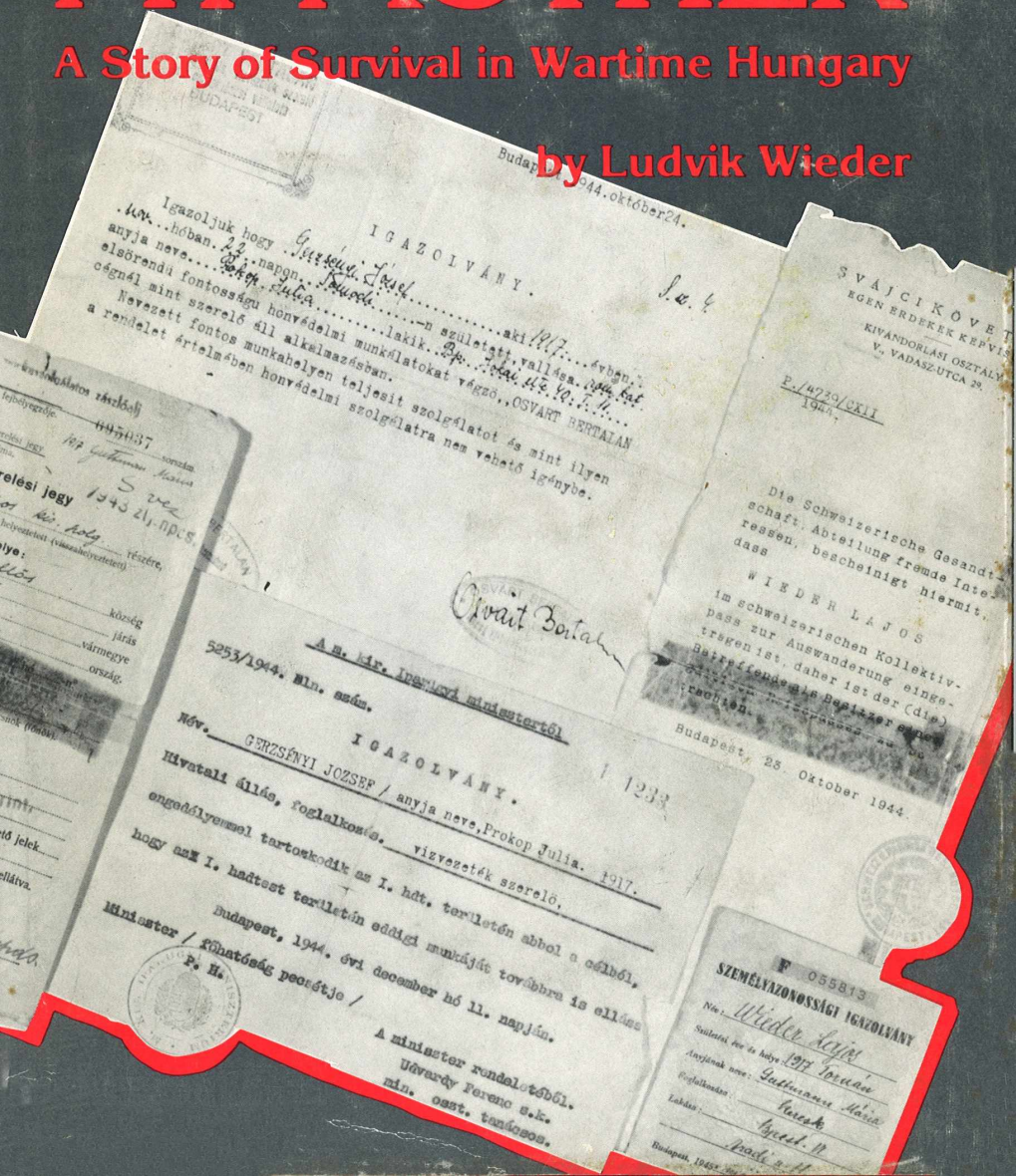
I PROMISED MY MOTHER

A Story of Survival in Wartime Hungary

by Ludvik Wieder



$12.95

I PROMISED MY MOTHER

A Story of Survival in Wartime Hungary

By Ludvik Winter

edited by Joel H. Cohen

This is the incredible story of a courageous young Hungarian Jew, who survived the ordeals of a labor camp and the Nazi occupation of Budapest, saving not only himself, but also his parents and a host of friends, relatives and strangers, from certain extermination.

At age 26, Ludvik had a growing business. Then, in the spring of 1943, the Nazis marched into Budapest and imposed repressive measures that threatened every Jew in Hungary. From that day on, all that mattered was survival.

Suddenly, life hung by a shred of paper—the proper "Aryan" identification. Determined to survive, Ludvik boldly entered the black market to buy those precious scraps of false identity that might save him and his loved ones from disaster. Soon he was living a double life, posing outwardly as a gentile, while at the same time clinging steadfastly to his beliefs. He became master of deception, posing as a trusted "gentile" factory employee, a drunken peasant or a member of the Hungarian S.S.

I Promised My Mother traces Ludvik's life, beginning with his carefree boyhood in Czechoslovakia. Then in 1940, after the Hungarian takeover he was inducted into forced labor. It describes the cruelty and black humor of labor camp, which helped him to develop the cunning and ingenuity that enabled him to sharpen his survival skills and avoid being sent to fatal service on the Russian front.

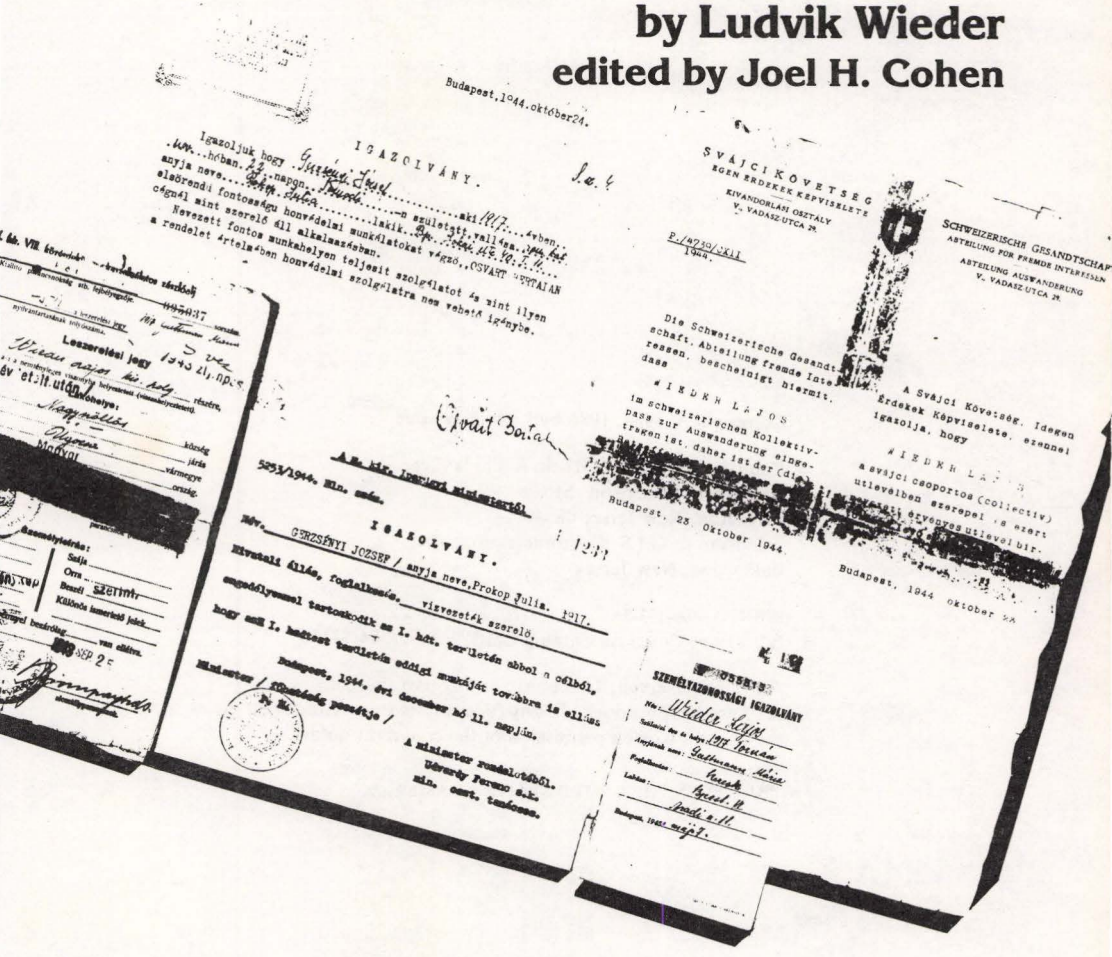
Armed with irrepressible optimism and unswerving faith in the Almighty, Ludvik never let fear keep him from doing whatever was necessary to save himself and his fellow Jews.

This remarkable and poignant testimony by a courageous survivor deserves to be read by anyone wishing to learn more about the dark era of the Holocaust. ELIE WIESEL

I PROMISED MY MOTHER

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by Ludvik Wieder
edited by Joel H. Cohen



Bristol, Rhein & Englander
Princeton, New Jersey

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Dedicated to the memory of my dear parents, whose abiding love and encouragement kindled in me the spark of determination and resourcefulness necessary to survive the Holocaust.

Contents

Introduction	
Country Boy	13
Hungarian Liberation	20
Labor Camp	25
A Promise to My Mother	40
Engagement	57
Budapest	64
Parade	66
Gentile Papers	71
The Rabbi's Warnings	83
Reprieve	87
My Guardian Angel	102
Reunion	116
Early Celebration	136
Knuckle Duster	145
The Second "Mrs. Szekeres"	153
Captured	162
'Tovarisch'!	180
Famine	186
Epilogue	199
Note from the Author	207

Introduction

Dreams and Nightmares

To this day, I have two recurring dreams. In one, I am posing as a gentile, an aryan, wandering around Budapest. People constantly ask me for my identification papers, so I stay out of the core of the city and head for the Skid Row section, where Jews are not expected to be. I grow tired of walking, so I take a rowboat from its mooring, and paddle down the Danube for many miles. Despite some boat traffic, I feel quite secure. No one looks at me suspiciously, but toward evening I return to my hiding place. If only I could stop the constant walking and paddling! I decide to ask a gentile friend to rent a room for me, a place to stay whenever I am too tired to walk or row. While other Jews are being hunted down in Budapest, I will remain indoors to relax and sleep.

The other dream has two versions, both beginning the same way. I am wandering in Torna, the Czechoslovakian/Hungarian village where I was born. I go through a narrow street and come to a hilly area, where I notice a cave. I want to enter the cave so I can be hidden from the view of passersby. When the dream is a good one, I manage to pull myself through the opening and go deep into the cave, where I can lie down and just relax, out of sight and out of danger. But usually the opening is so narrow that, as hard as I try, I cannot enter, and soon, I fear, the S.S. or the police will apprehend me. . .

So, although there are no concentration camp numbers branded on my arm, more than forty years later there are memories indelibly imprinted on my soul—memories I want to share with you, somehow to communicate what it was like to be Jewish in Europe under the Nazis, and perhaps to suggest what we can learn from that experience.

During the Holocaust, other Jews experienced far greater horrors than I did, others displayed far greater courage in resisting the bestial hordes who tried to exterminate the Jewish people. Numerous books have documented both the atrocities of the murderers and the heroism of those who resisted. These need no elaboration.

Yet I feel compelled to tell what happened to me and my loved ones during this incredible era. I believe every experience related to the Holocaust must be recorded for future generations, to impress upon them they must not "Leave it to the Devil." If you have only the faintest chance of escaping, try it. Don't just sit and await your "Jewish fate."

A second motivation in telling my story is to describe how much of an influence my mother was in my survival. I looked up to her as if she were God's angel. It is unfashionable to be a "momma's boy," yet I admit to that self-description without a trace of embarrass ment. Through my darkest days, I constantly reminded myself that I must always act to make her happy, and my survival was essential to her happiness. So I did everything possible to accommodate her.

By the time the Nazis were defeated, my parents had lost nine of their grandchildren, a daughter, a son-in-law, a daughter-in-law, twelve brothers and sisters and almost everyone of their friends. They, along with my other relatives and friends—some who perished and some who survived—are much in my heart as I recall the events of that tragic period.

But there was a bright aspect. Through a fortunate combination of qualities and circumstances, I was able to save not only myself but also some twenty others—relatives, friends and even strangers. *Chutzpah* and courage, intuition and ingenuity, determination and downright dumb luck all played a part. So did selecting the right times to be Jewish and the right time to be "gentile," and having the appearance and papers to prove it. Money helped, and so did those whose services it bought. But what pulled us through, as

much as anything, was kindness of gentiles—some of them total strangers, at great personal risk to themselves.

Whatever particular qualities of mine that helped me to survive were forged in an unlikely alliance of my parents' home and the labor camp, tempered by a constant faith in God.

All I thought of constantly was that my life and my parents' lives and the destiny of the Jewish nation, my people, were at stake—and I was not going to sit idly by, just hoping and praying. Every language has its way of expressing the same sentiment: in Hungarian, it translates, "Help yourself and God will help you."

The reader may wonder how, after nearly forty years, I am able to describe events and recount conversations in such precise detail. In 1953, closer to those awful times I call to mind here, I put down my recollections in Hungarian, and this book, in English, comes from what I recorded thirty years ago. I originally wrote my story so that my children would know what I and other Jews endured, and what human beings were capable of, both good and evil.

Since my story is fact and not fiction, all the names mentioned in it are actual. This is a story of that period, exactly as it happened.

To be sure, I was lucky to succeed where others, who tried harder and more heroically, failed. But I lived and learned a lesson: no matter how desperate a situation looks, no matter how heavily the odds weigh against you, never give up hope.

New York, N.Y.
June, 1984

Ludvik Wieder

Country Boy

I grew up in Torna, a small Czechoslovakian country town not far from the Hungarian border. The village, a very cozy, pleasant place, was made up of one-family houses and stores. Only two of the buildings had two stories—the City Hall and our place, a combination home and thriving retail textile business. My father, Baruch, and mother, Miriam, had five children—Armin, Margit, Josef, Jolan and me, the baby.

Of the village's two thousand inhabitants, about sixty of the families were Jewish, fifty-eight of them strictly Orthodox. As an observant Jew and the owner of a flourishig textile establishment, my father was president of the Jewish community and also occupied some honorary position in the administration of the village. The gentile population was made up mostly of farmers and tradespeople, such as shoemakers and tailors.

