# A TALE OF SURVIVAL: FROM WAR RAVAGED EUROPE TO THE PROMISE OF AMERICA

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*Don't worry about your problem. Soon a bigger one will crop up*
Hungarian saying

## 1. 1939. PARIS

On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later, France and Britain formally declared war on Germany. My future parents Edith and Jules Sander still lived in Paris at that time. At first, nothing changed. People began to hoard food and supplies, but there was no shooting, no invasion. Several months went by, during which life continued more or less normally in the City of Lights.

Finally, the Germans invaded France, and in June of 1940 made their triumphant entry into Paris. Edith and Jules were there to witness it, on that dreary cloudy spring morning. Hitler's *Wehrmacht* paraded down the Champs Elysees, from the Arch of Triumph to the Concorde. First came hundreds of tanks, their caterpillar treads loudly clattering on the avenue's cobblestones. Thousands of infantry soldiers followed, marching in lockstep. Then came the cavalry, thousands of men on horseback, plus hundreds of horse-drawn vehicles. Throngs of Frenchmen crowded the sidewalks, most of them silent, some of them crying, a few brave souls shouting, "*Merde au Boche!* (Fuck the krauts!)" and, "*Salauds!* (Assholes!)"

After the end of the victory parade, the huge avenue emptied out, as the people of Paris slowly walked back to their homes, crushed by the sudden defeat, still unable to comprehend its consequences and implications. By late afternoon the majestic Champs Elysees was a vast, empty space covered with tons of horse shit left by the German cavalry, exuding a powerful stench.

Before World War II, Paris had long been the Mecca for all artists, including my parents. My father was an aspiring painter, and my mother an aspiring photographer. They had moved into a modest apartment on the Left Bank. The vast colony of foreign artists in Paris included people from everywhere, for example Miro and Picasso from Spain, and Hemingway, Getrude Stein and the other Americans of the Lost Generation. Edith and Jules probably crossed paths many times with such historical figures when having coffee or Pernod at *La Coupole* or at *Les Deux Magots*, those well-known Left Bank and Montparnasse hang-outs. However, most of their intimate friends were Hungarian expatriate artists like themselves. Their youthful existence was creative and exciting, but hanging over it was the ominous cloud of imminent war.

When war was declared in September of 1939, Edith and Jules considered their options. They were not sure whether to return home to Hungary or not. Home is the best place to be during great disasters. And in this case, while France was at war, Hungary was still neutral, and it might stay out of the war altogether. Last but not least: Edith was now pregnant with me.

Wasn't it better to be home when delivering your first baby? They still had not made up their mind when they saw the German army march down the Champs Elysees nine months later.

The few weeks following Hitler's occupation of Paris were like a Roman Holiday for the Germans. Many of them deluded themselves into believing that they were welcome, and that the war was practically over. All of Paris' famous monuments were full of German soldiers acting like tourists.

Edith had her Rolleiflex and she took many pictures. She followed a couple of drunken German officers all the way up to Montmartre, where the Sacre Coeur cathedral sits like a crown on top of the city. As the two officers walked across the esplanade to take pictures of the church and of Paris, Edith managed to photograph them unnoticed, and then quickly disappear. Years later, this photo would become world famous. Today, it is on display at the Spinosa Museum in Budapest.

Edith and Jules were still pondering whether to return to Hungary when the German authorities made the decision for them. A few weeks after their entry into the capital city, the Germans decreed that all aliens must return to their country of origin, under penalty of execution.

So they gathered their few valuables, packed their clothes into a couple of suitcases, and took the metro to the *Gare de l'Est*, the Eastern Railroad Station which services Eastern Europe.

By now, the war was in full swing, at least on the Western front. Most regular passenger trains had been requisitioned by the Germans for troop transport. Civilians often had to travel on freight trains. My parents were not about to enjoy the luxury of the Orient Express!

When Edith and Jules arrived at the cavernous Eastern Station and found out that they would have to travel in a box car built for cattle, not for people, Jules had a fit. "What the hell?" he shouted at one of the French officials. "You expect my pregnant wife to travel in cow manure? Do you know how many days it takes to get to Budapest?"

Of course, the French official couldn't do anything. He raised his shoulders nonchalantly and said, "*Eh, Monsieur, qu'est-ce que je peux faire, moi?* (Well, sir , what can I do?)" adding, "*c'est la guerre! C'est les boches* (It's the war; it's the krauts)."

But Jules continued to gripe. "We are not animals, you know! You expect us to sit in this filth for a week? This is nuts!"

The French official tried to sooth him a bit, saying, "Look, *Monsieur*, the straw is fresh and clean, and there is a water container..."

Jules was about to continue harping and hollering, but a heavily armed German guard approached, asking, "*Was is loss? Was wohlst du?* (What's going on? What do you want?)"

Edith pinched my father's arm as sharply as she could and whispered, "stop it, idiot! You want us to get shot?"

So Jules regained his composure and explained to the German calmly that his wife was pregnant and that he wasn't happy about the "accommodations." Of course, nothing could be done, and they were simply ordered to get on the train.

