family for years never occurred to me. I couldn’t understand why my mother was so despondent. Of course, Christmas was two days away, and this would be the first time our family wouldn’t be together on Christmas Eve. I could not think that far ahead; for me the important questions were: “How do I get to Ujronafo tonight without being stopped by a patrol? How will I find Uncle Peter whose address I didn’t know, in a pitch-dark village in which I had never been?”

When the train pulled in, it filled pretty quickly with homeward-bound factory workers who commuted to Gyor from nearby villages. I kissed Mom goodbye and got on the train with my briefcase, which only held a pair of socks, a change of underwear, a shirt, and my toothbrush. The coach was full; people were talking, playing cards, munching food, passing a bottle of brandy around for anyone who felt like taking a slug, and of course most everyone was smoking. Me too. I struck up a conversation with a middle-aged man sitting beside me who seemed to be a regular old-timer; everybody seemed to know him. Pretty soon I told him that I was on the run and that I was trying to get to Ujronafo. I asked him if there was going to be an ID check during our trip. He said there usually wasn’t, but one could never tell.

“Leave it to me,” he said, and got up and walked to the front end of the coach and talked to a guy, returned walking past me, and talked to someone at the other end of the coach. He came back and sat down. “My buddies will signal should “padded coats” approach from either direction; in that case, you get under the seat, and we will put a suitcase across our knees and start playing cards on it. That setup should hide you OK.”

I thanked him and noticed that at each stop he poked his head out the window to check who got on the train. Nothing happened. It was a slow commuter train that stopped at every station. Even though it was only a 35 km trip, it was already dark when we arrived at Mosonmagyaróvár, the end of the ride. The border was another 14 km Westward. The man

told me that after I got off, I should just walk ahead along the tracks to the first level crossing (about 200 m) where I should turn south and follow the gravel road (which went parallel with the border), to Ujronafo about 7 km away. Sounded easy.

As the train pulled into the station, people lined up for the doors on the North side. I held back and pressed my nose to the fogged-up window to see if everything was OK. Holy shit! The platform was lit and lined from end to end with “padded coats” checking everyone. I quickly looked out the opposite side; total darkness, black plowed farm fields. No snow, no moonlight. Apparently, the station was at the Southern edge of the town. I jumped off and ran South into the blackness. Nobody noticed. There was no commotion. Eventually the train pulled out of the station, but by that time I was about half a mile away. I kept walking south but angling to the west, hoping to hit the gravel road leading to Ujronafo. Sure enough, soon I came upon it and turned South. There was absolutely no traffic on the road. I couldn't even see a light (like a lit farmhouse window) anywhere. I wondered if Ujronafo had electricity or not. The only sound came from my boots crunching on the gravel. Suddenly a light beam hit my face. Holy shit! It was a two-person oncoming police patrol on bicycles.

“Documents!”

Hoping my hand wouldn't tremble, I gave them my ID booklet. “There is no “zone permit” in this. You live in Budapest, so what are you doing around here? Where are you heading?” one of them asked. Totally unprepared, I had to wing it, flying by the seat of my pants.

“I am going to Ujronafo for the Christmas holidays,” I said. “I tried to get a “zone permit” at the Ministry of Interior in Budapest, but everything is in such a state of disorganization there that they told me to get one at the town hall in Ujronafo as soon as I arrive.” I heard myself, lying through my teeth. I asked them what I should tell the authorities if I run into a patrol before I get to Ujronafo. They just told me to explain the situation. So that is what I am doing now. Wow! Where did I get this idea from? My brain was on autopilot with no prepared text.

“No way!” said the policeman. “This is bull shit; we have to take you back to the detachment in Mosonmagyaróvár, and they will take it from there.”

My heart sank. Being a border detachment, they will surely have the “wanted list” and my name on it. Boldness be my friend! There was no way I was going back there. The night was black; nobody on the road. Both sides were plowed wheat fields, no forest, bushes, or any other cover around. Luckily, the policeman's flashlight was very weak; if, unexpectedly, I bolted into the fields, they couldn't use their flashlight to spot me. They would have to shoot blindly, then follow my tracks in the muddy field to see if they hit me or not. They only had sidearms (no submachine guns to spray with); I would have an edge. I resolved that I would take off at the first opportunity, but first I had to lull them into a false sense of security i. e., that I was quite willing to go with them back to the detachment. I didn't argue. I didn't want them to handcuff me.