In those years, Czechoslovakia was a wonderful, wonderful country, as liberal as the United States. In fact it was nicknamed "Little America" for its industrialization and democratic idealism. It was thoroughly democratic, with a high standard of living and equality in all things for every citizen, regardless of nationality or religious belief. Its president, Thomas G. Masaryk, a friend of Woodrow Wilson, shared with the American president the idea of "one world."

In elementary school, we Jewish children mixed fully with the non-Jews, and I never heard an anti-Semitic word or experienced any anti-Semitic deed there. We were never made to feel different.

It was a very happy, sharing childhood. Because my parents worked in the store, we had a full-time maid, but as prosperous as we were, we were never permitted to flaunt our wealth. My brothers, sisters and I were treated as much as possible like all the other children in the town. We boys got one pair of shoes and one suit a year—for Passover—just like all the other Jewish children. We were never spoiled; we never got more in the way of toys than children of less affluent families. When I was twelve, I pleaded with my parents for a bicycle. My father could have well afforded it, but he'd never simply buy one for me outright. "You could give it to me," I suggested, "for the *afikoman*." I was referring to the piece of *matzoh* of unleavened bread the Jewish children customarily hide from their fathers at the Passover seder. Since the seder cannot be completed without the piece of unleavened bread, there is usually good-natured bargaining about an appropriate "ransom." He would not get me a bike for that, either. Then he came up with an idea. "Learn to speak Yiddish," he said, "and I'll get you a bicycle." I agreed to the offer—I probably would have agreed to just about anything—and, because there were no Yiddish grammar books in our village, I got some that taught German, which is close to Yiddish. I practiced for months; only when my father was satisfied that I was well on my way to knowing Yiddish, did I get the bicycle.

Even though my father was very strict with us, my dear mother was exactly the opposite. Maybe it was because I was the baby of the family that she treated me a little specially—but, whatever the reason, whenever I thought about my mother, I envisioned an angel. Whenever I had a fight or quarrel with someone else, I always went to her for comfort, literally holding on to her apron, and she would say, "Don't worry, my dear, I'm here, I'm with you." Whatever she suggested, I knew was best for me, and I obeyed. If I put her on a pedestal, there was good reason.

All through her life she did so much to help others—she gave freely of all she had, with the greatest humility, in the true spirit of charity as well as the deed itself. My mother's grace was such that her help could always be accepted without embarrassment by the recipient. She lived the basic principle of the Jewish faith: do good to others.

I could provide a hundred examples. For instance, in those days in our country, *schnorrers* (beggars) used to go from town to town

seeking alms, and frequently had to spend a night in our village, especially over the Sabbath. There would be nowhere for them to sleep except in a cowshed in most places. My parents decided it would be real charity to set aside a room in our home in Torna exclusively for these poor people. So they selected one of our larger rooms and installed in it four modern (for those times) metal beds for the itinerant beggars to sleep in, after they had eaten dinner with us.

As a rule, these beggars were none too clean, having wandered around for weeks at a time, sleeping mostly in horse stalls or cowsheds, and they consequently left their beds quite dirty and often infested with lice. Here is where my mother showed a special side of her charitable nature. Although she employed housemaids, she never expected them to clean up after our "guests." Instead, she herself went to tidy up the room after the beggars had departed. Then, every Sunday morning, I helped her carry the beds into the backyard, where we burned the lice, changed the bed linen, scrubbed the floor and disinfected the room to make it habitable and pleasant for the next visitors to our home. She wanted to make sure the next group of poor, unfortunate souls would have decent beds in which to rest their bodies. It was this type of deed that made me idolize my mother and later inspired me to fight for my existence.

The creativity that would help me through the years in labor camp and the Nazi occupation developed in me at an early age. When I was six years old, I began providing Friday afternoon entertainment for the twenty-five or thirty of my *cheder* (Hebrew school) classmates. Friday afternoons, being the hours before the beginning of our Sabbath, were free of classes, and I came up with the idea of creating and presenting a one-hour cartoon "movie" to entertain the boys and girls during this leisure time. With the help of a friend, Simon Bitterman, I worked nights throughout the week to draw forty or fifty cartoons to create a silly story. Then, at Simon's father's junkyard, we set up our "theatre," with benches for our patrons, and an opening in a pile of rugs for the "screen." We showed the cartoons, with me providing the commentary, to the apparent delight of our classmates, who paid an admission of about one cent each. Simon and I divided the proceeds. It must have been very funny, because none of the kids would ever miss a "movie" of ours.

Sometimes a real movie came to town, and our house, formerly a restaurant, was the only place it could be shown because we had a large hall on the second floor big enough for a wedding. Because the films were shown in our house, I always had free admission, and I memorized them all. The following Friday, Simon and I would act out some of the funny parts, mainly the slapstick of two favorite characters, Zooroo and Hooroo (one tall, one short), as they ran or fell or battled. Sometimes, my friend and I would imitate clowns we had seen in the circus. In clown costume, we'd start a fight, slapping and kicking each other. Then he'd "shoot" me with a fake revolver, and I'd pretend to drop dead. When he'd start to prepare me for a funeral, he'd fold my arms, and legs would shoot out to the side; he'd pull my legs together, and my arms would go out. It was a way of making extra money with good, clean fun—and, in a way, it was preparation for the creativity that some day would help me save lives.

As one could judge by the way my family took care of visiting beggars, helping a fellow Jew was a common custom in our household. We were probably the favorite stop of a village that was known as a productive way station on the *schnorring* route.

The beggars certainly were experienced in how to get around places and people, and their sophistication was celebrated in jokes we used to hear about them. One of the classic stories of the era told of an entire Czech village whose trade was begging. The fathers from this town would go begging from village to village, city to city, throughout the country. When a daughter wanted to marry and there was no money for a dowry, the joke went, the father would offer the prospective son-in-law his begging route as a dowry. "I know the name of every contributor in every village, and exactly how much you can expect from him."

Our real-life visiting beggars weren't very different. Not that their lives were easy, by any means. One embarrassment they had to withstand was registering with police. We were located on the Hungarian-Czech border, and any stranger coming into town was suspected of being a Hungarian spy. Consequently, he'd have to report to the police, giving his name, where he came from, and the nature of his visit, and how long he intended to stay. More often than not, the police were impolite if not abusive to them because they were poor beggars. Once registered with the police, the beggars would go from door to door, asking for a handout.

Once I got my bicycle, however, I did their work for them. The beggar would come directly to our house and settle down for a nap or a piece of *kugel* (noodle pudding) at our table. I'd take his identification papers to the police, reporting that this man just arrived and that he would be here until the next morning. (In Europe, especially the eastern section, at that period, it was imperative that everyone have proper identification papers with him at all times.) The police respected our family, and we were on good terms with them, so my delivery of the beggar's papers and my report about him usually satisfied the authorities. I'd then pedal back to our house with the beggar's ID papers, and go door-to-door asking alms for him. Within an hour, I'd cover the whole town, and give him whatever I collected. Because I was the son of the president of the congregation, the beggar would fare a lot better having me *schnorr* for him than he would on his own. People who'd normally give a beggar ten or fifteen cents would be ashamed to give that small an amount when I collected; instead, they'd give twenty-five or even fifty cents.

I'd repeat this procedure for every beggar who came. It was just one example of my being brought up to believe that if you can help someone in some way, you should do it, regardless of the inconvenience to yourself; I really think this paved the way for me to automatically try to help Jews in danger.

It was my father who would say to me, when a beggar arrived, "Come on, get the bicycle. Here are the papers." Both my parents were equally charitable, but my mother, as the saying goes, was a little more equal. She would always go a step further and do a little extra. She was something special.

For instance, in the three years I attended *yeshiva* (religious day school) in Nitra and Galanta, my father would send me 600 crowns the first day of every month to cover my expenses for dormitory, books and meals. I had made up a budget when I first arrived there, and 600 was just what I needed to cover school-connected expenses. I never appreciated the 600 crowns, because it was "coming" to me, that is, it was for the *yeshiva*. What I did appreciate, however, was the extra fiver or tenner my mother included in every letter, along with a note of warning: "You can not spend this on anything but candy, fruit or some other delicacy."

In our village, elementary school went to the sixth grade, then later to eighth. If you wanted to further your education, you had

to go to another village, where there was high school, and yet another one (Kassa) for college. The average Jewish child in those days would just finish eighth grade, attending religious school as well.

We'd go to elementary school from nine in the morning until three, later four, in the afternoon, with a 12 o'clock lunch break. When we were let out, the Jewish boys would run to *cheder* and stay there until seven or eight in the evening. In the summertime, when there was no secular school, we attended *cheder* all day. *Cheder* attendance began at age three, when a family would give the child his first haircut, leaving little *payess* (earlocks), and present him to the rabbi in charge. There, the rabbis were strict. We had to study hard for our weekly *ferher* (oral examination).

When we "graduated" to *yeshiva*, we found such strict discipline that I think it helped prepare me for what was to come. As an example, in Nitra there was an "awakener" who went from one house to another (where we students were renting rooms) and knocked on the window. We all had alarm clocks, but in order to prevent anyone from offering as an excuse for tardiness the fact that "I am poor, I don't have an alarm clock," the awakener would tap on everyone's window at 4 a.m. This was, even for young men engaged in Godly studies, an un-Godly hour. A half hour later, a "controller" came by to look in the windows of the *yeshiva* boys. If they were sitting and learning—studying their holy books— that was as it should be. But if one should be missing from that activity, the "controller" made a note of it. We gathered for morning prayers at 7 a.m. At 8:00, the rabbi took his place and led us in studies of *mishnayis*, a profound analysis of Scripture. And then he was presented by the controller with a list of those who had not been observed studying at 4:30.

"Wieder," the rabbi would say. "How come you didn't study this morning? Don't you think you're wasting your father's money? It's costing him a lot to send you here." If you made that list a second or, God forbid, a third time, you would be expelled from the *yeshiva*.

My carefree *yeshiva* days ended when I was approaching my eighteenth birthday, and my father summoned me. "I can't let you stay in the *yeshiva*," he said, "we need your help here in the business." It was customary in our family for the oldest son to work in the family business until he got married. Then the second son would take over until he married, and so on. My oldest brother,

Armin, had already married in 1933, and set up a business in Nitra. In 1935, the second son, Josef, had also married and established his own business in Torna, and it was my turn to enter the family business.

Our business had been established in Torna, long before the first World War, about 1880, when the town was under Austro-Hungarian rule. The operation belonged to my mother's parents, who entrusted it to their son-in-law after their marriage in 1907.

While my father served in the Hungarian army during the first World War, my mother carried on the business all through the war years, at the same time raising their five children. She proved to be quite a successful businesswoman, and when my father came home after the war, she stayed in the business to help him make a real success of it.

She was loved and well respected, not only by our townsfolk but by everyone in the surrounding villages, as well. For anyone who needed something special in a textile, such as material for a wedding gown or trousseau, she became a private consultant. People always entrusted her to fulfill their special requirements, and they had a great confidence in her judgment. Her excellent taste was widely celebrated.

My parents' reputation for honesty and integrity made them a respected couple among th townspeople and town officials alike. Almost evry day my mother would receive presents from the villagers. The local farmers seemed to consider it a privilege when she accepted their first red ripe cherries or their first fruits as a token of their appreciation for her good advice and consideration in accommodating their needs.

All in all, we lived a warm, comfortable life, but our idyllic existence would not last long.

Hungarian Liberation

As in all wars, "to the victor go the spoils," and so it was that at the conclusion of World War I, when all the treaties were signed at Trianon, parts of Hungary were given to bordering countries, leaving just the center under Hungarian authority. The great Austro-Hungarian Empire became a memory.

When Hitler managed to acquire Sudentenland from Czechoslovakia in 1938 without firing a shot, Hungary thought this would be a good time to reclaim its lost territories from Czechoslovakia. In order to accomplish this, Hungary became Hitler's ally. It was a profitable arrangement for both countries—Hitler needed a friendly country that bordered on Russia for his future plans, and Hungary was able to regain peaceably its territories that it had been planning to take back with force. Only poor Czechoslovakia lost in this deal.

Torna, originally part of Hungary until the end of the first World War, was a Hungarian-speaking village and ninety-five percent of the population was of Hungarian nationality. So when the Hungarian Army marched into our village in the fall of 1938, the villagers, dressed in their best holiday outfits, applauded the marching troops as liberators. Every house displayed a large red, white and green Hungarian flag, which the Torna residents had prepared as soon as they heard the news of Hitler's decision to return part of our country to Hungary.

My mother was hopeful at that time that everything would work

out all right, as she only remembered the days when Emperor Franz Joseph ruled Hungary in a very democratic way, but alas, it did not take us long to realize what we actually had lost on this deal, as the Hungarian regime, aiming to please its German masters, turned out to be as sadistic as the Nazis themselves.

About ten days after we obtained our "freedom," I came home one evening and found my mother in tears, and my brother and his wife in a state of shock. "What's happened?" I demanded.

"Papa," my mother wailed. "They took him away."

The others reconstructed the events. Two well-dressed young men had driven up in a black car, knocked on the door, showed badges that identified them as Hungarian secret police, and announced, "We are looking for Wieder, Baruch." (The Hungarians put the last name first.) When my father presented himself to them, they said, "We have some serious charges against you, and here is a warrant for your arrest. We're sorry but you have to come with us."

Despite my mother's protests and questions about where they were taking him and why, the agents said nothing more. They merely showed their guns and badges, before firmly escorting my father by his arms to the waiting car.

Because the men came from Kassa, the big city some thirty miles away, we imagined that that was where my father had been taken. So the next morning my brother took the first train to Kassa and went from one acquaintance to another, saying, "They *shlepped* (dragged) my father away. What should we do?" A friend suggested going to a particular lawyer, who could locate our father if anyone could. We engaged the attorney, telling him that, whatever it might cost, we wanted to know our father's whereabouts and what the charges were against him. A lawyer had the right to inquire, although it should be understood that in Hungary there was nothing comparable to the judicial system in the United States, where a suspect cannot be physically abused or forced to testify against himself, and is entitled to legal representation. A favorite procedure was to have a Jendamarine get into the suspect's cell and squeeze the man's testicles until the poor soul confessed. Picturing my father having to endure something like that made me physically ill.

One day passed without word, then another and another. My mother cried herself to sleep, while we children waited anxiously.

For all we could tell, my father was dead, one more victim of police brutality for God-knows-what crime he allegedly committed.

At the end of the week, the lawyer had news. "Your father is being held at the secret police headquarters in Kassa."

"Thank God," I said, relieved that at least we knew he was still alive. "I'll go to see him at once."

"Impossible," the attorney said. "They are charging him with such serious crimes, he cannot be visited."

According to the lawyer, the secret police had received a report that a Jew in Torna, named Wieder Baruch, had "collaborated" with the Czechoslovakians. What kind of crimes could my religious, law-abiding father have committed?