At five in the afternoon, the train slowly began to pull out of the immense station. There were two steam locomotives pulling at least fifty cars, and at first it was almost as if they were unable to budge, like the little locomotive that at first couldn't. The first fifteen wagons were comfortable passenger cars, all reserved for German troops. The rest were box cars full of people like Edith and Jules, as well as cattle and horses.

At least, people and animals did not have to share the same cars. That is, if you exclude pigs, goats and chickens, which were plentiful even in the box cars reserved for humans.

The trip to Budapest took five days. Every day, some people would get off and new passengers would get on. Many were farmers accompanied by animals. After a few hours, these animals would inevitably begin to urinate and defecate. Soon the passengers were traveling in unspeakable filth and stench. However, the worst was yet to come.

The Allied air raids had begun. Trains, of course, were prime targets, with all the troops and war materiel they carried.

My parents' train must have been somewhere in Southern Germany or in Austria when they experienced their first air raid. Sirens began to blare and the train came to a screeching halt. German soldiers came running toward their box cars, shouting, "*Heraus! Alle Pasagieren heraus! Schnell!* (Out! Everybody out! Quick!)"

So everyone jumped out and onto the track, whereupon they were all ordered to crawl underneath the train. Bombs came raining down, but they all missed. The closest explosion Edith heard must have been three hundred meters away. Eventually, the all-clear signal was given and the train resumed its course.

They arrived in Budapest unscathed five days after leaving Paris. Hungary was a strange place at this time. It was deceptively prosperous, and they felt very lucky to have been expelled from warn-torn France and sent back to their home country.

The country was still at peace. They were astounded by the cornucopia of foods on display and available in every store and marketplace. You could buy goose liver pate, salami, produce, the best wines and just about anything else for a trinket anywhere in Budapest.

This was because once the war had begun, Hungary - traditionally one of Europe's breadbaskets - could no longer export anything to Western Europe and to many of its other markets. So there was a glut of agricultural products, to be either consumed by the Hungarians themselves or to be left to rot.

Little did Edith and Jules realize that in the coming years the ravages of war would be incomparably more horrific in Hungary and elsewhere in the East than in Paris. By 1945, Paris had been spared and France had lost a few hundred thousand lives. But Budapest looked like Hiroshima and Hungary had lost a fifth of its population. So in 1940, Edith and Jules were actually jumping from the frying pan into the fire without knowing it.

However, for the time being, before all hell broke loose, Edith and all other Hungarians could gorge themselves on every conceivable type of food for practically nothing.

This was very lucky for me, because at that moment, I was thrashing around inside my amniotic sac.

And so, I was born on April 8,1941, just a few months after my folks returned to Hungary from Paris. As a result of the nutritional fluke just described, I was a healthy 8-pounder at birth, not the starved war baby you might expect.

This is not to say that my birth was uneventful. As it so happens, Edith went into labor during an allied air raid. My father managed to rush her to the Jewish hospital in Buda, but when they got there it was totally deserted. Not only was there no obstetrician, there was nobody, period. People usually don't like to go to work while bombs are falling.

Edith went into labor, and for twenty four hours she pushed and tried, while Jules was panicking and running around frantically, trying to find help. He finally got a hold of a rural midwife, and he dragged her to the hospital and forced her to help. Thus, both my mother and I survived a dangerous and difficult delivery which, according to some psychologists, may have

shaped my character.

About two years later, in May 1943, Edith completed our family by giving birth to my twin sisters Susan and Elizabeth, under conditions that were far worse.

## 2. 1944. LAKE BALATON, HUNGARY

As the allied bombing of Budapest intensified, my family decided to evacuate the city and go underground somewhere on the shores of Lake Balaton.

On a snowy winter morning, a large group gathered outside our house on Budapest's Hill of Roses, and they began the trek to the lake, about two hundred kilometers from the capital. They would look for an area that was already under Russian control. The group included me, my parents Edith and Jules, my grandparents, my twin sisters Susan and Elizabeth, my aunt Ica (pronounced Itsa) and her fiancé Ferry, some other toddlers, and several Jewish friends traveling as gentiles with false papers. Many years later, I would be astounded to discover the origins of those papers. These people all moved to the South shore of Lake Balaton, where they spent the entire winter and the following spring.

Sometimes my father and I would stroll on the snow-covered beach, and we could hear a distant buzz. I asked my dad what it was, and he pointed toward a neat symmetrical formation of small, glistening, gold-colored objects very high in the clear blue sky. ."Those are American airplanes flying to drop their bombs on Budapest."

"Why?" I persisted, inquisitively ( I wasn't quite four years old yet). "Are the Americans going to bomb us too?"

"No, Tom," my father reassured me. "The Americans are our friends. They are helping the Russians defeat the Germans. Soon all the Germans will be dead or gone, and we'll be able to go back home."

That winter, Lake Balaton - Europe's second largest - was the location for the war front between the Germans and the Russians, and they fought on the ice.