“OK, let's go,” I said - “the sooner we clear this up, the sooner I can head back to Ujronafo.”

We started walking. They were pushing their bikes, and I walked between them with my briefcase. One of them asked who I was going to visit in Ujronafo. I told them, Peter Kovacs. Now the name Kovacs in Hungary is as common as Brown or Smith in North America, so for good measure, I added: “The deaf Peter Kovacs”. Obviously, the term “deaf” made a difference; one of the policemen said he knew whom I was referring to. As we were marching on in the blackness, it started to rain, but because of me, they had to walk and slowly got soaked. They had no rain gear, and swearing at the weather didn't help. Suddenly one of them told me to go ahead a few steps and then stop. I did as I was told while they held a quick whispered conference.

"OK, this is what we are going to do," he said. "You go on to Ujronafo, but register at the town hall first thing in the morning. I will check tomorrow to make sure that you did."

With that, they jumped onto their bikes and pedalled towards Mosonmagyaróvár. I turned around and hightailed toward Ujronafo. Within minutes the rain stopped and a sense of relief flooded over me. Again, I was on schedule. I soon reached the edge of the village, but now the new dilemma. How to find the Kovacs'? It was pitch black, no street lights, no one on the streets. I decided to knock on the first lighted window and ask for directions. Walking beside a low fence, suddenly a door opened on the other side, and the light from the kitchen illuminated a good part of the courtyard. A teenage girl came out with a pail to get water from the pump well; she left the kitchen door open to see better. When she finished, I called out to her:

"Excuse me, miss, do you know where Mr. Peter Kovacs lives?"

"Here," she said - "he is my father".

Providence or coincidence, I almost collapsed with relief. The family was sitting around the kitchen table, just finishing supper. Uncle Peter didn't recognize me; I was 13 or 14 when he last saw me, but when I told him my name, he jumped up, shook my hand, hugged me, and introduced me to his wife and children as one of the Dobos boys. Of course, the whole family knew who Karoly Dobos was, for Uncle Peter and my father were friends and co-workers in the Hungarian Reformed Church's youth movement for over 20 years. I told them my story, including what the bike-patrol policeman told me, and also that nobody in the village knows about me because her daughter was the first person I talked to. He told me to eat, have a good sleep, and tomorrow they will look for a local "guide".

The next morning, we were having breakfast when I saw the cap of a policeman pass under the window, then heard the yard-gate open and close and someone was already knocking on the kitchen door. Panic-stricken I silently mouthed the word POLICE! to Uncle Peter (he was deaf anyway, although you could converse with him if you sat beside him and shouted into his ear). He quickly pushed me into the bedroom and closed the door whilst his son let the policeman in. He was asking about me.

"Nobody came here," said Uncle Peter. "Whoever it was, he must have gotten so scared that he went for the border as soon as you let him go; he is probably in Austria by now".

Apparently, this satisfied the policeman, and he left. Soon after, Uncle Peter's teenage son took off to look for a "guide" for me. He came back after lunch with the bad news that all his friends who were "in the business" were taking a break until after the holidays. I couldn't blame them; it was the 23rd, and Christmas Eve is a big holiday in Hungary; all the presents are opened on Christmas Eve, followed by a big dinner and, for the Catholics, midnight mass. It seemed that I'll have to spend Christmas at the Kovacs'.

In the afternoon, Uncle Peter led me to his neighbor's house through the back garden, who was a good friend of his, an old bachelor, living alone, and said it would be safer for me to stay there. At Uncle Peter's house the friends of his children were always dropping by, and if they saw me, word would get around the village, and the police would come again. This made good sense. The old neighbor was a friendly and obliging fellow; the three of us sat down in his kitchen, and the two buddies were soon deep in conversation at maximum decibels, usual for them, but exceptionally nerve-racking for me. Seeing my worried face, the old man told me to relax; should anyone knock, he would hide me before he opened the door, and with that, he pulled over the kitchen table, flipped over the rug, and lifted up a half-by-half-meter piece of the floor which covered a small vegetable cellar.