The only "collaboration" we had with the Czechs was a contribution I made to the Czech National Defense fund. Because I spoke Slovakish fluently, I always was the one to speak to the authorities. So when a Czech official came into our store (before the Hungarians actually took over) announcing that he was collecting money for the national defense, I took out five hundred crowns—which I thought was an appropriate donation—and gave it to him. He thanked me and went on his way, collecting door to door.

It was I, and not my father who had done that. Could *that* have been the charge against him?

"Much more serious I'm afraid," the lawyer said. "They're accusing him of buying an airplane for the Czech army."

My father? It was almost laughable, except that he still hadn't come home and he might be found guilty of this outrageous charge.

Reduced to praying and hoping that we'd hear good news soon, we spent almost three frantic weeks not knowing my father's fate. Then, one day, without warning, the front door opened. He stood there, a broken figure of a man, announcing, "Here I am."

"Papa," we shouted gleefully, embracing and kissing him, until we realized that the physical and emotional strain were too much for him. He was hardly recognizable. Twenty pounds lighter, he displayed welts and black and blue marks on his face and body that testified to the harsh treatment he'd received from the secret police as they tried to extort a confession from him. They'd beaten him, tortured him, robbed him of his dignity and broken his spirit. Yet, there was still a semblance of a legal system in those days; the

Nazi idea that a Jew could be put away indefinitely, executed, or tortured to death without cause had not yet taken hold. So once they were convinced he was innocent of the charge, they sent him home.

But he remained under emotional stress, and the Hungarian Jendamarines capitalized on his fragile spirit. "How are you, Mister Wieder?" they would ask, before taking him on the side to warn, "You know, you're being watched, and we have certain reports against you. Of course, we don't believe them, but the reports are there and we'll have to investigate them." They made no follow-up to these comments, but they left my father shivering in fear.

And, by curious coincidence, the same Jendamarines began calling regularly at our store with their wives and daughters to buy wholesale quantities of textiles on credit. "Write it down, we'll pay you," they said, and even though my father knew they would not, he was too frightened to resist.

"Just give it to him," he would tell my mother and me. "Whatever quantity he wants, let him have it. Just take the name." He said it listlessly, lacking the will to do anything that might inspire another arrest on false charges. Giving away textiles was my father's way of trying to buy off the Jendamarines.

Matters got worse. In the spring of 1939 we were notified by the Hungarian government that our license for carrying on our textile business, which we had run for over forty years, was no longer valid and we would have to apply to Budapest for a new license. It was a rule that everybody in the country who carried on any kind of trade or manufacturing business had to have a license, even a shoemaker or grocer.

In our town, there were about sixty Jewish families licensed to engage in various businesses and trades. They were all compelled to apply for a renewal, but fifty-eight out of the sixty were marked "rejected" when the reply came back from Budapest.

Two months later, the authorities closed all the Jewish stores and enterprises in the "freed" country and forced all storekeepers to give up their shops and sell their merchandise to the new aryan owners for next to nothing, which consequently left most of the Jews without any kind of existence.

After our shop was closed, my sister Margit invited me to live for a while with her and her family in Nagyszollos, another terri-

tory that was turned back to Hungary. While my hometown Torna was a small village with very little opportunity to learn a trade, Nagyszollos had a large population and opportunities to match. Since I would no longer be able to make a living as a businessman, we thought I would retrain myself and learn to work with my hands, and perhaps gain employment working for someone else. We naively thought that the Hungarian authorities could have no objection to that.

I really crammed a lot of work into the one short year that I lived with them, learning several trades, which came in very handy in later years: first, custom shirt-making and photography from professionals and then how to make liquors and cosmetics, from my brother-in-law Adolf, who was a chemist.

But, before I was able to put my new-found skills to use, I was drafted by the Hungarian army in the spring of 1940.

Military service was an accepted fact of life in Hungary, and I registered and took my physical examination without any qualms. My family, including my mother, took the developments in stride, for if the Hungarians hadn't come in, I probably would have been drafted by the Czechs for two years of army service, and so it was inevitable.

Classified the equivalent of 1-A, I was notified that I had been drafted for the Hungarian Army's Corps of Engineers, which had the responsibility for building bridges and roads. But six months went by before I was called up, and then it was not for a regular army unit, but for an exclusively Jewish labor force. The Hungarian authorities had decided that Jews would not be allowed to have guns. In fact, all Jewish soldiers already serving with the regular army were discharged and transferred to the newly formed labor force.

I rationalized that if I had to perform military service, it might work out better for me to be part of an all-Jewish group than to be one of a handful of Jews among almost all gentiles.

Labor Camp

All Jewish males between the ages of eighteen and sixty were ordered to report. My father was fifty-five years old at the time he was called in, and even though he suffered from bleeding ulcers, he was sent to work with his unit in Sarospatak, where they were repairing a highway. Those older men were never checked out by a doctor to see if they were fit for the work. All had to go; there were no exceptions.

My draft call indicated that I should report to the Corner Castle in Munkacs. Corner Castle had previously been the headquarters for the Hungarian Secret Police, where political prisoners were held, and where, prior to the labor camp call-up, many Jews, arrested on trumped-up charges, had been held. Our living quarters in the castle were primitive. We were billeted in empty, windowless rooms, and we slept on dirt floors, with no straw to lie on. Fortunately, we stayed there only a few days. After the first 250 recruits arrived we were shipped to Chust, a Czechoslovakian city that the Hungarians occupied in 1939. There, we were billeted in regular army barracks and given three meals a day.

I was one of the few men who could not bring themselves to eat the non-kosher food, and I soon got tired of subsisting on just bread and black coffee. So one night I decided to risk going into the city in hopes of buying fruit, extra bread and a prune paste called *lekvar*. Coming back I was caught by one of the guards, who took my name and ordered me to report in the morning. When I did, the company commander meted out the punishment

and it was a beauty known as "*guzsbakotes*," which to the officers was only a minor punishment.

"This is what happens when someone disobeys regulations," one of the officers told the assembled company, just before demonstrating the procedure on me.

I was made to sit on the floor, knees pulled up against my chest. With my arms wrapped around my knees, my hands were tied in front of me and a broomstick shoved under my knees so that it pressed down my forearms and crushed my stomach; I could hardly breathe. In this position, you could last about three minutes before losing consciousness. When you did, the non-commissioned officer would douse you with a pail of cold water to revive you, and then have you go through it again. This punishment was repeated three times.

There was a punishment to suit every occasion. Another, which was seldom used, was known as "*kikotes*," consisting of tying the offender's hands behind him with a rope and then pulling him up over a rafter or a tree branch, where he would hang by his hands. It took only a minute or so before the person being hanged lost consciousness.

One Rosh-Hashanah night, Hirsh, a strong, young comrade of ours, was caught for some minor infraction, and was given this punishment. His hands bound behind him, he was lifted to a tree branch and hanged by the hands. A minute later, his head flopped down, he was unconscious. They lowered him to the ground, poured water on his head to revive him, and repeated the process, until he lost consciousness again. They let him down, revived him with water again, and strung him up once more. After the third time, he was set free.

It was terrible to behold and, as we watched this medieval cruelty, our blood boiled. Stationed at each corner of the square in which two hundred of us sat viewing the spectacle were two soldiers with guns drawn. It would have been foolhardy to take any action or even suggest it, so we sat literally gnashing our teeth at this "New Year's present."

Our assignment in Chust was to work in a stone mine from sunrise until sundown, chopping stones out of the side of a hill with pickaxes and heavy hammers. Though we had not done this kind of physical work before, we soon got used to it.

After laboring there three months, we were taken back to Mun-

kacs, where our group was disbanded. The older men were sent home for the winter and I was transferred, with some other young men, to Kassa where special units of young Jewish men of military age were being formed. There, we were organized in a regular army battalion under a new command of officers and for the first time were issued used Hungarian army uniforms, together with blankets, straw sacks for sleeping, canteens, and all the ordinary equipment of a Hungarian soldier except guns. Seven hundred of us, the equivalent of an army battalion, were sent to Estergom, a military training camp, for seven weeks of standard basic training. Considering how we had started camp life, this training was quite normal. We were trained in all kinds of military maneuvers, except that we used shovels and pickaxes instead of guns.

We soon learned tricks of our trade. For instance, we were taught how to slide our hands up and down the handles of our pickaxes and shovels, to avoid calluses even after ten hours of constant work with our tools.

Although the training was hard, we were quite content because we were treated like regular army recruits. After seven weeks of training, we were sent back to our central headquarters in Kassa, and a few days later, in February, 1941, two hundred of us were transported to a small Hungarian village, Sajoszentpeter, to do some "very important" military work.

We were assigned a new superior by the name of Milakovics, who adopted the Nazi ideals and did such a satisfactory job of harassing Jews that he was soon made a lieutenant and commanded the entire labor camp headquarters for that region. He'd say, "My lungs are boiling," and expect two hundred men to go scrambling to bring him water in their canteens. He selected for our living quarters an old, broken-down school that had been closed for ten years because of danger of collapse. The walls and floors were covered with green mold and mud, and the stench of rotten grass and filth was so strong that I really don't know how we managed to sleep there for the next four months. In spite of the fact that we worked in the fresh air all day, we were pale and asthmatic-looking.

Our assigned project here was to take apart the concrete foundation of a demolished army base and remove from the concrete the heavy metal wires used in the construction of the foundation. We were approximately two hundred young men, each of us armed

with a heavy sledgehammer, with which we hammered away at the concrete all day to extract the wires. It was such a waste of energy; I don't think we produced more than ten percent of our keep, which was very small to begin with.

Marching back from the work site at the end of the day to the barracks, we had to pass through the main street of the town, and we were made to sing vulgar army songs to embarrass us in front of the decent villagers.

In the spring of 1941, we were shipped back to central headquarters in Kassa, from where we were reassigned in groups of forty to various cities where the older men were recalled for work. By this time, we younger ones were experienced workers, knowing exactly how to handle our tools, so ten young men were assigned to each group of forty older men to lead the way in any work.

My group was sent to Mateszalka, and from there to the Hungarian-Yugoslav border. Our transportation was always in cattle cars attached to regular passenger trains, but fortunately, the fifty of us assigned to a car were not packed in as tightly as were the poor souls deported to the concentration camps. We usually had a few benches and some straw on the floor, which offered a little bit of comfort during the long journey. The trip was never direct to our destination; we always had to wait for a passenger train that was going to a major city in our general direction. There, we'd wait again until they could find another train to which ours could be attached. Therefore, what should have been a twelve-hour trip could take many days, even a week.

This time our new work project took us to Stanisic in Yugoslavia. Just as our part of Czechoslovakia had been given back to Hungary by Hitler without war, so had the northern part of Yugoslavia on Hungary's southern border. Yugoslavia and Hungary had been staunch enemies for many years, and Yugoslavia had constructed a very well-built defense line, similar to the French Maginot Line, as protection against any possible military incursion by Hungary. It was this defense line, many, many miles long, that we of the Jewish slave labor force were sent to dismantle. The job was originally started by the Corps of Engineers of the regular army, who, of course, were issued proper working tools, all in good condition. But we Jews got old, rusted tools to work with. Old, rusted tools and our bare hands. Our job was to cut all the barbed wire, miles and miles of it, then twist the broken ends

together and roll them up into large bales—all to be shipped to the Russian front for a new "defense line" along the Russian-Hungarian border.

The first line of barbed wire was four rows wide, and fastened to steel posts imbedded in thick concrete. Then about one hundred feet farther came a second line similarly built, but wider and taller, and five rows deep. Beyond that were heavy concrete bunkers with walls approximately six to eight feet thick, reinforced inside with heavy steel girders. Each bunker had at least three gun holes framed in solid steel, one in the front and one on each side. These bunkers were built about a hundred yards apart for the entire length of the border. About seventy yards behind the line of bunkers were the tank traps, made of very deep sloping trenches filled with water. The trench, of course, was not visible to the tank driver, and once the tank fell into the trap it came up against a solid concrete wall fifteen feet deep. There was no possible way for a tank to extricate itself.

Our first job was to dismantle both sections of rusted barbed wire, and then each steel post holding the wires had to be extracted from its concrete base. The wire had to be joined and rolled into bales, and the steel posts assembled and cleaned of all the concrete.

Another group of Jewish laborers was assigned to dismantle all the bunkers, which meant breaking up the concrete with heavy sledgehammers, extracting the steel rods and preparing them for shipment to the Russian front. The entire defense line had been built on farmland, which they wanted restored to its original condition to make it suitable for farming. To accomplish this job, they brought in about five thousand Jewish laborers from all over the country.

On the first day, our group of two hundred men marched out to the work site and given a demonstration by the Engineers on how to cut the wires and reassemble them. We were told that a group of twelve Engineers were able to clean up a length of one hundred meters (equal to about one hundred ten yards), and we would be required to do the same. We were broken up into four groups of fifty each and assigned to clear away a total of four hundred meters a day. If we had been issued new, sharp clippers like those the Engineers had, we might have been able to accomplish our daily quota. However, each group of fifty men was issued eight old, rusty, dull

clippers, which managed to cut through only after continued effort at each spot.

At the end of the first day, our new commander rode out to the work site on a magnificent horse to inspect the work done that day. Although we had made a supreme effort to prove ourselves, we couldn't possibly finish the total amount we were assigned to do. He ordered that we remain on the field as long as it would take to complete our assignment, even if it meant staying until the next morning, when we would have to start on our next day's quota.

At first we thought that he'd come back in a short while and say he was joking and that we could make it up the following day. But that announcement never came. Realizing he was serious, we sent two men into the village to buy a supply of candles and matches, we worked all night by candlelight. Weary and hungry since we had no supper, we snipped the wires and twisted them together into the wee hours of the morning. It no longer paid to take the five-mile march back to the barracks, so we slept in the cornfield that night.

By the end of the week we had picked up speed and were able to complete our quota by 8:00 at night and go back to the barracks. Luckily, there was a small lake next to our quarters, so at least we had a chance to wash after a hard day's work.

We barely became adjusted to satisfying our commander when the second week he came up with a new surprise. He raised our quota by twenty-five percent to an impossible five hundred meters a day for each group of fifty men. Even our immediate superiors, the corporals assigned to watch us, were aware that we would never accomplish this much work in a day, and they were very irritated because they could not leave to visit their girls until we finished our work and were back in our quarters.

We had to think of something practical very quickly, in order to solve our new problem and still obey the new order. We decided that, even though the assigned length of wire had to be cut, we would bury all the left-over wires we could not finish binding together by 5:00 p.m. With the blessings of our corporals, every morning as we started work, two of our men were sent into the cornfields, which were adjacent to our work area, to dig a grave large enough to hold the excess wires. Long wires require less time to bind together, so it was all the short wires that we piled up, and buried at the end of the day. Later on, as the corn grew higher, we

didn't even have to bother burying them; we just made big piles, flattening them as much as possible, and carried them into the cornfield.