It is difficult to imagine the horror and the magnitude of the Eastern European winter war of 1941-45. For example, in order to relieve the German siege of Leningrad (which lasted three and a half years and cost three million lives) the Russians built a railroad over frozen Lake Ladoga - a vast, 100-mile long lake to the East of Leningrad (now again St. Petersburg). The winter was so long and cold that it made sense to build a temporary rail line on top of the frozen lake!

Lake Balaton's location was similarly strategic. While no attempt was made to build a railroad on top of it, as the Russians had done across Lake Ladoga, the winter battles were horrible, as the soldiers fought on the ice of the frozen lake. The Russians attacked by crossing over the ice; troops, horses, vehicles, weapons, everything. The opposing forces would shell each other on the ice, causing the death of hundreds of men by drowning in bloody icy water. My family and I moved many times from village to village, running away from the fighting as much as possible. We spent several weeks in the town of Balaton-Lelle, and then Balaton Boglar, and then Karad. For a while we lived in a church sacristy. We all slept on the floor of course, crowded like sardines. There were no amenities, no diapers, and food was scarce.

The area changed hands between Germans and Russians several times, but eventually the Russians prevailed. My grandfather Imre had become fluent in Russian while in captivity in Siberia during World War One, so he became the translator. My family thought that we had

been liberated, not realizing at the time that this would only lead to a new form of servitude. At that time, most Hungarians, not just the Jews, welcomed the Russian liberators with open arms.

My family immediately had to contend with the Russian soldiers stationed in the same house as the one into which we had moved, which they had requisitioned. The Russians fit the stereotype and the description provided by authors like Sandor Marai. They were more primitive than my middle-class Hungarian family. Many of them came from the Asian parts of the Soviet Union. They drank enormously and most were practically illiterate. They were mesmerized by western gadgets like watches and fountain pens - which they took at will. You could see some of them walking around with half a dozen watches around their wrists.

One winter morning my mother had to go barter some of our possessions for a few potatoes. She went on her tireless bike, riding on the wheels' metal rims. The bike's rubber tires, like anything else valuable, had been confiscated by the red army.

As Edith rode down the snow-covered road, a young Cossack soldier stopped her. He couldn't have been more than sixteen years old. Very politely and timidly, he demanded that she give him her boots. Using some Russian, some Hungarian and a little signing and pointing, he insisted that he needed the boots more than she did, because the following day he was going to have to go fight the Nazis on the icy lake. He pointed to his own feet, with only sandals on, and looked at Edith's boots, which he wanted. So, she had no choice but to take them off and hand them over. He thanked her profusely -- at gunpoint.

My mother returned home carrying a big bag of potatoes on her tireless bike, wearing nothing but socks in the snow.

The Russian soldiers also loved, hugged and were often very kind to children. Here again, stereotype and reality merge. Sometimes one of them would take me on his lap, at a table, as he took his gun apart for cleaning and oiling. He would explain the mechanisms to me, and offer to teach me how to use it. While I accepted the offer eagerly, my parents intervened politely.

When the Russians got drunk - which was practically every day - serious problems could ensue. They would get back from the field already drunk, or starting to get drunk on whatever local *Barack* (Hungarian brandy) or other liquor they got their hands on, and then all hell would break loose. The wild and drunken soldiers would start shooting off their guns randomly in all directions - mostly skywards, but sometimes in more dangerous directions, sometimes wounding or killing one of their own, or a hapless Hungarian civilian. Rapes and attempted rapes were also a chronic threat and occurrence.

My mother and her sister Itsa were very vulnerable. One night, the family was having dinner together at a long table. At the head of the table sat a short stocky Cossack officer. He was in charge and he was drinking heavily. He shouted incessantly and ordered everyone around. After a while he stood up, slapped his boots loudly to demand everyone's attention, and said, "Everybody out, except you and you - pointing at my mother and my aunt Itsa – two very beautiful women, one in her twenties and the other one only sixteen. Then he turned to my grandfather, sitting right next to him, and barked, "Translate!"

So my grandfather translated the order and everyone obeyed and filed out of the room, except my mother, Itsa and my grandfather.

The Cossack's face turned beet red and he shouted at my grandfather, "Didn't you hear me? I said OUT!"

Grandfather Imre, with his head down, answered in a low, calm voice, “I heard you.” But he didn’t move.

The Russian shouted, “Don’t you know that I can shoot you and kill you the instant you disobey me?”

Imre: “Yes, I know”≅

Then the short stocky officer gave the dinner table a loud kick with his boot. Dishes and glasses fell to the floor, and he stomped out of the room and out of the house, red-faced and furious. Such was the courage of my grandfather! He saved my mother and my 16-year old aunt from being raped.

This was not an isolated incident. My grandmother often had to fend off drunken soldiers as well. Once (I was four years old), I saw her physically shoving one of the soldiers out the front door. After she slammed the door shut, I walked up to her and asked, “Grandma, weren’t you afraid that he was going to shoot you?”

It is also during that winter by Lake Balaton that my family suffered one of its worst tragedies. Some members of the family have blamed my father for it, and never forgave him.