"You hop in there, and I put the table back before I open the door. Unless they bang on the floor under the middle of the table, they wouldn't know there was a cellar there," he said.

He hardly finished with the demonstration when there was a knock on the door. I quickly jumped into the cellar; they put the rug and the table back, and I heard the old man opening the door. Down below in the dark, I was holding my breath, listening to what was being said.

"We are looking for the boy from Budapest," a male voice said. I couldn't tell if it was the police, "padded coats," or border guards.

"There is nobody here except Peter, my neighbor," said the old man. "I don't know anything about any boy from Budapest. You can look around if you don't believe me".

"We were told he was here," said the voice.

"Someone gave you a bum steer; there is nobody here but us two," insisted my old host.

"Well, all right, I just wanted to tell him that my brother and I decided to take one more group over to Austria before Christmas; we are leaving tonight. Bye-bye.

"Hold on, hold on! Wait a minute!" I heard the table being moved, then the trapdoor opened, and I climbed out. A man in his late twenties and his teenage brother were standing in the kitchen. We shook hands, relaxed, then explanations followed. As it happened, Uncle Peter's son visited these "guides" in the morning but was told that there would be no crossing until after the holidays. Later on, there were more inquiries, and by early afternoon they had half a dozen potential customers; that's when they changed their minds and came over to Uncle Peter's house to let them know that the crossing was "on". His wife sent them over to the neighbor to see me and discuss the details. We agreed that one of Uncle Peter's boys would take me over to their house at 8 PM. So it seemed that I would be across the border before Christmas after all.

During the afternoon, snow began to fall, and it was cold enough for it not to melt. Soon everything was covered in white; there would be a white Christmas. By eight o'clock it stopped snowing, the sky cleared, and the moonlight was so bright that even without streetlights one could see pedestrians moving a block away. To sum it up, conditions were lousy for escapees. Uncle Peter's son delivered me to the "guide's" house, shook my hand, and disappeared. (Fifteen years later I met him in England where he lived with his British wife and daughter; he had escaped shortly after me).

Seven people were standing in the kitchen with their overcoats on, each clutching a small bag or suitcase; nobody talked, trying to ignore each other. They had arrived independently during the day and didn't know each other except for a fat bus driver who had his 10-year-old daughter with him. There was a university student who spoke German and would translate for the group when we got to Austria. Two single middle-aged men were smoking silently, and a couple in their thirties. Eight altogether. There was no light on in the kitchen, but the door to the living room was ajar, and light seeped into the kitchen from there. Muffled voices were coming from inside, and finally the two "guides" came out to give us the final instructions. The older one told me I was the last one; there would be no one else coming, and he asked me to give him 4000 Ft (the going rate at the time). I told him all I had was 2500 Ft (the average monthly wage at that time was 2000 Ft), he took it and turned to the group.

"Listen up! There is a curfew on, so no talking and no smoking! We go out in a single file, me in the front and my brother in the rear. When I signal to stop, you stop! Only follow me when I signal. Sometimes I have to scout ahead to check if the way is clear. Other times I will stop with you and my brother will walk back a bit to check if anyone follows. If a flare goes up, freeze until it is dark again. Do not crouch or lie down! It is a movement that catches the eye, so don't move! Even if you feel you are in the middle of a stage with all the spotlights on you,

don't move! The flares are shot up by border patrols randomly or when they hear or see something suspicious. They are no longer triggered by tripwires as they used to be. My brother and I may switch places, leading and trailing, as the situation warrants. We have to cross another village on the way; otherwise, it is open fields. There are no forests around here. You will see some watchtowers, but they are not manned. Total distance 18 km; we should be over shortly after midnight. Any questions?" You could tell he had made this speech many times before.

Nobody dared to ask what if we get caught? I presumed any patrol that spotted us would march us to the nearest guard post and phone for transportation. Border patrols usually consisted of 2-3 armed men, although now that the Russians had taken over, one couldn't really tell. I resolved that if we got caught, I would escape again before reaching any border guard detachment. I tried not to think of this possibility.