This way everybody seemed to be happy. We managed to get back to our quarters in time for supper with less effort; the corporals had time to spend with their girls, and our commander, who was oblivious to our trickery, probably received a gold medal from Budapest for getting so much work out of the Jews. We just felt sorry for the poor farmers, who had sown corn seeds in the spring, and would be harvesting bales of rusted iron wires the following fall.

We were really very lucky to finish this project just before harvest, for otherwise we surely would have been found out, and suffered dire consequences. We were also very lucky to have escaped any serious blood poisoning, because we were working in just shorts and shoes under the burning sun, and every time we snipped the very tightly strung, rusted wires, the release of the tension caused the barbed wire to recoil and scratch us painfully. While the Engineers worked with special gloves, we did all this with our bare hands, and by the end of the day had accumulated enough wounds to make our hands look like a mass of polka dots. The only protection against infection was a bottle of iodine we all carried in the back pocket of our shorts.

As the fall of 1941 approached, the older men were sent back to their homes, and we younger men were returned to our original military post at Kassa. We were not given much time to relax. As soon as all the boys from the various commands came back to Kassa, we reformed our original battalion of about seven hundred men, and were shipped out to the part of Rumania that the Hungarians, with Hilter's blessings, had claimed in 1940.

At the village of Also-Repa, we were billeted in private homes —three to eight boys to a family. I was assigned with three other boys to a farmer who had a standard one-family house consisting of two rooms, with thatched roof and dirt floors. In one room was a long table, covered with a pretty embroidered cloth and a loaf of twisted bread at one end. This room was opened only once a year when the local priest came to bless their food. The second room, of medium size, provided sleeping, cooking, and living accommodations for the family, and it was in this room that we had to sleep. The room contained two beds pushed lengthwise against the rear

wall of the room, about four feet apart. One bed was occupied by the farmer and his wife, who was the town midwife. The other bed was used by their son and young daughter-in-law, while a baby slept in a cradle next to the bed.

My three buddies and I slept on the floor between the two beds. Adjacent to the farmer's bed was a two-burner wood-burning stove. Opposite the stove on the other side of the room was a heavy round table, whose top had six carved-out indentations that served as substitutes for plates. All food was placed in these bowl-like wells.

The third corner of the room was reserved for the family's goat and two sheep, which lived in the house in the winter, behind a low gate. The fourth corner was rented to six Rumanian laborers, who also slept on the floor in the house. We were one big happy family and as congenial as possible under the circumstances.

Our assignment was to build a railroad thirty-five miles long to connect the cities of Szeretfalva and Deda. Six days a week we arose at 4:00 in the morning to the sound of reveille blown from the center of town. Each morning, one of us went with a pail to the kitchen next to our commander's office and brought back our breakfast of black coffee. By 4:30 a.m. the second reveille sounded and the entire company had to assemble outside the office for roll call. Then we began our five-mile march up into the hills, where we worked cutting through the mountains, sometimes forty to fifty feet deep, to make a roadbed for railroad tracks. All our work was done with pickaxes and shovels.

For two months everything went along smoothly, and our commanding officers were satisfied with our progress. But as winter approached and the ground froze solid, work became impossible because as our tools hit the ground it was as if they had struck steel and the handles of all our axes and shovels snapped. Even though our production was nil, our officers insisted that we make the march to the job site in deep snow, and attempt to work each day until dark.

Our guards (one private, one corporal and one sergeant named Hajdu) who had to endure the hardship with us, soon realized it was a ridiculous situation, and agreed to allow us to build a large bonfire as soon as we arrived at the work site. There we sang and tried to keep warm all day. It was necessary, however, to show the commander that we attempted to work, so five of us would take all

the pickaxes and shovels and break all the handles against a large rock. There were twenty boys working in the village doing nothing but replacing the broken handles.

Despite the bonfires, we had several cases of frostbite every day, because of the subfreezing temperatures. Our shoes had holes, as did the gloves of those of us lucky enough to have them. There was often not enough wood for a fire, and we ran back and forth in order not to freeze. During our usual half-hour "official" lunch break, four boys from the kitchen staff brought us a warm soup and a piece of salami or some marmalade. We were given a loaf of bread every second night at suppertime, and we carried whatever was left in our knapsack.

One bitter cold morning, my buddy Ernie Weiss, who slept next to me, surprised me by suggesting that I stay "home" and keep warm while he would answer for me at roll call. This, of course, was a dangerous undertaking for both of us—it would have meant the *kikotes* punishment if they caught us. But we thought that if it proved successful this time, we could take turns, covering for one another. I agreed. Since the roll call took place early in the morning when it was still dark, all he had to do was answer to my name, the magic word "*Parancs*" which means "Present" in Hungarian.

The scheme worked the first day, so we decided to do it every day, alternating one for the other. Names were called alphabetically and since we were both "W" and our names were only three apart, we trained ourselves to change our voices quickly and consistently. *Parancs* in a high voice when one name was called, *Parancs* in a deep voice when the other was called. I can still do it to this very day, just as we had practiced.

As usual, there was always one more problem we had to solve. Because our commander suspected that some of our boys might be sneaking back to their quarters at mid-day, he ordered a spotcheck during the day at the homes where we Jewish "soldiers" were billeted. Our Rumanian landlady, who hated the Hungarian authorities, was very sympathetic to us, and she suggested that whoever stayed home go to her sister's home only two houses away, and remain there for the day. There were no labor campers assigned to her sister's tiny house and, therefore, it would not be subjected to the daily inspections. This we did. Being able to rest every second day was a great relief for both of us, and we continued this pattern for the next two months without being detected.

One day when we marched to work, instead of our regular overseer, Sergeant Hajdu, with whom we had become quite friendly, a different commander, Sergeant Dalmi, decided to come with us to oversee our work. We all hated this man because of his past cruelty to us.

When he realized that the ground was still frozen solid and we could not do any digging, this genius came up with a bright idea to keep us busy. Sergeant Dalmi commanded us to go up the hillside and clean up all the frozen snow, so that when spring arrived and the sun shone, the ground would be clear of snow and the earth would soften faster. We all ran up the hill and started to shovel and clear the snow, but because he wanted to show his power and authority over us, he decided that we were not working fast enough. And, to make us feel like fools, he ordered that everybody somersault down the hill.

A command was a command, and we all knew that Sergeant Dalmi did not joke when he talked to "his Jews," so everybody somersaulted down the hill on his head. Everybody, that is, except me. From the time I was a child, I could not do a somersault, and when I tried, I lost my balance. But I wouldn't dare not obey his command, so I rolled down the hill like the other boys, except that I did it on my side.

How he noticed me among two hundred boys rolling down a hill, I still don't know, but notice me he did. When I reached the bottom, Sergeant Dalmi immediately called me over, and I ran to him and stood at attention. "Did you hear my command?" he asked. Before I could explain, he raised his arm and punched me in the face with such force that he knocked out a front tooth. Then, while I was still stunned, he commanded me to go up the hill and come rolling down on my head. I fell unconscious in the course of my somersaulting descent, but there was plenty of ice-cold snow for my friends to bring me around with when I reached bottom. He was not a big man, and my anger was so intense that, if not for his pistol, I would have tried to tear him to pieces.

Disturbed at this case of brutality in our unit, even our regular guards suggested that I report the incident to our battalion commander. The next morning I showed the commander my missing tooth, but he was indifferent. He just ordered one of our men who doubled as the company dentist to replace the tooth, and that was the end of it.

From the time of that event, my situation became more difficult because now I was recognized as the one whose front tooth had been knocked out. I could no longer hide in anonymity, no longer take every other day off for fear that Sergeant Dalmi might decide to come up to the hills with us, and miss me. Luckily, the weather was a little warmer now.

In the beginning of March the snow began to melt, the ground became workable, and we could show some productivity once more.

The five-mile march back and forth was not very pleasant. Because there were no roads for us to walk on, we trekked over the melting snow with water seeping into our worn-out shoes. Imagine our existence—little food, little sleep on dirt floors, hard labor, poor treatment—often freezing cold and we could now add to our growing discomfort suffering with wet feet all day. Nevertheless, we never lost our sense of humor; some of the boys suggested that we cut holes in our shoes to let the water escape.

As difficult as labor camp often was, the strong religious faith of those of us who were Orthodox helped to sustain us and give us the will to go on. Some of those who had lived a more secular life were not so fortunate.

In early April 1942, we were scheduled to be shipped from Rumania, to an unknown destination. We were marched twenty miles to the nearest railroad and, because there were no accommodations that night, we slept in the field near the tracks. At the morning roll call, everyone answered "*Parancs*" (present) to his name, but one—Bergida. The sergeant called the name several times, but there was no response. After roll call, we began looking around, expecting to find Bergida asleep, but suddenly, one of the boys who had gone around the side of the railroad depot shouted "Quick! Come here!" We ran toward him and immediately saw what he was shouting about: the body of Bergida, hanging by his belt from a tree. Bergida, a fine, well-educated boy from a secular background, apparently could not take any more of the terrible treatment and, seeing no end to it, killed himself. A group of comrades buried him near the tree.

Soon after the burial our (cattle car) train arrived and we started to get on board as though nothing had happened. We were once again in the cattle cars on our way to a new destination. We never finished our work on the railroad bed. As a matter of fact, in all of

the three years that I was in forced labor camp, we were never given the chance to finish a job and get any credit for all that back-breaking hard labor. We were always interrupted in the middle and taken to a new project. Our commanders never told us in advance where they were taking us, on our own we were able to determine only that we were rolling back into the mainland of Hungary. We travelled for six days, with nothing to eat except bread and marmalade.

When we finally reached our destination point, we jumped down from the train to find that we were in the city of Veszprem, one of the important military centers in Hungary. We wondered whether the Hungarian army was now in such bad shape that we were to be re-trained as a military unit, but soon learned that we were still laborers. After marching several hours, we arrived at the now-famous village of Szentkiraly Szabadja, which will be remembered by thousands and thousands of Jewish laborers as one of the most undesirable places they had ever been.

From the village, we marched about ten miles into a forest, where we were instructed to settle down. This forest, we were told, would be our new quarters for the next several months, but we assumed our commanders were only joking with us. After all, for the past twenty months of labor camp, we had always been given a roof over our heads—if not a house, then at least wooden barracks or a stable, something to shelter us from the elements. But here we saw nothing but trees all around us, and as it turned out, if there was a joke it was certainly on us, but we weren't laughing. It appeared we would have to live with no shelter but what nature might provide.

By this time it was late in the day, and the eerie shadows cast by the trees as dusk turned into evening made us feel even more chilled than the mid-April weather normally would. Our commanders returned to the comfort of the village, leaving us with two or three guards for the night.

The night air was still pretty cold, and the earth of the forest, not yet warmed by the sun, gave little comfort under our bedrolls. But tired and exhausted after the long march, we settled down to sleep under the sky. The fresh air, and the aroma of the blossoms of the young trees served as a tranquilizer to help our weary bodies to a good night's sleep.

In the morning we were told by our commander that he was go-

ing to request army tents for us, but it would take about six to eight weeks for them to arrive, and if we wanted some shelter he would give us the morning to construct something for ourselves as protection against the weather. Had they provided us with some wood or other building material, we would have done very well in short order, but we were not even given proper tools with which to utilize what nature had given us. All we had were our shovels and pickaxes, with which to hack away at the tree branches. Ernie worked with me until we had enough branches and leaves to make an Indian-style wigwam. We didn't even have straw to fill the sacks of our bedrolls or to make pillows, so we had to use dried leaves, which were good for about two or three days until they were soaked by the frequent spring rains. We slept on the soaked, rotten leaves until the sunshine came out and we could exchange them for fresh, dry leaves.

In our ragged clothing and worn shoes, we started our work the afternoon of the day following our arrival. Divided into three groups, we were ordered to start building an airport on a clearing between the forest and the village. The first group would prepare the ground for the runways, the second group was assigned to build hangars and the third group, mine, was to build a stone road from the would-be airport to the village of Szentkiraly-Szabadja.

Aside from our regular commanders, who were with us for our entire tour of duty and with whom we had grown somewhat friendly or accustomed to, we were given a detail of Engineers, similar to those we had in Yugoslavia, to oversee us. The Engineers were well-known for their toughness and, while I don't know how well they did when confronting the enemy, they surely did a superb job of making our lives miserable. In fact it was their idea that we live under the open skies for two months before receiving the tents that were ordered for us.

We were totally restricted to the forest area, and could not venture into the village, even on Sundays, when we were off. In the past, we had been able to receive food parcels from home to supplement our diet, but here, even that was denied us. The loss of these parcels was especially difficult for us because they had begun to feed us a new type of food imported from Germany. Actually, "food" is a generous description for what looked like burned semolina and tasted absolutely vile. We were fed this twice a day, seven days a week. They even replaced our alternate day allotment of

fresh loaves of bread with stale, old, mouldy loaves.

Hooked up in the field kitchen was just one small faucet, from which the entire battalion drew water. This water in our canteens served both for drinking and washing. It appeared that the only preparation made for our arrival in the forest was the laying of exposed pipes at various field kitchens set up for each battalion.

Thanks to our new diet, our entire battalion developed acute diarrhea, which almost became fatal to all of us. The boys who were stricken the first few days were taken to the city hospital, but in less than a week all of us were affected and we could hold no food or even water in our stomachs. We became so weak that we didn't have enough strength to go to work; we just lay in our improvised shelters hoping to die peacefully. Luckily, when our battalion doctor became aware of the situation, he ordered that we not be given any food for the next three days, just tea and a few drops of opium on a cube of sugar three times a day. After a few days of this treatment, we began to feel better. Soon our old food supply was restored to us, including fresh bread, replacing the food imported from Germany.

Gradually we regained our strength and, except for a few boys who developed kidney trouble from sleeping on the ground for two months, were able to go back to our routine work. The boys with kidney problems were sent to a hospital for treatment. Thanks to our youthfulness, there were no fatalities.

We lived in the forest for more than six months without seeing even one civilian. The months went by slowly, as we did our daily routine of marching out to the work site every morning, working, and returning after work to our tents. My job involved sitting on a mat all day, laying stones next to each other and hammering them into place, a task I actually became quite expert at.

Our only time to relax was on Sunday, when, if we were lucky, and if weather permitted, we were marched about six miles from our quarters to Lake Balaton for a swim. Otherwise, we played cards or wrote letters to our dear ones at home.