My father was an inveterate womanizer. Then too, the war probably relaxed everybody’s mores. Many men and women lived lives of incredible danger, deprivation and also with courage and heroism. Frequent quick and random love affairs were the only solace. To Jules, no woman was off limits, not even my mother’s sixteen-year old sister.

Edith’s sister Itsa was a pretty, freckled, frizzy brunette with blue eyes -- one could describe her as having that attractive, sexy Eastern European Ashkenazi look. She used to give me baths and dry me and dress me afterwards. I loved the luxury of a warm bath, something rare and requiring the boiling of water in several pots for a long time.

So here was this large group of people that had gone underground during the war, all living in very close quarters. The group included much of my extended family, plus various acquaintances. My father’s adulterous affair with my 16-year old aunt was especially disastrous in view of the fact that we lived together under one roof - my father himself, my mother, her 16-year old sister, and even Itsa’s fiancé Ferry. Everyone was aware of the scandal, not just the four people personally affected by it, but my grandparents and others, too.

My father’s seduction of his wife’s young sister contributed a great deal to the tension in the house. My mother’s reaction had been sadness rather than anger. Itsa herself felt guilt and bewilderment. The brief affair had been a one-time seduction in which she was more victim than participant. Her fiancé Ferry was angry, but he was afraid of my father, who was effectively one of the group’s patriarchal leaders. My grandparents were both outraged. However, grandfather Imre was a silent, dignified man who did not get into the gutter with people. His response to Jules’ misdeed was to shun him.

The only person who had the meanness to get into a scrap when necessary was my grandmother Margit. All her life she had been forceful and outspoken, and she had never backed down from a fight when one was called for. After Jules’ seduction of her 16-year old daughter, she had expressed her anger without restraint, calling him all sorts of names, telling him that if it were up to her, he would never again be allowed inside the house, that he deserved to be thrown out into the snow and be killed by the Russians or the Germans, she didn’t care.

One bleak winter morning, words were flying again. Grandma Margit was telling Jules again that he was a bastard. He didn’t reply much, but young Itsa said, “Oh mom, that doesn’t

help, you know. What's done is done. Now we all have to try to survive the war."

"You stay out of it, girl," said Margit, "I am not talking to you, I am talking to that son of a bitch who had his way with you."

Itsa began to cry again, as she had done daily for weeks. "I am sorry for what I did, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry," she kept repeating, while sobbing.

Jules tried to console her, but her fiancé Ferry told him not to touch her, ever! It looked like blows were going to follow. However, Itsa said to Ferry, "Let's get out of here! I am going to the library in Szekesfehervar. I heard that they are about to burn all their books. Let's go get books and bring them back while there is still time."

"You are crazy," said Ferry, "It's too dangerous. Szekesfehervar is more than twenty kilometers from here. And they are fighting, and what about the land mines?"

"I don't care, I'd rather be dead," Itsa shouted back, "I can't stand it here any longer!" And with that she stomped out the front door, followed by Ferry running after her, and another young couple who also ran out either to try to hold Itsa back, or maybe because they also felt cooped up and hysterical.

The people inside the house saw the four run across the snow-covered field toward the road, Itsa in front, Ferry close behind and the other couple catching up fast.

Suddenly there was an explosion which sounded more like a train collision, followed by horrible screaming and then deadly silence. My father went outside and walked carefully across the field, following exactly in the foursome's footsteps. All the adults understood instantly what had happened. The group had stepped on a land mine buried in the snow. I did not truly understand, but I knew instinctively that something terrible had happened, and I began to cry.

Only years later did my parents describe to me the carnage my dad saw in the snow that day. Itsa had been blown to pieces, probably never realizing what hit her. The other couple died a slower and more painful death. Ferry was the only lucky one. He lost a leg, but survived.

There is one thing about this event which I do remember clearly to this very day: A couple of years later, back home in Budapest, I once barged in on grandmother Margit in her room. She was crying silently. I saw that she was going through family photos and that she had stopped at a picture of Itsa's.

## 3. 1944. BUDAPEST

It was a beautiful crisp winter morning, I was almost five. The sky was clear blue and the snow had stopped. For the first time in months, you couldn't hear the bombs exploding in the distance. The city lay silently under a blanket of fresh snow. Edith decided to treat me to something truly exciting: If we could swing it somehow, we would cross the entire city from Buda to Pest, cross the Danube and pay a visit to *Varos Liget*, the city's major park, including the zoo - or what was left of it.

She put four or five layers of ragged old jackets and sweaters on me, and she wore her old inherited fox skin coat. The tiny hat on my head was actually a pointed pink girl's hat, but at least it had the advantage of covering my ears, which was important, considering that the temperature remained well below zero even during the sunny afternoon. Edith borrowed grandma Margit's old Russian fur *shapka*, the one with the ear flaps.

She slid my gloves onto my tiny hands and put on her own. As we were about to step

outside, grandma Margit continued what she had been doing all morning, namely strenuously objecting to this dangerous cross-town excursion.

"Are you crazy, endangering the life of your child like this? And for what? You know that there isn't one animal left alive at the zoo! This is the stupidest thing I have ever heard!"