We left the house in a single file without a word. Damned moonlight, you could read by it! Once we were out of the village and on the open fields, you could see for miles. I saw a dark clump of people about half a kilometre away slowly moving in the same general direction we were following; another group of escapees, no doubt. Looking around, I could see single stationary lights in the distance, probably windows of farmhouses. It was hard to tell if a light was strong but far away or a weak light much closer. After about two hours, we headed toward a large haystack to sit down and rest. As we reached it and walked around to be out of the wind, we bumped into a group of escapees who were also resting. Not a word was spoken. They jumped up and continued westward, pretending they didn't even see us. We, in turn, sat down without acknowledging them. It was quite comical in a way because everybody knew that everybody knew, but because of the tension, nobody snickered. Our guide said that we would be crossing a road which was heavily patrolled and we should be extra careful. I didn't know what he meant by "extra careful"; should we go on tiptoe or hold our breath?

Soon we started up again; the previous group, moonlight notwithstanding, had already disappeared in the distance. Suddenly a flare went up about a mile away; it lit up the countryside something awful. It seemed to stay up forever and didn't seem to dim as it was coming down. We froze, and I only moved my eyes to see if anyone with guns was coming toward us. I was expecting a spotlight and a bullhorn to tell us to put up our hands and not move, but nothing happened. Finally, the flare died, and we started moving again. One guide scouted ahead whilst we waited with the other one. When he came back, we moved on. Then the other went ahead to check; they kept alternating. Once, when the older was in the front and went ahead, he did not come back. We waited and waited. Nothing. No movement, no noise, no light. There we were standing with a fifteen-year-old whose older brother seemed to have disappeared. Our young guide started to swear, quietly but intensely cursing his brother for leaving him in shit. Finally, he turned to us and said he would go ahead and see what had happened to him and that we should wait for him. The others waited; I didn't; I went with him.

He turned to me and asked: "Don't you trust me?"

"I can not afford to," I said. "If we lose you, we are sunk. We don't even know which way is West." Apparently, he didn't take offence.

"You see that little light by itself straight ahead? That's in Austria." I saw the light but couldn't tell if it was half a km or five km away. We kept walking ahead for a while but couldn't find his brother. Looking for footprints was useless; there were too many, left behind by previous refugee groups, no doubt. Finally, we turned around and walked back to the group. They huddled immobile where we left them.

"Son of a bitch, he chickened out and left me holding the bag," he informed the group in hushed tones. "But don't worry, I'll take you across."

Will he? - I wondered.

Just then, a flare went up really close. You could not tell where it was fired from since it only ignited about halfway up; it seemed to hang there forever before slowly descending. I was really surprised that nobody spotted us in all that glare. I could see the outline of a watchtower although not in the direction of the flare. Surely, we would be caught in a searchlight beam at any second, with a metallic voice commanding us not to move, but nothing happened. I guess the guides were right; the towers were not manned (yet). We crept moving forward; I could see the outline of an earth embankment ahead running perpendicular to our direction. A road ran on top which, we were told, was heavily patrolled. We had to cross it. There was no movement, no engine noise, no silhouette of any parked vehicle as far as we could see left and right, which wasn't very far because it was getting cloudy with no more moonlight. We scampered across the road, one at a time, and waited crouched low on the other side for everybody to get across.

"We are in no man's land now," whispered the boy. "Move ahead as quietly as you possibly can. There will be wet ditches to cross; you can either jump or wade through. The last ditch will be a big one, the Hansag canal, which is the demarcation line. The other side is Austria. Let's go!"