The regular military service in the Hungarian army was for a period of two years. It was now the middle of August 1942 and our two years were just about up. Since we were officially considered regular army units, our commanders told us that we might soon be discharged. The few aryans who were our guards and had been drafted about the same time had already received orders to write

home for their civilian clothes, and every day we anxiously awaited the same order.

Being an optimist all my life and wanting to give my parents some good news for a change, I wrote them to start packing my civilian clothes because any day now we would get our discharge orders. My mother, being wiser than I in the ways of the world, was not so optimistic. In her answer to my letter, she told me that my clothes were ready but that she would not believe I was coming home until I was actually there. I was quite disappointed with her reply, because during the entire two years of my service, it was my mother who kept my spirits high. It was she who, through her letters, gave me the strength and courage I needed to endure all the hardships. Her faith in God and her optimism that I would soon be home kept me going.



My mother.

A Promise to My Mother

Only later did I realize that she was trying to protect me in case of disappointment. She was well aware that the Hungarian officials could not be counted on where we Jews were concerned, and she did not want me to take my discharge for granted. How right she was! In the early days of September, 1942, while we were in the midst of our work, the bugle sounded and the company marched back for a roll call. We were very excited, of course, because nothing could disturb the work schedule unless it was very important.

We were sure the roll call meant we were getting our long-awaited discharge orders. We all stood at attention before our commander while he read a telegram. It contained a request from Lieutenant Milakovic, the commander of the entire battalion, that a company of two hundred and forty men be sent back to headquarters at Kassa, from where they would be sent to the Russian front.

Before we could recover from the shock, our sergeants began selecting the tallest and strongest boys from our battalion of seven hundred and fifty men. Being six feet tall, I was among the first selected. My friend Ernie was also picked. The rest of the boys were ordered back to work while our names were registered for this new assignment, and we were given the afternoon off to rest. Since I was not going to be discharged, I was proud to be a part of this handsome new company of tall, strong young men. Luckily, Lieutenant Hering, the nicest officer in the leadership, was appointed as the commander to accompany us to Russia.

At that time the Hungarian army was in pretty good shape, fighting alongside the advancing Germans. There were no reports of casualties yet, because the Russian army was still retreating, so the fact that we were going to be among the first of the labor force to be sent to the front didn't bother us too much. At least we would have a change of scenery, which couldn't be worse than where we were, and most important, I would no longer see the face of Sergeant Dalmi, my personal enemy.

The day before we were to board the cattle cars once again to take us back to Kassa, Lieutenant Hering suggested that we write a nice letter of "good-bye" to our families, notifying them of our new assignment. When I sat down to write I suddenly felt a terrible melancholy and bitterness. It had been only ten days since I had written to my parents about readying my civilian clothes for my discharge. Now I had to let them know that my chances of coming home were nil, and, to top it off, I was being sent to the battlefield in Russia.

I decided that rather than send a letter to my parents, when we arrived in Kassa I would take a chance and sneak out of the barracks and telephone them, or—better yet—go home to see them. The village where my parents lived was only twenty-five miles from Kassa. Several other boys who lived near Kassa had the same idea, so we got together and asked Lieutenant Hering to give us three-days leave to say good-bye to our families. We told the lieutenant we would leave the forest a few days ahead of our group and travel on a high-speed train, returning in time to join the group when it arrived at the Kassa railroad station from the forest. Even though he sympathized with us, he was afraid to grant this officially because his name would appear on the pass, and if one of us decided never to return, he would have to answer to the head commander in Kassa. However, he said, he would close his eyes to our absence as long as we promised to be back on time.

Ernie's parents lived about one hundred miles from Kassa in Tisza-Polgar, so we decided that he should go home first, and I would cover for him at roll call, and when he came back I would take my turn.

The Talmud teaches us that when you are on a journey to execute a good deed, no harm will come to you, and since both Ernie and I had studied Talmud, we comforted one another with the thought that nothing would go wrong since we were going to see

and give respect to our dear parents. By the time our company arrived at the railroad station in Kassa, Ernie and all the boys who went AWOL were already there and nobody was missing when Lieutenant Milakovic did the official roll call at the barracks. After roll call, we were told that it might take several days or even weeks before our company would leave for the front. Milakovic didn't want us to become lazy during this waiting period, so he arranged a new job for us. Every day our company was marched up to the hills of Banko, which stretched out on the edge of the city, to repair a road leading up to the hill.

I decided that if I was ever going to get home, it had to be now. The day after we arrived at headquarters in Kassa I left for home, knowing that Ernie would cover for me as he had done in Rumania.

Torna, where my parents lived, was only a one-hour journey by train, so I could really make the round-trip in one day, but I told Ernie I would like to spend at least one night with my parents to make them happy.

When she saw me, my poor mother just stared at me, as though witnessing a miracle. Her face was immobile, rigid with shock. Then, little by little, the tears started flowing down her sad, pale but beautiful face. I think she cried more from her intuition of trouble than from our happy reunion. The last time I had come home on an unofficial visit was a year earlier when we were being shipped to Rumania.

I didn't know how to tell my parents about our new assignment. Since I didn't have any good news to tell them, I tried to ease into it by telling them how right they had been not to anticipate my release, and that our discharge had been postponed for a while. Not wanting my parents to be concerned about my being AWOL, I told them that we all had received a two-day pass, and that, instead of going back to the forest, we were to report to our staff command in Kassa. From there, I said, we would most probably be sent to the Russian front.

As soon as my mother heard the words, "Russian front," she began to cry, more bitterly than I had ever heard her. Ordinarily, she was the most self-controlled person I had ever known; always satisfied with her fate, she never complained. Many times during my two years of labor camp when I had complained to her about mistreatment, she would comfort me with a beautiful letter, urging

me to be patient and have faith in God, because, she said, God would take care of those who have faith in Him. My mother had never suggested to me that I try to hide or escape or do anything that was against the law. This was the first time I saw her lose her self-control. She became hysterical and pleaded with me not to go to the front. I tried to explain to her that we were not going to the battle line because we had no guns, and that conditions in general were bound to be better for me as we had a new commander and I would not have to face Sergeant Dalmi any more.

None of my words could calm her down; I couldn't make her stop crying; not until I promised her with a handshake that I would not go to the front did she calm down. Of course, I had no idea how I would go about keeping this promise, but a handshake was a solemn pledge, and for my mother I would move mountains.

At that time, of course, we didn't realize the danger we would face at the front, but mothers are endowed with special intuition where their children are concerned. How my mother knew I was in mortal danger if I went to the front, I'll never know—after all, our armies were advancing with no casualties to speak of and, anyway, we had no guns, so we felt sure we wouldn't be in the line of fire. But she sensed the danger I was facing and, for the first time, asked me not to obey the law, and avoid going to the front.*

I left my parents' home a little more sober than I had arrived. Any light-heartedness I had felt about my new orders had quickly vanished, and I spent my return trip comtemplating the enormity of the promise I had made to my mother, but keep it I would. To disappear from one's company in peacetime was punishable by a stiff prison sentence; disappearing from a company designated to

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* Unfortunately, her premonition proved accurate, because from my company of a select group of two hundred and forty boys not a dozen survived. The casualty rate was equally high among the two other companies subsequently sent to Russia. One of my comrades, David, who lives now in Brooklyn, New York, came back from a Russian labor camp in 1946, four years after he had been sent to the front, and told me that most of the boys died of hunger or were shot dead by the retreating Hungarian and German soldiers, and that the rest of them, including my best friend Ernie, had perished in Russian captivity. David told me that Lieutenant Hering was with him in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp, and many times David helped him to get some food, but later on they were separated and he didn't know whether Hering survived.

go to the front during a war, could bring the death penalty. But *"I promised my mother."*

When I got back to the barracks I told Ernie about my pledge. He was disappointed because, at best, he would lose his closest friend at a time when a good friend meant a measure of security, and, at worst, it would mean severe consequences for me if caught. I decided that I would try every legal means to get out, and if I failed in that, then I would try to escape and go into hiding.

Before I left home, my father suggested to me that I enlist the help of a close doctor friend of his who lived in Kassa. It was easy to slip out of the barracks at Kassa; all I needed to do was crawl through the fence, and take off the yellow arm band worn by all labor campers. So after supper I sneaked out to see my father's friend. I told him about my promise and asked if he could help me fake some illness that would make me appear dangerously sick.

He suggested that I try a phony kidney infection. First he instructed me as to all the symptoms of kidney infection and as to what spot in my back would supposedly hurt, since I would have to be able to tell the army doctors exactly what was bothering me. Then he prescribed a heavy oil (balsam), which I was to drink six hours before any anticipated urine check by a doctor. The next day I managed to buy several bottles of the oil from different drug stores, and went to see the doctor again that evening. He gave me an injection of milk, which he said would cause me to have a high temperature in the morning. I went back to the barracks the same way I got out, and about 3 a.m. drank two bottles of the oil, holding my nose so as not to smell the terrible aroma of the balsam that I repeatedly belched forth. It's amazing what human beings can endure when they are determined.

By seven in the morning, when it was time to get up and go to work with my company, I had a high temperature and reported sick for the day. We had four Jewish assistant doctors in our battalion, one to each company. Medical students previously, in labor camp they were assigned to be assistants to our battalion doctor, a captain who was, of course, an aryan. Every morning one of these medics checked out anybody who reported ill and, if the person had fever, he just put him on the sick list and held him for examination by the doctor at 9 a.m.

Since I had a high fever, it was no problem to get on the sick list. When the doctor examined me, all the symptoms indicated that I

had a kidney problem and so he told his assistant to check my urine. The urine test showed a slight kidney infection, and the doctor prescribed a strict diet and ordered me to come back in two days for another urine test. The night before the second test I went back again to my doctor friend in the city for the milk shot, and once again I drank the heavy balsam oil, although I thought I would die from it. My stomach could not digest it, and it kept coming up. Still, a promise is a promise. There's an expression in English, "Necessity is the mother of invention." In this instance, you could say my mother was the necessity of my invention.

After the second urine test, my condition showed no improvement, so the doctor ordered that I go to a nearby military hospital the following day. He gave me a slip of paper instructing the hospital as to what kind of tests they should do on me. Needless to say, before each test I went to get my milk shot, and then had a good dose of oil for a midnight snack. When my turn came for examination at the hospital they asked me for a urine specimen and told me to come back in two hours for the results. When I returned I was handed an envelope to take back to my company doctor.

Of course, I couldn't wait to get out of the hospital grounds and open the envelope to read the report. I was not very knowledgeable in medical terminology, but I could understand that the three tests our doctor had asked the hospital to make were all marked negative.

Very disappointed, I went straight to my own doctor to show him the report. He explained that while the initial test of the urine was a simple one and showed positive results indicating kidney disease, the more thorough hospital tests involved boiling the urine, and those came out negative. So all of the effort and agony of five days went to naught.

Having learned in the last two years not to give up so fast, I asked my doctor what to do next, and he suggested two possibilities: first, that I prick my finger just before I go to the camp doctor, and when I was asked to give urine, that I squeeze a drop of blood from my finger into the container. Blood showing in the urine, he said, can pass the more thorough tests. My second choice, by far the more difficult, was to find a man with a genuine kidney infection and to mix some of his urine with mine. This, of course, would pass all tests.

Naturally, I decided on the first option. After all it doesn't take

much to prick one's own finger, especially if you're big and strong as I was. Compared to drinking the oil, this would be a piece of cake. Anyway, it would be nearly impossible to find someone with the illness, and, even if I did, to let him in on my secret would be dangerous.

My immediate problem was what to do about the hospital report, which I could not possibly show to the battalion doctor. I decided not to take it back to camp, and not to report sick. Instead, I would just go to work for at least a week until my case was forgotten. After all, the battalion doctor had at least twenty to thirty cases a day to care for, and I figured that if he didn't see me for a week he would forget about the hospital report.

Although we had been in Kassa two weeks, luckily the train to take us to the front still hadn't arrived. In the meantime I went to the city and bought several needles, of various types and sizes, and even a few razor blades, and started practicing how to prick my finger to draw blood. I practiced for two days, trying to cut my finger deep enough to squeeze out some blood, but I just couldn't hurt myself. I became so obsessed with trying to prick my finger that I decided to stay out of work for a day to continue practicing and went so far as to sneak out at night for a milk injection so that I would have fever in the morning, thus justifying staying in the barracks for the day.

What happened next is almost too incredible to believe, but I assure you it is the truth. While I was lying on my straw sack, still trying to gather enough courage to prick myself, one of my buddies, by the name of Deutsch, came over to me to say good-bye because he had just received his discharge papers and was going home to the city of Munkacs. I asked him why they were discharging him and he said "Don't you remember, Wieder, when we were in the woods in Szentkiraly Szabadja in the early spring and we were sleeping on the wet leaves, I developed a kidney inflammation and was sent to the hospital? Well, I was there for over two months. Then I was sent back here to Kassa on sick leave until now, and, since they can't seem to cure me, I'm being discharged and sent home."

I guess my strong faith in God was being rewarded, because this was like a miracle. I asked him, "Deutsch, just before you go home, would you do me a favor?" "Why not" he said. I asked him for a sample of his urine, and Deutsch was in such a hurry and

so excited about going home that he didn't even ask me why I needed it. He just asked me for an empty bottle, which was easy enough to provide from my supply of those that had contained the balsam oil. Within minutes he was back with a bottle full of his infected urine.

Once I had the right ingredient, I rushed to tell my doctor about my newly acquired "fortune." He took a small sample of Deutsch's urine and did a quick test, which verified that my friend was really very sick. Just a few drops of his urine in my specimen would definitely show up positive in a test.

The next problem to overcome was how to get Deutsch's specimen into mine in almost full view of the company doctor without him noticing it. I went to the drugstore and bought eye droppers, which I realized had to be inconspicuous and yet placed so that the droplets would fall directly into the glass into which I would give my specimen. I opened my trousers and examined the waistband, and saw that the facing that lines the waistband could be opened. I removed some of the stitches on both sides of the fly front at the waistband and slipped a dropper in on each side of the waistband and then sewed it up again. The pressure top of the dropper would be hidden in the waistband and just the open tip of the dropper exposed where the facing meets the fly front. The doctor thought this was an excellent idea, and gave me another injection.

In the morning I started the whole process all over again, reporting to sick call with fever and a pain in my back. Handed a glass for a specimen, I went to a corner and managed to empty the contents of the droppers into the glass along with my own urine. I could see that it worked because, when the assistant doctor made the initial test, the urine turned brown, similar to the color of rotten eggs, and I could see on his face how sorry he felt for me when he showed the specimen to the battalion doctor. Repeating the routine we had gone through ten days earlier, I was sent once more to the military hospital for a thorough check-up.