"Oh mother, calm down," Edith replied, "It's a beautiful day; we haven't been outside in months. Tom really needs some fresh air. We'll be all right. I know someone who can take us across the river."

"And what about the marauding Russians?" her mother retorted, they'll rape you for sure, just like your sister last year; for crying out loud, don't be an idiot!"

"They wouldn't dare, a mother with a four-year old son. You know how kind they are to children. Besides, I know where I can find some potatoes, there is nothing left to eat in the house."

"And what if the Germans start bombing again? What kind of mother are you? you want Tom killed?"

But Edith wouldn't be deterred. They argued some more. I was getting upset. Why was grandma so mean? I *wanted* to go to the *Varos Liget* zoo! Just me and my mother for once. No son ever loved his parents more than I did. This love was compounded by the hardships of war and general misery, which threw families back onto their own inner emotional resources, often strengthening them. At age four, I admired and loved my mother Edith and his dad Jules equally. I found both of my parents more handsome, attractive and good than anyone else in the whole world. A few years later, I would often draw their portraits and show them off to my friends in elementary school. I would be shocked when some of them would react indifferently. I would wonder how on earth they could fail to appreciate my parents' unparalleled beauty and goodness.

The fly in the ointment was that I had to share these demi-gods with my two younger twin sisters - Susan and Elizabeth. Ever since they had come home from the hospital where they were born, they had been pests - always crying and demanding my parents' attention. They were stupid, too. Instead of using words, they babbled nonsense most of the time. You couldn't even play with them, and you couldn't tell them apart – they were identical! At times I wished that they'd go back to the hospital where they came from. Then, my mother, my father and I could live happily together, just the three of us.

On this day in early 1945, I was ecstatic because Edith was taking me to the zoo all by myself. As I looked at her getting ready to go, I admired her beautiful wavy blond hair, her dark red lipstick and her fur coat. I was sure that she was the most beautiful mother in the whole world.

Edith hopped on her tireless bike and took off, with me sitting in the tiny basket behind her. We rode down from our house on top of the Hill of Roses, the wheels' metal rims biting into the crunchy snow. A fine pair we were, with our ratty clothes and our galoshes, a mother and her tiny son riding a tireless rusty old bike through the desolate streets of the bombed-out city.

We got to the bottom of the hill and to the bank of the Danube. The grand river was practically frozen. Ice chunks the size of houses were slowly floating down toward the Black Sea, practically covering the river from one bank to the other. A popular sport among Russian soldiers was crossing the river by jumping from iceberg to iceberg. The participants in these contests were often drunk, and many died a horrible freezing death between the ice chunks.

To cross the river from Buda to Pest required a barge, since all of Budapest's ten majestic bridges had been wiped out by allied bombing, or by retreating Germans. A man named Laszlo took us across, carefully negotiating the monstrous ice chunks floating down the river. There was

a fee involved, but my mother's looks probably helped to reduce the amount significantly.

The trip to *Varos Liget*, following the long, wide Andrassy boulevard seemed endless to me, and my toes and fingers began to hurt from the cold. But I was a trooper. I didn't complain.

We finally reached the zoo. Edith stepped off the bike and took me down. As we walked up to the entrance, I saw my mother bend down to pick a small white object up from the ground. She stopped for a moment and manipulated the contents of the small object into a piece of paper, which she rolled up, lit up and began to smoke. I did not understand then that the only way my mother could enjoy the delights of a cigarette during the war was by collecting butts from the pavement.

Inside the zoo, I saw something I would never forget. Amidst the dilapidated moats and structures now practically empty of all animal life, there was still a sickly old polar bear, his fur more yellow than white. And near the bear, inside the compound, just across a small waterless moat, was a drunk Russian soldier clowning and taunting the animal! The bear was too old and sick to do anything but growl weakly at the intruder, who escaped unscathed.

After the zoo, Edith took me to the adjacent *Varos Liget* Square to show me one more thing. In retrospect, this seems to have been the main item on her agenda for that day. The square is a huge open space with a grand column rising in its middle and surrounded by eight enormous statues of the fierce Magyar warriors who founded the kingdom of Hungary. The layout is similar to Trafalgar Square.

Edith took me by the hand and we slowly walked across the square toward the monument. Standing at the foot of it, Edith pointed at one of the eight giant warriors. He sat menacingly on his horse, wore a fierce moustache and a magnificent horned helmet, and he brandished an enormous sword in one hand and a shield in the other.

Edith began to explain, "That is chief Sandor. He lived a long, long time ago, and he is the great-great-great-great-great... grand father of your dad. This is your family, Tom. It's a great and old family, and you are part of it. Some day you will be a big and strong man, too."

I didn't understand much of what my mother was telling me. I asked, "Am I going to be a warrior, too, with a big sword, like that man? (the idea excited me).

"Well, not that," she explained, "Men don't use swords any more. You'll be big and strong, though. You'll work hard and do many things in your life, and you'll be the best!"