In the blackness ahead there was "that single light". I still couldn't really tell how far. The fat bus driver started to act up. "Continue without me. Leave me here! I have a heart condition; I can't take it anymore. I am going to die here!" he was wheezing and whispering loudly. Somebody took his suitcase to help him. He suddenly fell to his knees, clutched at his heart, and pulled a piece of paper from his breast pocket. "Here, take this. The address in Montreal, take my daughter to this address; they will take care of her. I'll never make it. Leave me! Just take my daughter!" I couldn't believe my senses. It was like watching an Italian movie with the self-sacrificing hero perishing just before reaching freedom. I reached under his arm and hissed at him to stop the theatrics. Another guy lifted him from the other side. He started walking but clutching at his heart and periodically declaring that he wasn't going to make it. He repeatedly referred to the piece of paper with the Montreal address. It felt like a ridiculous dream that I was watching from the outside. This can't be happening! Not to me! Not with 500 yards to go. I felt like throttling him. Each time we got to a ditch, I jumped to the other side and waited while he waded across knee-deep in muddy water. Somebody took his daughter's hand; she was very sensible, kept walking, and didn't make a sound.

Suddenly we got to the Hansag canal. The channel was V-shaped, about 4-5 meters down with steep embankments; the water at the bottom was waist-deep and about 2-3 meters across. I let go of the bus driver, who suddenly became quite perky; I looked across at the light source ahead. Finally, I figured out what it was; it was the porch light of the Austrian border guard detachment. A single light bulb above the door; a dark red brick building, with the wooden window shutters closed, although from where I was standing I could see cracks of light seeping through some of them. The circle of light partially illuminated the red and white Austrian flag near the door.

Everybody started to slither down the muddy side of the canal, wading across in the waist-deep water, then trying to scamper up the slippery slope on the other side. I looked around to see if there was any way to get across dry; after all, it was near freezing, and I didn't think that there would be a whole pile of dry clothes and boots waiting for us on the other side. Sure enough, I spotted a thick wooden beam laid across the canal about 40 yards away. So I took the "long way" and kept myself dry. The others were already making a beeline for the door, but I hung back. I had heard it on Radio Free Europe that some Hungarian border posts put out the Austrian flag, and when the refugees tumbled in, they were arrested. So I crept up to one of the windows and listened to the voices inside. It was German. Finally, I could relax; I went around to the door and entered. One of the Austrian guards was pouring

tea for everyone; the other was on the phone calling for transport. The refugees were chattering excitedly, shaking hands. The bus driver, completely recovered, soaking wet and muddy, was really happy with his authentic escapee appearance; the university student kind of took charge since he spoke German. We all hugged our little teenage guide and thanked him for not abandoning us when his brother disappeared. He said that he wanted to spend Christmas with his parents but that after New Year he would also leave Hungary. He looked so forlorn and vulnerable as he walked back into the night. We watched him until we could see him no longer, eight refugees staring eastward, and only one of them had dry shoes. It was just past midnight on December 23rd. I was no longer a fugitive; from now on I was called a "refugee".

Soon a tractor-trailer arrived and took us to the village of Andau about twenty minutes away. There were huge tents most of them full of people sleeping on straw mattresses. Gray Red Cross blankets covered everyone. One tent was set aside for feeding the new arrivals and handing out information. Canadian Red Cross nurses were standing by the hot chocolate and coffee urns, serving sandwiches. They were very friendly but could not speak German (let alone Hungarian), so the conversation was rudimentary, to say the least. We all went into the food tent and were munching away happily when one of the guys proposed that since we crossed the border together, we should stay together and emigrate to Brazil. I told him that I appreciated his enthusiasm, but I was sure that everyone had his own plans; at least I had, and it did not involve Brazil. Besides, we didn't even know each other's names, so count me out. Trying to sleep was out of the question; we were still too wound up. I slowly peeled away from our group and tried to find out how the refugees were processed once they arrived in Austria. During November and December, over 200,000 Hungarians left the "peoples paradise," so there were many secular and religious agencies, in addition to the International Red Cross and NGOs, to deal with the refugees.

Several refugee collection centres were running along the Austrian side of the border from which people were transported to the interior into laggers (usually unused army barracks), that were heated, had proper beds, cafeterias, and bathrooms. We were told that because of the Holidays there would be no transport until after the New Year. That was a bummer.

"I am not going to spend Christmas here. I have got to get to Vienna as soon as possible." I told the person at the information desk; on a town map, he showed me where the bus terminal was and wished me luck.