The morning I went to the hospital I made sure that both droppers were fully loaded with the infected urine that I kept in my footlocker. When I was called into the examination room, a sergeant handed me a glass and commanded me to urinate while he stood over me. This was very unexpected, but I didn't panic. I made believe that I was trying hard to force it, without success. "Okay," he said, "come over to the faucet and drink five glasses

of water." Jokingly, I asked him "Isn't that too much, Sergeant?" But he was not joking and gave me a sharp slap on my face and commanded that I now drink *ten* glasses of water. I jumped to attention and said, "Yes, sir," and started to drink full glasses of water while he counted. I was at about the fifth glass and ready to burst when someone from the next room called him away.

This was the moment I had been hoping for. I immediately squeezed the contents of both droppers into the glass, plus everything else I had to offer. By the time he came back, the glass was half full and he remarked with a grin, "You see, I knew exactly how to make you do it." Then he said, "Okay, now you can sit outside and wait for the results."

Every minute in the waiting room seemed like an hour. At last, my name was called and once again I was given an envelope to take back to the battalion doctor, which I opened as soon as I left the hospital. Each of the three different tests was marked with the magic word: *positive.* With great satisfaction, I rushed back to the barracks and handed over the envelope to the Jewish medic. The head doctor who came to the barracks in the morning to check the sick list, had already left for the day. The medic looked at me with much sympathy, and said, "You know, Wieder, I'm afraid you have a serious kidney infection. You had better go back to your billet and keep a very strict diet, as the doctor ordered, and come back tomorrow morning to see him." Seldom has a patient regarded such bad news with such relief.

In the evening I paid another visit to my city doctor for the milk shot, and in the morning, running a high fever, I was presented to the doctor along with the results of the hospital tests. The head doctor ordered that I keep the diet he had prescribed and get a lot of bed rest.

Two days later at 5 a.m. we had a reveille, and everybody, including all the sick, were ordered into the large backyard for a roll call by none other than Milakovic, the top man himself, so we knew that this was something very important. He ordered all the boys to stand at one side of the yard and instructed that everyone who heard his name called walk over to the other side of the yard and yell "present" along with his mother's name and the year of his birth. A table and chair were placed in the middle of the yard to make sure there would be no cheating.

The roll call was proceeding very slowly and he was very

thorough as he made notes on his lists. Because my name starts with "W" and the roll was called alphabetically, I figured there would be plenty of time before I was called and, having a postcard and pencil in my pocket, I sat down next to a fence and began to write to my sister in Nagyszollos. I wanted to notify her that I was probably going to the Russian front, and in case she and the family didn't hear from me for a while, she could make inquiries about the whereabouts of my company from the parents of two boys from her city who were in my company.

In the midst of writing my postcard, I heard Milakovic's voice yell "Wieder, Lajos." I jumped up, running over to the other side screaming "Present," my mother's name, Guttman, Maria, born October 16, 1917. Suddenly, I heard him scream at me, "Wieder, Lajos, you come over here!" I presented myself at the table, and jumped to attention before him. He asked, "What's in your hand?"

"A postcard and pencil, sir."

"Can I see that postcard?"

I handed over the card, and he began to read it aloud. Then he said, "You scum, do you think you are going with this elite group to the front? You will go to hell, not to the front. You are a sick dog, and I will never let you go with this select group. You will stay right here, you aren't going anywhere."

His insults were like sublime music, but I just snapped to attention again and said, "Yes, sir." By the time the roll call was finished there were two more "very sick" boys standing beside me, Donath and Stern. Then Milakovic ordered the entire company to report to the quartermaster to be issued brand new uniforms, as well as new shoes, because tomorrow the company would leave for the front. To the three of us, he sneered, "You, you sick dogs, you will not get new uniforms because you don't deserve them."

Among the entire company, only Ernie knew about my secret. Later that day in the barracks, several of my close friends came to me to express their regrets that I was so sick and had been ordered to stay behind. They felt truly sorry for me. No one envied me for staying behind because no one, including myself, knew what was awaiting them out there. This time, I was smart enough not to rush to the telephone to notify my mother about what was happening, just in case.

The boys were all very excited, convinced that from the next day

on, everything would be better because Hering would be in command again. I had mixed feelings all through the day. It wasn't easy to say good-bye to all my friends; after all, we had grown quite close during the past two years, as close as brothers, and I knew what it meant for Ernie to have to say good-bye to me. Who would cover for him at roll call? On the other hand, I had made the promise to my mother, and she meant everything to me.

That next crucial morning the alarm sounded very early, and all the boys started packing to get ready for the march to the railroad station. Suddenly, a corporal asked for two volunteers who were not in the group going to the railroad station, to go to the home of one of the sergeants to chop wood for his oven in preparation for the winter. In these barracks there were always about one hundred boys of different status floating around. Some were assigned to work in the camp as cabinet makers, shoe makers, office workers, etc., and others, like myself, who were sick and didn't have to report for work. But that morning, for the first time in labor camp, I *volunteered* to go to work, just to get out of the barracks legitimately. The second volunteer was Stern, who was thinking along the same wave-length as I—not to be present when our company left. After I said good-bye to Ernie, Stern and I were marched off under a corporal's charge, to the sergeant's home, where, as never before, we worked diligently all day.

At 5 p.m. we were taken back to the barracks. When we left in the morning it had been busy, bustling with noise and excitement, and now, abruptly, it had become very quiet and lonely. The company was gone, and I felt such emptiness in my heart that I wanted to cry. I had something to eat, and then went to the city to call my mother and tell her the good news. She had won. I also visited my doctor to thank him for his help.

What to do next? Persist in my deception and continue to go to the company doctor until he got tired of me and gave me a discharge? Too risky. I was afraid that Milakovic, who was very tough and not very generous, would probably send me to a hospital for treatment, as had been done with Deutsch, where I would be confined for a long period. This would mean that I couldn't leave at night, and, without the milk shot, I would have no fever. Also, it would not be so simple to mix the urine, especially since the odor of the infected urine had grown very strong. I decided not to stretch my luck any further, but just to sit tight and wait.

I sorely missed my stand-in, Ernie, who was always willing to cover for me while I was doing my rounds in the city, Now, however, because I didn't belong to any specific group, and there was no roll call, I could still come and go through the fences. I managed to visit my parents several times, taking the morning train and returning in the evening. My parents, relieved and very happy with the situation, hoped that, since I had completed the required two years of regular military service, I would soon be discharged and come home permanently.

But after hanging around the barracks for about three weeks, it appeared that my luck was about to change and that fate was now going to catch up with me. Without warning, the second company from Szentkiraly-Szabadja arrived with Lieutenant Dunai and Sergeant Dalmi in command. It seems a request had been made for another company from our battalion to be sent to the front. So, a second unit was formed from among the less strong boys, who had been left in the forest the first time, and now they were in the barracks at Kassa with me, awaiting transportation to the Russian front. The three of us who had been left behind when the first company went were automatically transferred to Company 2, and I realized that I was in a worse position now than I had been four weeks earlier. Most of my friends were gone, and I faced the possibility of being sent to the front under Sergeant Dalmi. Not wanting to upset my parents, I didn't mention anything about the latest development to them.

My most pressing problem was that I had no more of the infected urine. I immediately wrote a special delivery letter to Deutsch, asking him to send me a small bottle of his urine in a sealed box to the address of a cousin of mine in Kassa. I explained to him the urgency of my request and asked him to ship the specimen to my cousin by special delivery, immediately.

Every day for four days I anxiously visited my cousin to see if the parcel had arrived, but each time I came back emptyhanded. Communication by telephone was not as easy in those days as it is today. Very few people had phones, and in order to contact your party, you had to know someone in his neighborhood who had a phone, call him and ask the favor of calling your party to the phone. One other way, which was even more complicated, involved going to the main post office of the city, where the central telephone offices were located. You would ask the operator there to call the main

post office in the city in which your party lived, and have them send a message to the person you were calling. The message would specify that you planned to be at your post office at a certain hour of the day, and requested that the person you wanted to reach be at his post office at the same time to receive your call. Sometimes, after all these complicated arrangements, your party wouldn't even be there at the scheduled time.

Once more, I went to my cousin to see if the parcel arrived, but it hadn't. Since the weekend was approaching, I realized that I could wait no longer and that I must take the chance of traveling to Munkacs to see Deutsch and get the urine myself. It was a journey of about six hours by train, and to go AWOL was quite dangerous, but I couldn't wait for miracles. So on Sunday, I left the barracks through my secret way, and walked to my cousin's apartment. There, I changed from my uniform to civilian clothes and went to the station, hoping that I would not be stopped by a policeman and asked for ID papers.

I arrived safely in Munkacs around 10 p.m. There was an express train going back to Kassa at midnight, so I had two hours to complete my task.

Even though Munkacs was considered a big city in those days, with a population of about thirty-five thousand, there were no taxis at the station. I hired a horse and carriage to take me to the address and wait for me about half an hour to take me back to the station. There were no door bells at that time so I knocked on the windows of the Deutsch family house until I got the attention of my friend's mother. When I told Mrs. Deutsch my problem, she let me in and woke my friend, who once more gave me a bottle of his urine. He told me that he had received my letter, and had immediately sent me a bottle which evidently never arrived. I told him briefly what I had accomplished so far with his help and, after thanking him for all his trouble on my behalf, I left. By 8:00 Monday morning I was safely back in my billet with my fresh loot.

In order not to lose any more time, I visited my doctor on Monday night and, by Tuesday was on the sick list once again, with a high temperature. I went through the same trials and tribulations that I had five weeks earlier, except that being qualified as seriously ill, I was now taken off the list of Compay 2 on orders from the battalion doctor. Company 2 didn't stay in Kassa more than two weeks before being shipped out to the Russian front to join Company 1.

Having escaped the second transport, I ventured out to visit my parents once again, describing with relief what had happened to me since my last visit.

With the second company gone, we were on our own again. We didn't belong to any group and could come and go through the fences and do pretty much as we pleased. This happy state lasted for almost three weeks until, one morning the sound of the bugle summoned everybody for roll call. Milakovic had received a request from the high command to send seventy Jews to Satoralja-Ujhely to do some work for the Engineers.

To make his quota, he collected his Jewish office staff, as well as our shoemakers and cabinet makers, and those of us who were sick. This new work site was only fifty miles from Kassa, and everybody, including me, wanted to go, for two good reasons. First of all, in Kassa we were in constant fear that if there were to be yet another request for more men to go to the front, we would probably not be lucky enough to escape it again. Second, we were still hoping to get discharged one day soon, since our two years of service were behind us, and it was our feeling that when the time came, it would be easier to get discharged from inland than from the front. So, although we all had bad memories of working with the Engineers in the past, we all volunteered as one man for this new adventure.

Milakovic decided we could make the fifty-mile journey to Satoralja-Ujhely on foot, and he dispatched a private first class and a corporal to walk with us to deliver our group to the Engineers. He had sent along a huge horse-drawn open wagon, big enough to carry a hundred footlockers, but it carried only two—those belonging to the two soldiers accompanying us. He had given strict orders that none of us Jews could put any of our belongings on that truck. As we walked through several villages, all the farmers laughed at the grotesque picture we presented: two footlockers sitting in the center of this large truck, while seventy tired soldiers *shlepped* their heavy footlockers in their hands. To the Hungarian peasant, with his ingrained anti-Semitism, it seemed only fitting that we Jews be humiliated in this fashion.

The first night, we rested our tired bodies in a cowshed in one of the villages. After two days of marching with our bedrolls wrapped around us in the usual fashion and carrying those heavy footlockers, we arrived at our destination exhausted. We were greeted by a special sergeant of the Corps of Engineers, Sergeant

Oswald, whose only enjoyment seemed to be in making our lives miserable.

We were billeted in an abandoned building near the railroad station and were restricted to quarters at all times, except when we were taken to work. Our daily program began at 6 a.m. when reveille was sounded and, after dressing quickly, we were marched to the Engineers' barracks for a breakfast of black coffee and bread, after which we began our work, which consisted of moving large pontoons to a village called Borshi, seven miles distant. The pontoons, which were oversized and therefore very heavy, were fastened on long horse-drawn carriages. This would appear to be not too taxing. But the horses were in the stables and, after we arrived, that's where they stayed. We became the horses!

In order to demoralize us, and create a spectacle for the population as we passed through the main street of the city each day, we were made to pull those carriages. Eight men were assigned to each carriage, three on each side pushing, and two in the front steering the long wooden handle. We pulled these carriages laden with the heavy pontoons to Borshi, where the Engineers had a large base next to the big river in that village for training recruits to build pontoon bridges. All day at Borshi, on our shoulders we carried the pontoons, as well as the wooden planks laid across the bridges. At day's end, we dismantled the bridges, reloaded the carriages, and pulled them back again to the city. I could never understand why we had to take those carriages back and forth each day, when they could have been left at Borshi, the only place they were used. Perhaps it was done for the enjoyment of the people who lined the streets to watch us and see what their heroes could do with "the Jews."

Later, when winter came and the river froze, we were relieved of this exhausting job, because they couldn't train the recruits until the spring thaw. We stopped going to Borshi, and instead worked around the yard of the Engineers' barracks in the city doing repair work on pontoons, building new pontoons and cleaning the ammunition that was stored there.

Don't think that, after carting pontoons and planks and pushing and pulling those carriages around all day, and later in the winter after working all day on the premises, we were allowed to have our supper and collapse on our straw sacks in our quarters. There was still lovable Sergeant Oswald to face. While we were out working all

day, he sat in his office writing speeches. Actually, they were quite memorable. In fact there was one speech delivered during the winter months that we all committed to memory. It was wonderfully morale-building, and I don't think there was one among the seventy of us who forgot that "address." It began, "My dear animal hordes, I was watching from my window how you were all working today, and I can tell you that you are just a bunch of lazy animals. Now, I want you all to remember that you are going to work till you drop dead, but in any case, you will all drop dead."*

Upon finishing that "friendly," informative talk, we would then begin the punitive exercise that had been a part of our daily regimen since our arrival. What we were being punished for, I'll never know, but at the end of every day, after the speech, we had to endure these exercises until at least three of our boys fainted. Then, and only then, were we dismissed and allowed to have our supper, which usually consisited of potato or bean soup.

One evening I was so tired, I decided I'd rather rest than endure the exhausting exercises that followed. So instead of staying with my group I crawled under a pontoon. It was just my luck that at the very time, Oswald decided to distribute mail and there was a letter from my mother.

"Wieder, Lajos" the sergeant called, but Wieder did not respond. Again and again he called my name, in vain. Finally, hearing those familiar syllables, I jumped from my hiding place and raced toward the sergeant, shouting *"parancs."*

His acknowledgement was to slap my face so hard that my ear rang. "Tomorrow," he barked, "You're going on report."