## 4. 1944-1946: THE END OF THE WAR

The Russian counter-offensive reached Hungary in the winter of 1944/5. Budapest fell to them in February of 1945. I was nearly four years old.

The allied bombing raids had become a nightly occurrence. The planes always came from the West to drop their bombs on Budapest's industrial sectors located in Obuda, on the Eastern outskirts of the city. My entire extended family lived in a large mansion built by my great-grandfather around 1900 on Budapest's Hill of Roses, one of Buda's beautiful suburbs. It was a three-story house with a basement. When we had to run for shelter, we would quickly exit the family room on the second floor by way of the veranda and run down the outside stairway.

During most of the air raids, I was being carried and protected by Edith and by my grandparents. My father was rarely home. He was usually off on one of his secret missions. It would be many years before I would find out what these secret missions had been. During most

of the war, my father was a somewhat mysterious and imposing figure who came home occasionally and briefly, but who was absent most of the time. No one knew when or under what circumstances he would barge in. He would suddenly arrive at noon or at midnight, and there would be a great commotion. He would be carrying a bunch of mysterious packages, the women of the house would alert each other, saying, "Jules is back!" and scurry around the house to help him. Edith would ask him, "How on earth did you manage to get through? Thank God you are alive!" He'd smile and tell a long story about how he had used this or that trick. I could hear the stories, but I did not understand them. I had nothing but admiration for my great, tall, handsome father, who never showed anger or fear, always laughed and encouraged those around him by his calm and benevolent demeanor. I didn't know what my dad was doing out there, but I knew that there was a war and that my heroic father was somehow doing very, very brave things.

One of the first great Disney classics to which Edith took me after the war was Bambi. I was seven. After seeing the movie, I thought, "Yep; Bambi and his dad, they are just like us. A dad is supposed to be away, doing brave things. He is not supposed to be home with his kids. But a dad always loves his son. He teaches him how to become brave and strong."

One night, the sirens started blaring again. As usual, Edith and her parents grabbed the kids and began to hurry out of the family room. Grandfather Imre was carrying me. As we were running down the balcony toward the stairs, the sky was lit up by spectacular explosions. The air defense batteries were doing their best to shoot the planes out of the sky. I was mesmerized and, pointing at the explosions, I said to Imre, "Look grandpa! Beautiful fireworks!" Imre confirmed that the light show was indeed a firework, which made me feel even better. We hurried down into the stinking damp basement and spent the rest of the night there by candle light, kids, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, all huddled together and keeping each other warm under piles of old blankets and empty sacks of hemp, while the explosions were reverberating in the distance.

By 1945, Budapest looked like Dresden, Rotterdam or Munich, or any one of those other bombed-out cities, which have been depicted in so many photos and documentaries since then. Most of the city was in rubble and in ashes. There wasn't a single bridge left connecting the two sides of the city - Buda and Pest.

One day in late 1945 - the war had just ended, people were now rummaging in the rubble for food and whatever else might help them survive another day - My grandmother Margit was taking me somewhere across town. We walked down from the Hill of Roses to the Margit Square. This is a major hub located on the right bank of the Danube, and it is surrounded by large 6 and 7-story apartment buildings. Now, about half of these massive buildings had been pulverized, and many of those still standing were cut in half! Like the architect's model bisection of a building. You could see inside the people's living rooms and bathrooms. As we were walking by this odd and frightening sight, I pointed out to my grandmother some rooms way up on one of the upper stories. Inside them, there were people, trying to go about their shattered lives. I asked, "Grandma, what if those people fall down from their room?" She assured me that they were all very careful not to let that happen. Still, I wondered, "Why do these stupid people stay there? Why don't they move to a nicer house?"

The nightmare of World War II was always at its worst during the winter. Sometimes I thought that winter was the normal and natural condition. I had grown used to seeing the Danube

frozen, slowly carrying huge chunks of ice downstream, occasionally dragging the bloated bodies of German or Russian soldiers along. To me, all of this had become part of the familiar landscape. Being cold, always and everywhere, not just outside but also inside our unheated house - this too seemed the normal state of things.

However, spring and summer did arrive eventually. During the first two years following the war, I could finally begin to play outside, and oh what fun I had! Just outside of our backyard, on Bimbo street, a huge German tank had ground to a halt. The Russians had shot it out of action and its crew had either been killed or had escaped. Now, at five years of age, I climbed up on it, and then I carefully went inside. Although the cramped space was a mess, there were no horrifying human remains. So for a couple of seasons the German tank became my jungle Jim. I was terribly annoyed when the authorities finally hauled away the most fun toy I would ever know.

## 5. 1946. SOMOGY DOROCSKE, HUNGARY

The village was called *Somogy Dorocske*. It was so small and tucked away in the most backward part of rural Hungary that it wasn't found even on the best map. It is somewhere halfway between Budapest and the Yugoslav border.

During the first couple of years after the war, Hungary was ruled by an interim coalition government in which the Communists played a large albeit not overwhelming role. As in the rest of Eastern Europe which had now been overrun by the Russians, the Soviet takeover was gradual.