I had one address: Wasegasse 9, where Mr. and Mrs. Tsuk lived. They were friends of my parents; their only son was a classmate of my eldest brother. They were Jewish, and my parents hid them from the Nazis during the war; this way, they survived the Holocaust. They left Hungary in 1948 and lived in Vienna; their son had emigrated to Montreal. I was 12 years old the last time I saw them.

I ambled into the village as soon as it was light. It was neat and clean with well-lit paved sidewalks, not a policeman or red star in sight. Every oncoming early morning pedestrian greeted me with a polite "Gutten morgen!". As soon as the post office opened, I sent an innocuous-sounding coded telegram to my parents that told them where I was. I paid with my well-worn one-dollar bill and the lady behind the window gave me back a bunch of schillings. They were apparently used to newly arrived refugees paying with all kinds of currencies. I bought a one-way bus ticket to Vienna and had enough leftover change to buy a chocolate bar and one orange. Life was good.

It was a crisp, sunny winter day; the bus was heated and comfortable, and I was still in a state of excitement which kept me from dozing off. Everything was neat, colorful, and richly decorated for Christmas. When we entered Vienna, the shop windows were amazing. Nativity scenes that we never saw in communist Hungary, plenty of consumer goods. Blinking lights

and colorful decorations. The architecture was similar to Budapest, which was not surprising since Vienna and Budapest were twin cities, both for centuries part of the Habsburg Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. "This is how a free, non-communist Budapest would look," I thought.

Soon we pulled into the bus terminal, and since I didn't have any money left, I decided to hoof it to Wasegasse. I had no map, and no idea how far or even in which direction it was. So I put together the four keywords and asked the first pedestrian that came along: "Wo ist Wasegasse bitte?" (Where is Wasegasse, please?). The usual response was the swing of the arm indicating the first direction I had to take, after which I stopped listening because I did not understand the rest. When the person finished, I said "Danke schön." Then I walked one block in the indicated direction and asked somebody again. So slowly but surely, one block at a time, I arrived at Wasegasse 9. It was an apartment house close to downtown, and according to the tenant list at the entrance, the Tsuks lived on the third floor. I walked up the stairs and rang the bell. Mrs. Tsuk opened the door, and of course she did not recognize me.

"Don't you recognize me, Aunt Lilly?" I asked in Hungarian.

"No," she replied in Hungarian.

"Well then, do you recognize this kucsma?" (Kucsma is a Hungarian-style fur hat only worn at wintertime; Mr. Tsuk gave me and my three brothers identical kucsmas before they left Hungary in 1948; they owned a fur shop). When she said that she didn't recognize the kucsma, I told her my name.

"My goodness! Come in, come in! Gyula, look who is here! Dobos Peter from Budapest just arrived in Vienna".

During supper I slowly told them my story, and after taking a bath and getting into clean pajamas I realized that for the time being I didn't have to go anywhere. There was no urgency to plan my next move. I was "out"! I was free! It was Christmas Eve. What a Christmas present! "As to the future? We will talk about it tomorrow; go get some sleep," said Mr. Tsuk. "Good night."

I didn't realize it at the time, but my life had just turned around 180 degrees.

**(After the defeat of Nazi Germany, at the end of World War II, Hungary was occupied by the Soviet Army. A Communist Soviet-style government was formed, a regular police state, under the guidance of the Soviet secret police, or KGB. East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria shared a similar fate. From the Baltic to the Adriatic, an "Iron Curtain" descended in Europe, separating the Soviet satellite countries from the free democracies of Western Europe. The "Iron Curtain" was an impenetrable border, consisting of electric barbed-wire fences, minefields, and watchtowers. After the war, it took roughly three years to establish this border, and by 1948 it was impossible to get "out," i.e., to travel to the West. In October 1956, an armed revolt broke out in Hungary against the Soviet occupation and against the Hungarian communist regime. The Soviets were taken by surprise and, to gain time, they pretended to negotiate. For twelve days, Hungary was free, and the border to the West was open; on the 4th of November, the Soviet Army counter-attacked, crushed the revolution, and re-established the communist government, which ruled until 1989, when the communist system in Eastern Europe and, two years later, in the Soviet Union itself, collapsed. More about all this later.)*