The next morning, instead of going to work, I got in line to see the camp commander, as ordered. When he asked why I was there, I confessed my "terrible sin," and he fixed punishment (which we all feared would be "guzsbakotes").

After lunch, not only the Jewish labor force, but the gentile corps of Engineers were marched to the punishment area to see me get my due. I was determined to do my best not to faint, whatever they did.

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*This frightening speech loses some of its punch when translated into English. The original Hungarian follows: Tisztelt állat állomány.

Megfigyeltem az iroda ablakán keresztül hogy hogyan dolgoztok és ugy mozogtatok mint a tetük. Vegyétek tudomásul hogy vagy dolgozni fogtok vagy medögöltök, de mindenképen meg fogtok dögleni.

They had me sit on a wooden box, handcuffed my left hand to my right leg and had me sit there that way all afternoon. Before they returned to work, my comrades looked on sympathetically.

My position was quite uncomfortable, but essentially the punishment was only an inconvenience, the type that marines usually were given; nothing to compare to the ordeal I went through during the first weeks of labor camp

Some of my buddies were even envious. At night, they said "Wieder, I wish I had had that punishment instead of *shlepping* pontoons all afternoon. You were very lucky."

And so I was—but one's fortune depended on the mood and the identity of the commander and the man carrying out the sentence.



My labor camp battalion, with strawsacks, ready to march.

Engagement

We must have been there for about five months with no end to the brutality of Sergeant Oswald in sight when finally God decided to give us a break. Oswald was about thirty-five years of age and still a bachelor when we heard the news that he had become engaged. Learning that his fiancee was a local girl who had finished high school with one of our buddies, who was from the same area, we decided that we would take the chance of trying to soften-up Sergeant Oswald through his fiancee. A wedding present seemed the best idea, and we all chipped in to buy them a washing machine, which was considered a very expensive luxury item and which she said she would love to have.

By visiting his old schoolmate, our buddy Jeno was able to gain her good-will, but we never took the chance of approaching the "big man" himself. Thank God, it worked, and our next six months with the Engineers became a honeymoon by comparison to what we experienced before. Once he made contact with the young lady, Jeno never neglected to visit her or her parents without a generous gift, and it was always worth everything it cost us and more.

Suddenly, we were treated like human beings. First, our quarters were moved from that abandoned building near the railroad station to a Jewish school in the middle of the city, where we could have contact with the local people. Then, every Sunday we were free to move about in the city, to visit Jewish families, and perhaps even to see or take girls out for a walk. This was the first time,

after having served thirty months, that we could go out on the street legitimately without fear of being arrested. We were given all the rights the Engineers had, and even the punitive exercise stopped. All of us wrote home, asking for a set of civilian clothes to be sent to us, so that we would have something decent to wear on our Sunday outings.

We were all quite happy now and, as a matter of fact, we were so content with our status in Satoralja-Ujhely that, by September, 1943, after being there almost a year, we were actually a little disappointed when an order arrived from Milakovic that we return to Kassa because he had to discharge us after completing three years of military service. We really felt sorry about leaving, and having to say good-bye to our friends in the city, and even to Sergeant Oswald.

It was on September 25, 1943, that we received our official discharge papers from Lieutenant Milakovic himself. I still have the treasured document in my possession.

Once I came home, my parents were overjoyed to see me a free man again, but for me the adjustment was difficult. Psychologically, I had adjusted to camp life. For three years my days had been planned for me, and I didn't have to think about how I would occupy my time. We all had dreamed of being free men, and here I was, one of the lucky ones to have that dream come true, yet, after three days, I had such a useless feeling, combined with a craving to do something worthwhile. My natural instinct to do something constructive was still alive; I couldn't just sit at home and do nothing. Also, I was the only young Jewish man left in town, because all the others were in labor camps or at the Russian front, leaving me no one to talk with.

The Hungarian authorities would no longer issue licenses to Jews to operate businesses, and since our license had been rescinded and our store closed, I had to think of something to do to earn a living that would not require a license. I decided to try the trade of custom shirt-making that I had learned before being called into the labor camp, and went to the homes of my neighbors, offering to make shirts to order for a minimum charge. After working at this several weeks, I was summoned to City Hall and was told that making shirts to order required a license, and since I had no license and would not be issued one, I had to stop what I was doing or be sent to jail.

I had acquired a good deal of skill as a photographer, so I went around to our old customers on my bicycle, offering to make family pictures. But after several weeks, I was once again reminded by the officials that I was doing something illegal and risked a jail sentence if I continued.

I realized that if I stayed in my village any longer I would wind up in jail, so I bade my parents good-bye for yet one more time, and left my village to go to Budapest which was such a large metropolitan city, I was confident I could get lost somewhere among all those people. Also, I had heard that it was still possible for a Jew to earn a living there.

Once I settled in Budapest I began frequenting the Nissel kosher restaurant. A few days after my arrival in October, 1943, I went there for lunch and took a seat at a long table already occupied by several men. Hungry and not paying attention to those around me, I started to read the menu. When I looked up to give the waiter my order, my eye caught sight of a young man sitting at the table in front of me.

Since all the young Jewish men were supposed to be in labor camp, I couldn't believe my eyes. Could it be? Yes, it was "Bubi." "Bubi? Is that you?" "Laizer!" he exclaimed, "Laizer, Laizer," (my Jewish name). We leaped from our chairs and hugged like two long-lost brothers. It was Bubi Salamon, my close friend from yeshiva days in Nitra, Czechoslovakia.

I hadn't seen him in the ten years since we'd separated in 1933. If ever there were soul mates, they were Bubi and myself. Coming from similar backgrounds and having outgoing personalities, we had taken a liking to each other at once, and formed a close friendship.

After a ten-year void, you would think I'd have greeted him with something profound. But all I could say was "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in labor camp?"

We grabbed an empty table in the rear and Bubi, as blond and good-looking as ever, began his story, "Laizer," he said, "because I'm a year younger than you and the other boys I know, my draft notice for labor camp came a year after the call-up started. I noticed the misery that the older Jewish boys were experiencing, and so I came to the conclusion that labor camp was not such a bright idea for me, and I decided I was going to try to avoid it. Be-

fore my notice came, I said good-bye to my parents and came to Budapest. I told them that if and when my draft notice arrived, they should return it, saying 'We are sorry, but our son is not home, and we don't know his whereabouts.'

"I have been living here in a sort of limbo, changing my address every few months so the draft board can't locate me."

"And what are you doing for money?" I asked.

"Well, I couldn't take a steady job because then the authorities would catch up with me. So I had to try something else."

"What?"

"As you know, Laizer, textiles are rationed in Hungary because it's a commodity in short supply. And whenever there is rationing, a black market automatically develops. Even gentiles with ration cards have to bribe their manufacturers for merchandise, just as these manufacturers have to bribe their suppliers for raw materials. You cannot buy textiles at regular prices, and even with a twenty to twenty-five percent premium you need the right contact. I remembered I had some relatives who are textile manufacturers. Of course, as a Jew I couldn't get a license or a ration card for a legitimate business, but I could become a middleman for those who had the ration cards but couldn't get the goods. I asked my cousins if they would help me in this venture, and they agreed. This way I managed to make a small percentage for myself."

I admired his nerve, and told him so.

"Now Laizer," he said, "tell me about you. What have you been doing? Did they get you for labor camp?"

"Well, Bubi, I wish I had been as smart as you. I served three miserable years, and when you've got a year with nothing else to do, I'll tell you all about it. But you did the right thing, I can tell you that."

"Did you serve the full term?"

"Yes I did, and I received a discharge from the labor camp. With God's help, they won't call me back. I'm here in Budapest legitimately."

We sat smiling at each other, juggling memories of the past with hopes for the future.

"Laizer, if you have no other plans, I have a fantastic idea for both of us," he said. "It will be like old times again."

"I haven't had time to get myself together, so I'm open to any good proposition. Let me hear what you have in mind."

He explained he had a contact, a gentile woman who made dresses to order and has a legitimate license and ration card. "For a small sum, she'd let us use her license and ration card, and with my contacts for textiles, we could get a nice business going. Do you like the idea?"

"Bubi, it sounds made to order for us."

Within three days we both left Budapest for our respective hometowns to visit our parents for the express purpose of borrowing 20,000 pengos from each of them to start our new venture.

I had no trouble convincing my father to lend me the required capital. After all, he had relied on me to conduct the family business and now was only too glad to help me get into the business mainstream once again. Bubi also fared well with his father.

Two days later, he and I were back in the city and, in short order, made a deal for the woman's license and rented a large room in an apartment owned by Mr. and Mrs. Szenes, an elderly Jewish couple, at Aradi Street 11. We employed two Jewish sisters Bubi knew, Gita and Lily, as our designer and pattern-maker respectively, and we started manufacturing ladies' skirts. Within a few months we were able to hire a salesman and our business started to prosper.

One of Bubi's clients was a congenial Hungarian Air Force reserve lieutenant named Asboth, who, by virtue of his military title and being gentile, had a sizeable textile ration. But, like everyone else, he had difficulty obtaining his ration, until Bubi came along.

Pleased with the idea of serving a gentile military man, Bubi made the lieutenant a wonderful offer. All the lieutenant had to do was give Bubi his ration card, and Bubi purchased the 500 or 1000 yards of textiles that were allocated. Instantly, Bubi sold those goods on the black market for a twenty-five percent profit, which he gave to the lieutenant.

Through this painless profit-making, the two became friends. They would soon become neighbors.

Allied bombings had levelled many buildings in Budapest and apartments were in short supply. Accordingly, a new regulation required that Jews report to the appropriate government agency the size of their apartment and how many people lived there. Any apartment that was not filled to capacity would have to accommodate some of the bombed-out residents of the city.

This caused some concern to our business landlords, the Szeneses, who technically were the only inhabitants of their large

apartment. "Perhaps you know a nice family we can rent to before the authorities put in someone undesirable?" Mr. Szenes asked us.

Bubi decided to play matchmaker. He approached Lieutenant Asboth, who lived with his wife in a small apartment in a less desirable part of town, and asked them to visit the Szeneses' residence. "Come and look at this apartment. If you like it, they'll be happy to let you have the rooms for a minimal rent, because they're anxious to get a decent family instead of just anybody assigned by the authorities."

The Asboths liked the two spacious rooms and kitchen facilities and the Szeneses were pleased to have as tenants a gentleman and lady who were referred to them. They felt good about sharing their apartment with gentiles and were additionally pleased by the fact that he had a respected military title. The word "lieutenant" gave them confidence that they would by protected if something happened.

Once our business was established, we decided to rent an apartment under my name because my status was more legitimate.

Upon Bubi's recommendation, we rented a room from an elderly woman, a doctor's widow who lived in a beautiful, modern apartment with her housekeeper, a middle-aged gentile woman named Renee, who treated us as if we were her own children. She served us breakfast on a silver tray in our room, and tea and cookies in the evening after work. At night, Bubi and I would usually settle down to study Talmud, as in our old, care-free yeshiva days. We hoped to find in the sacred writings answers to all our new life-threatening problems. Somehow we managed to remain optimistic, and we expressed our optimism by singing Jewish and Hebrew songs.

The lyrics of one of our favorite songs, "Bayamim Adamim," began: "In the dark days of despair, in the long night of hopelessness, in the cities and villages, we will raise our flag, in perseverance and victory." This was one of the many beautiful songs I had learned from my friend Stern, an ardent Zionist, in labor camp, and these songs gave us the courage to dream of a rosy future in our own days of despair.

Another aspect of my closeness with Bubi was my friendship with his sister, a beautiful, intelligent girl who lived in Budapest. She helped him with his textile business, and was quite a capable business person herself. As much as I liked her, I really couldn't al-

low myself to become involved in a romance, because Orthodox boys and girls could not have a serious relationship unless it could culminate in marriage, and with the turmoil we were experiencing during that period, under the Hungarian regime, very few marriages were made. Almost all the young men were either in labor camps, in hiding, or living with false documents, with no future to look forward to. Those of us of marriageable age who did meet Jewish girls had to be content with taking them to a movie or a restaurant, or going for a stroll in the park, and talking about a future if and when our misery ever came to an end.

But in the meantime, the pieces of my disrupted life were beginning to fall into place. Now that Bubi and I had a factory operating and a comfortable apartment to come home to, the city was beginning to take on a new lustre.

Budapest

How can anyone but a poet find the words to describe beautiful Budapest adequately? It was a bustling, crowded metropolis with tall buildings, and hotels, magnificent broad boulevards, splendid parks, bubbling spas, and elegant women. like New York and Paris, it was distinguished by grand avenenues—Andrasy Street and Teraz Korut, to name just a few—and, of couse, it encompassed the celebrated blue Danube, which divided the city into Buda, the resort area, and Pest, the commercial district. In the middle of the Danube, connected from both sides of the city by the imposing Margit Bridge, was Margit Island, a resort whose amphitheatre was the setting for weekly open-air performances, and whose indoor-outdoor pool was the meeting place for scores of young men and women. In 1939, a few years before I settled in Budapest, a cousin of mine had taken me to the open theatre on Margit Island to attend a performance of a great operetta, "Janos Vitez." I memorized all the songs and, even today, singing them gives my spirits a tremendous lift.

The first time I had ever visited Budapest was when Hungary took over our village and severed our business connections with Czechoslovakia. In order to obtain textiles after that, we had to go to Budapest, which had textile factories in abundance. I made four or five trips to the capital, but spent no more than two days each time, so I never really enjoyed the advantages Budapest offered a young man until I became a resident.

Once I did, the city opened up to me like a beautiful flower,

often making me feel like a happy child. I found it thrilling, for example, to jump off and on the tram that ran throughout the city while the electric cable car was still moving. The fact that placing the wrong foot down first in dismounting could cause you to fall under the car and be killed only added to the excitement.

Delighted with everything in Budapest, I soon fell deeply in love with the city. I became aware of the depth of my affection when, returning to Budapest after a weekend visit to my parents, I felt the warm glow one feels when returning home.

For some time, my conscience bothered me about feeling that way for a city where, as a Jew, I was looked down upon as a third-class citizen. I couldn't understand experiencing for Budapest a feeling that I, as a Zionist, had always reserved in my heart for Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. The Holy Land, not this secular metropolis, was my home. And yet, returning to Budapest after a visit to my beloved parents and the village where I was raised, I had the joyous feeling of coming home.

"What's the matter with me?" I wondered. I couldn't understand feeling so much affection for an alien city. But I loved it passionately.

Parade

Under ordinary circumstances, I would have enjoyed the parade—the spectacle of thousands upon thousands of smartly dressed marchers as far as the eye could see, moving with clockwork precision down the broad avenues of the capital, to the appreciative welcoming roar of throngs lining the sidewalks.