Because my parents had been good patriots in the struggle against the Nazis, the interim government rewarded them by giving them a farm somewhere in the outback, and they moved there in the summer of 1946.

There is something hauntingly beautiful about the great Hungarian/Eastern European plain, something I would never forget. Memories of this sad, distant and beautiful landscape are firmly engraved in the hearts of all Hungarians, wherever they live. When I saw the movie *Fiddler on the Roof* many years later, I instantly recognized that landscape. The *Puszta* - also known as the *Hortobagy* - is the best known part of the Hungarian plain. It has even become a bit of a tourist attraction, with its wide vistas and its colorful cowboys roaming on the plain.

The diminutive village of Somogy Dorocske was not in the *Puszta*, but it was in the great Eastern European plain - Southeast of Lake Balaton. The summers are long, hot and muggy. Fields of maize and green beans stretch to the horizon in all directions. Flocks of cranes fly in formation in the cloudless skies, and one can see distant villages with their Russian orthodox-style onion bulb church steeples on the horizon (even though Hungary is not a Russian orthodox country). A river moves lazily by the farms, each of which has that unique Eastern European landmark - a well, topped by a long, slanted wooden arm sticking skyward with a a bucket dangling from the top.

My parents, my twin sisters Susan and Elizabeth and I took the train at Budapest's Kelety Station, the one that serves the Southern lines. From there, the train took us to Kaposvar , which was the closest railroad station to our god-forsaken destination.

It took the steam-driven train the better part of the day to cover the 200 kilometers to

Kaposvar. It stopped incessantly to take on and let off a variety of farmers, veterans, gypsies and others, all carrying the meager belongings they had been able to save from the war. The cars were unbelievably overcrowded. Of course there were dozens of people sitting, lying and sleeping in the hallway and by the bathroom at the end of the car. Worse yet, some people traveled on the roof. Horrible things could - and did - happen to people who traveled that way. They could fall asleep and slide off the curving train roof, or they could be pushed off by others if there were too many people crowding the roof. Or, if they didn't duck for a bridge, a tunnel or a low-hanging tree, their heads could be chopped off.

My parents had traveled that way in the past. Luckily, the worst thing that happened to them was that they lost some of their bags, because they let go of them and the bags slid off the side of the car. Also, they would always get an awful lot of soot in their hair and in their face, from the spewing locomotive up ahead. They were always careful to sit backwards, so as not to seriously damage their eyes. Often the locomotive spewed not just soot, but sparks as well.

Fortunately, my dad had succeeded in cornering part of a compartment on this occasion. The only inconvenience was that we had to share it with a family of farmers and their two pigs. Susan and Elizabeth were afraid of the animals, but I had fun with them, yanking their tail and their ears.

At the Kaposvar station, Mr Nemet was waiting for us with his horse cart. He was a farmer in Somogy Dorocske, and he had been summoned to pick us up , and to assist us in settling on our new farm.

I could see that Nemet's horse was not in the best of shape. The sickly animal was so thin that its ribs were poking against its skin. It took the horse over four hours to cover the 20 kilometers to our final destination, even though Nemet was whipping it mercilessly during much of the trip.

Somogy Dorocske was indescribably primitive. It would be an understatement to say that conditions were Third World-like. As I remembered it later, it was much more primitive than, say, rural Latin America is today. There was no electricity, no telephone, no gas, no heating.

Our house had a thatched roof and walls and floors made of earth. Soon, my sisters and I developed a creative use for the house's dirt floor. We would pour water on it to make it soft and muddy. Then, we'd dig holes and build moats and castles of mud made *out of* the floor itself! Edith would get exasperated, saying, "Kids, I told you to go outside if you want to build sand castles!" Then she would undo the children's work and flatten the mud floor back to its regular shape.

Because my sisters and I were young, healthy and of strong stock, and thanks to our parents'constant efforts, we weathered the dirt and the lack of hygiene. Throughout our stay in Somogy Dorocske, we were covered with lice. So our parents shaved our heads completely, and drenched them in turpentine. We became accustomed to our bodies' oily stench.

The village consisted of one street, flanked by two rows of shacks similar to ours, and a church. The street was made of dirt, and there was a big ditch running parallel to it through the entire village, which was about 300 yards long. There was no telephone anywhere in the village, nor a post office. Cars were unknown. Money did not exist, there were no stores, there was no commerce. Neighbors just bartered with each other.

News from the outside world reached the village in an unbelievably quaint fashion. Once a week, the village was visited by an official-looking fellow on a horse. He wore a grey uniform and a grey cap and he had a drum. He would station himself in the village center and roll his drum. After the villagers were gathered around him, he would read the latest news to them and

enunciate the latest government edicts. This was a twentieth-century European official, yet he resembled a medieval town crier.

My parents went to Budapest periodically for supplies. This was always an enormous outing. First, they had to cover the 20 kilometers to the Kaposvar railroad station. Sometimes they could get a ride in Mr. Nemet's horse cart.

However, this came to and end when Mr. Nemet's horse died. I remember this well, because at that time my parents were taking me with them to the city. It happened on our way back, two days later. Mr. Nemet was waiting in front of the station to pick us up, as usual. We began the long trek back to the village, the horse walking more slowly than ever, and Nemet beating him more relentlessly than ever. After a while, the beast stopped walking, and simply stood there, heaving and foaming, despite Nemet's furious whipping frenzy. Finally, the horse collapsed on the road, tried desperately to breath a few times, and expired.

So we grabbed our belongings and walked the rest of the 20 kilometers to the village. From then on, the trip to Budapest always began (and ended) with a five hour walk to the railroad station. The children could no longer go along. During our parents' absence, we were taken care of by Marika, a neighbor farmer girl.

The government had also given us a small vineyard on the hillside next to the village, plus a couple of pigs. Edith and Jules knew as much about farming as most Americans know about Hungarian poetry - nothing. So the grapes didn't last long. We ate some, bartered some to the other villagers, and the rest perished. As to the pigs, we ended up slaughtering and eating them. Food was scarce. I had become attached to one of the pigs, naming him Jancsi (Hungarian for Johnny). I was sad to see him go, but this didn't prevent me from eating his remains, as hunger was a chronic condition. In fact, my parents made us drink Jancsi's blood, too, telling us that it would make us grow strong.

Food scarcity and starvation were endemic in Hungary and elsewhere in Europe at the end the war. Many people starved to death in 1945. Some of the newspapers featured gruesome photographs of skeletal corpses lying on city sidewalks.

One afternoon, a neighbor lady invited me into her house. Most adults in the village found me exceptionally cute, especially the women. I had an uncanny way of triggering their maternal instincts. (On the other hand, some of the older boys gave me a hard time, being spiteful precisely because some of the women took me under their wings). I usually had long curly blond hair blowing in the wind, although that summer my parents had shaved nearly all of it off, to combat the lice.

The neighbor lady told me that she had a gift for me, something very, very nice. I followed her into her kitchen. She opened a pantry, grabbed a jar and a wooden spoon, dipped it into the jar and offered it to me. I looked at a mysterious red gooey substance, and she said, "eat it Tom, it's really yummy." I did, and it was the most exquisite delicacy I had ever tasted. Never before had anyone given me such a treat. "It's called jam," she said, as I reached to her with the wooden spoon for another helping.

Food was such a central problem that the penal code declared no crime more serious than stealing food. You could murder someone and probably just do prison time. But if you stole food, the authorities would most assuredly hang you.

That's what happened to Mr. Nemet. I had never liked the ugly old man, especially since

I had seen him beat his horse to death. Then, I heard it from the bigger boys in the village: Nemet was hanged! They were all sitting in a circle in the dirt, talking about it excitedly. Being by far the youngest, I just stood in the back and listened, not saying a word. All I could figure out was that Nemet was hanged for stealing food, a large hunk of ham. The man had been hauled away by the national guard a few days earlier, and he never came back.

Yet my mother refused to let her children starve, so she had to steal food. She did this when she came back from Budapest on the train and started walking the twenty kilometers to the village. She would pick beans and other vegetables from the fields along the road, and stuff them in her bag to bring home. She risked Nemet's fate in order to feed her children.

Death, violence and cruelty were common. Once, some of the bigger boys took me inside the church and showed me a dead baby lying there. Another time, I saw dozens of villagers squatting and standing in a circle at the village center, watching, cheering and hollering: A bunch of village dogs were dismembering a pathetic live fox.

One of my scariest experiences was when some of the village boys sent a dog after me, for the fun of it. My mother had sent me to fetch some bread from a neighbor a few hundred meters up the main street. I was walking back home, clutching the bread to my chest. As I passed by a shack just a couple of hundred meters away from ours, I saw a group of boys, sitting around, chatting, not doing much. I knew that they were no good, because they had often taunted and teased me, sometimes saying things like, "Hey, girlie! You just play with your little sisters, don't you? I bet you play doctor, don't you?"

There was no way around them. There was only one street in the village, the filthy dirt street that served as the main thoroughfare. I picked up the pace without starting to run, which would show fear. They started to holler at me, saying things like, "Hey Tommy boy, what's that you are carrying? come on over here, let's see it."

I ignored them, which made them mad. One of the bigger boys had a dog with him, a mean-looking brown-colored mongrel of some sort, weighing probably no more than 25 kilos, but seeming more like 100 kilos to me.

The sadist sent the dog chasing after me, saying, "Go! Go Peri! Go boy!" whereupon the animal took off after me, growling. I began to run as fast as he could, which of course only encouraged the dog's hunting instinct. As the dog gained on me, I could hear the boys laugh and holler. Before turning the corner into our front yard, I threw the bread away. That did it, the hungry dog went for the food instead of me, and I ran inside, feeling as if my heart would explode. Edith was in the middle of the room, sweeping the daily mud and dust. She looked at me with a surprised and stunned look on her face, and I fell into her lap sobbing.

We stayed in Somogy Dorocske for about a year. After a while, my parents realized that they were not meant to be farmers, so they went back to Budapest.

## 6. 1948. LEAVING HUNGARY AND COMMUNISM