But the circumstances were far from ordinary. The date was Monday, March 20, 1944; the place, Budapest; the marchers, invading German troops. *Invited* invaders, to be sure. But for us, Hungarian Jews, who stood in numb silence among the cheering gentiles, the tidal wave of German infantrymen, Wehrmacht, blackclad S.S. and all the other special troops spelled deadly menace.

In retrospect, the signs had all been there, had we but faced reality. But at the time it occurred, we were ill-prepared for the Nazi takeover.

The previous day, March 19, 1944, was a beautiful Sunday, filled with the promise of spring and blossoming beauty and rebirth; there was no hint of the ugliness to come. In fact, life seemed quite pleasant and the future loomed brighter, despite the war that had engulfed Europe and much of the world. I had successfully completed three years of labor-camp service and was one of the few Jewish men to endure and receive a full-fledged honorable discharge from the labor service. I was young and vigorous, and filled with the optimism that automatically attaches itself to youth and good health.

My partner Bubi and I were enjoying a peaceful lunch when suddenly the Sunday afternoon radio concert was interrupted for a news bulletin: "German troops have crossed the Hungarian border, and are marching toward the capital..." To say we were thunderstruck is an understatement. "I don't believe it!" Bubi said. "There must be some mistake!" But in our hearts we knew it was not a mistake. How could we not have seen it coming?

We had already heard of terrible things going on elsewhere on the continent. We ate lunch every day at one of Budapest's kosher restaurants that, by its very nature, had become a communications center for news of the Jewish world. Many refugees who had escaped Polish persecution ate there and fed us a daily diet of horror stories about the murder of Polish Jews. We heard about the Warsaw Ghetto. But that was Poland; this was Hungary. And we heard about the Germans persecuting and deporting Austrian Jews. But that was Austria. The same was happening in Slovakia, but that was Slovakia.

In Poland, the populace went along with whatever the Germans wanted, especially in anti-Semitic acts. They gave Jews a double dose of what the Nazis ordered. But Hungary, which had no history of pogroms, was different.

Throughout the world's history, some of the sorriest victims have been those who were firmly convinced "it can't happen here." Yet the Hungarian Jews had grounds for their conviction that they would somehow be exempt from the persecution Jews elsewhere were experiencing. There were several reasons: There was the fact that many Hungarian Jews has assimilated into Hungarian society. Also, they looked, dressed and spoke the way the gentiles did, and the average Hungarian Jew was, for lack of a better term, cosmopolitan, and in the mainstream of secular life.

What contributed even more to their false sense of security, was confidence in Hungary's ruler, its regent, Admiral Horthy. The Admiral was a friend of Hitler's, as evidenced by the Fuehrer's presentation of a part of Czechoslovakia to him, and so we thought Hitler would do nothing against Horthy's will. Horthy had the reputation of a man who would protect his citizens, even Jews, and if he couldn't keep the Germans away completely, at least he would prevent them from *murdering* Jews.

The arrival of the Germans was not only a tragedy for the Jewish population, but also a severe shock to the Hungarian intelligen-

tsia. There had been no previous talks or agreement giving the German troops access to Hungary. It was one of Hitler's simple tricks, which he always managed successfully. He had summoned Horthy to Germany for urgent talks, and, while the Hungarian leader was en route to meet him he ordered the German troops to cross the border. Since there was no Hungarian military leader left in an official capacity to give orders, Horthy had no alternative but to surrender to reality and—on the friendliest basis, of course—agreed to the German takeover.

At about 2 o'clock in the afternoon on Monday, the Nazi troops began to arrive. The spectators applauded the Germans as if they were great national heroes or liberators. But the Jews, dumbstruck by the turn of events, were not applauding; they turned to each other and surreptitiously whispered, "This is it..." "This is what we dreaded would happen..." Then they fell silent, enveloped by an overwhelming sadness. Springtime had suddenly developed a chill.

As I stood there speechless, all I could think about was what would happen to my parents and to all us Jews. It was, of course, inevitable that the Jews were to become the first victims of this "new order." No time was lost in building concentration camps for them. As early as Tuesday morning, at the two main railroad terminals, the East Station and the West Station, every male was stopped and asked for identification. Anyone whose papers indicated he was Jewish was arrested on the spot and, without even being given a chance to notify his family, was hurried off to one of the newly-built camps. Some Jewish homes were raided and their frightened inhabitants taken off to the camps, too. Within three days, the number of Jews who had been arrested and interned reached the thousands.

The very efficient manner in which this was all done made it seem clear to us that these camps and the plans for them had been well organized in advance by the secret Hungarian S.S., known as The Arrow-Cross, and by German sympathizers, who now emerged like worms after a spring rain.

As soon as the parade ended, I hurried, downcast, to our factory, where my partner and good friend, Bubi, was already waiting. Needless to say, we were no longer interested in our factory. Our first concern was to think of something to save our lives before it was too late. We decided to liquidate our business immedi-

ately, first reducing our large inventory by shipping out whatever orders we could. We rented a truck, loaded it with merchandise, and sent our salesman off with it, but in the late afternoon he came back to report that nobody had accepted delivery. Most of our customers were Jewish merchants, who, for good reason, were not interested in business any more, either. So Bubi and I divided the merchandise equally between us, and sent the goods to our respective parents.

It may seem surprising to anyone who lived through wartime censorship, but mail in Hungary during this period was free of any kind of intrusion. It was delivered as promptly as ever, and there was no indication that any authority opened the mail, let alone censored it.

Despite what was beginning to happen in Budapest, we did not feel we were yet in mortal danger. But what the Polish refugees in the restaurant on Dob Street had told us was happening to Jews in Poland seemed to be striking closer and closer to home.

Meanwhile, as much as the "handwriting was on the wall" in a figurative sense, we had to contend with irritating and often frightening words that were on the wall literally. Throughout the city, functionaries were daily mounting posters, announcing the latest regulations concerning the Jews. Within several days after the Germans arrived in Budapest, one poster ordered: "All Jews must wear the yellow star"—and so we dutifully purchased the Star of David, ready-made from yellow felt, and sewed it on over coats or jackets.

Some Jews felt degraded by the regulation; I had mixed emotions. I felt a certain pride in wearing the Jewish star as a badge of honor that proclaimed to the world that I am Jewish, but I was also upset because I knew the star symbolized all kinds of restrictions. Travel was one. If a Jew owned a car, he had to surrender the vehicle. Traveling by train was forbidden to anyone wearing the yellow star, which meant that I wouldn't be able to visit my parents, who lived a twelve-hour train ride from Budapest. To risk traveling without the star would be inviting disaster. Police were everywhere, including at the approaches to the railroad stations, seeking to trip up Jews who had disobeyed the order to don the star. If I were to go on the street without my identifying mark, I feared people would accost me, demanding, "Jew, what are you doing on the street without your yellow star?"

What upset me most about it, though, was that we saw in the order to wear a star the sure signs of danger. It would be too easy to concentrate all the Jews in Hungary for God-knows-what purpose, just by assembling all the star-wearers. The question of what was in store for all of us who wore the symbol of our people haunted me.

It was time for action!



Ella Schoen, my sister Margit's mother-in-law, lighting Sabbath candles. (The picture was taken by me when studying photography at that time.)

Gentile Papers

We realized that to continue to live openly as Jews in Hungary would be perilous at best and we had to devise a plan.

Bubi and I decided to go back to the restaurant where the Polish refugees congregated and listen to them more carefully.

They emphasized that the liquidation of the Polish Jews had not come suddenly, but gradually. First there were a few restrictions relating to business, and all Jews were required to wear the yellow Star of David. Then there was the forced labor camp induction and prohibition of train travel, followed by ghettoization and the final deportation.

How had they managed to escape?

Gentile ID papers was their ticket to freedom, they explained.

Taking a leaf from their book, Bubi suggested that the first order of business for us should be the procurement of gentile papers.

The idea of masquerading as other than Jewish was disturbing. A part of me felt that the mere acquisition of false papers would make us traitors to a proud heritage dating back thousands of years, a heritage for which countless Jews had gone to their death rather than save themselves by simply renouncing it. But another part told us that we were only making preparation to save our lives; whatever our false papers said, we'd always be faithful Jews. Once our basic decision was made, we moved to implement it.

"Converting" ourselves into Christians meant procuring a full set of aryan papers, complete with new name, address and police

registration. The law required that when you were asked for identification, you had to produce a birth certificate, working book (which gave details of your employment), a personal identification card and a police registration card, among other papers. Every change of address had to be registered and approved by the police. All of this presented us with what seemed to be a hopeless problem. Securing a completely different identity, an aryan one at that, would have been difficult enough at any time. Now, with the increased vigilance imposed by the Nazis, the situation appeared impossible.

Clearly, any hope of accomplishing this ruse depended on enlisting a third party—a gentile. But who among them would be willing to help, and who among them could we trust?

Bubi suggested we approach Lieutenant Asboth with our problem—"Maybe he can help us"—and I agreed. Although Bubi considered him completely trustworthy, I was afraid that the lieutenant, out of a sense of loyalty to Hungarian authority, might decide to turn us in. Frightened as I was, though, I knew we had no alternative but to trust somebody, and Asboth was the best prospect we had. Not only was there a cordial relationship between him and Bubi, thanks to the textile dealings and procurement of the apartment, but something more: he had a wife who was an outspoken anti-Nazi, and, in Bubi's view, she was echoing the sentiments of her more discreet husband.

In her rather innocent way, beautiful Maria Asboth had said, "Anybody who supports the Nazis and Hitler should have their hands and feet fall off, and they should all drop dead." A Nazi sympathizer and another witness overheard her make the statement and reported her to the authorities. She was arrested, put on trial and sentenced to thirty days in prison. If not for the fact that her husband was a Hungarian lieutenant, she probably would have been given five years. Her comment cost the lieutenant a promotion to captain. The Air Force needed his skill and intelligence, but, because of his wife's attitude, the service felt he could not be trusted with any important assignments.

This was the perfect recommendation as far as we were concerned. If he couldn't be trusted by the Hungarians because of anti-Nazi feelings, he most certainly *could* be trusted by us, for the very same reason.

From the moment Bubi introduced me to the lieutenant, the of-

ficer called me neither Lajos nor Mr. Wieder but "Lajoska" (my dear Lajos), just as he called Bubi "Bubika" (my dear Bubi). It was as if we were his children. Almost at once I got the feeling, later confirmed, that this officer was a fine gentleman.

We started talking about conditions relating to Jewish issues, and he assured us, "It's not going to be so bad, and anyhow I'll do what I can to help you."

We told him our decision to buy aryan papers. "It's a very good idea," he said. "Adopting aryan identities won't be any problem for either of you, with your appearance."

He suggested we meet with his cousin, Paul, and his close friend, Ferenc, college students who were about our own age. They were both friendly with Asboth, who knew their families and political views. He assured us we could openly confide our problem to them.

Bubi and I looked at each other for an answer. We both felt comfortable revealing our plan to Asboth, but the young men were a different matter. Still, we had come this far . . . We nodded to one another, and then told Asboth to proceed.

Within three days, he had arranged an appointment in his room for us with the two young men, "They're willing to do it," he said, "for a good price." The fact that they wanted a lot of money for their papers was not surprising. After all, they weren't our friends and didn't owe us anything, and they were taking a chance. We kept the appointment

The boys were both highly intelligent, well educated and very neatly dressed. Their tone indicated they looked down on us as inferiors, but money is an effective device for bridging social strata.

We discussed how we could obtain their personal documents, and they proposed to "lose" their identification papers in a telephone booth, where Bubi and I would "find" them. They were candid with us about how they would protect themselves in this; it would be necessary for them, the boys said, to report the loss of their identification papers to the police, to be covered against the possibility of our being caught with their papers. It was quite reasonable, from their point of view. How much would they want for their papers? Three thousand pengos each—an amount equivalent to about $600 U.S. dollars. We could have managed to raise the sum, but it seemed to be too much to venture for a very risky proposition. We politely declined the deal.

Nevertheless, we had not abandoned the idea of procuring aryan papers for ourselves. The Polish refugees we had met in the restaurant were already trafficking in false identification papers, with the names of certifying officers forged. You could buy a blank birth certificate or a blank police identification for relatively little money. But I was afraid that a forged document could too easily be recognized as such; they were plain papers, simply stamped, but they looked brand new. There were ways to make a certificate look old enough to match the age of the bearer—but I preferred to have old, original, worn papers, which would be much more believable. The question was, where to find them.

A sudden idea came to mind. Without saying a word to Bubi I removed the yellow star from my coat and headed for the "Telekiter" or flea market. Everything was rationed in Budapest, and whether it was a pound of sugar or flour, lard or anything else, you needed a certain amount of ration stamps to qualify to buy it. But not at the "Telekiter"; if you were willing to pay the price, just about anything could be obtained there. You name it...stolen goods, ration books, second-hand merchandise. Maybe, I thought, I could find someone there who would sell me aryan papers.

The Telekiter, which resembled the famous Paris flea market, sprawled across a huge area ten blocks square and was a noisy, colorful place, where a shopper could buy anything from antiques to live chickens at discount prices. Food, hardware, fabrics, from both legitimate and criminal sources, were available there. Thousands of vendors, their carts, tables and open booths teeming with merchandise, hawked their wares and haggled over prices with customers from early morning until late at night, every day of the week.

I was particularly impressed by this famous flea market because it was such a grand reflection of a big outdoor market that used to be held in a big area just outside our village three or four times a year, attracting thousands of peasants. One of my biggest treats as a youngster was to be given a crown (about a dollar), instead of my customary ten cents, and be allowed to spend it any way I wanted at the market. Then, when I arrived in Budapest following my labor camp service, one of the first places I headed for was the Telekiter, ten times the size of our village market, and was instantly seized with pleasant memories. I was struck by the fact that the

boy who once considered a crown's spending money a fortune was now a man with considerably more than a crown in his pocket. And he could wander around and buy as freely as he wished. It was a delightful experience.

Today's trip to the Telekiter, however, was no pleasure trip. Worried about being arrested, I was shivering like a fish in a net.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, it seemed, an old man, reeking of cheap wine, appeared and asked me, "Young man, what can I help you with? I can supply you with cards for sugar, bread, clothing, or anything you like." I was so frightened, I could hardly breathe. But I decided to take a chance. "I want," I said, "something different." My voice quavered. "I need papers that identify me as a gentile."

"Oh! I know what you want," he said nodding. "You want a *flackney* (the hobo's slang for ID papers).

I nodded my head nervously.

"Don't worry," he continued. "Just stay here, and I'll come back to you in a few minutes."

He disappeared into a nearby hall full of drinking places, a regular Skid Row, and I waited. In about ten minutes (although to me it seemed like an eternity), the old man returned, accompanied by a man about twenty years old, who was so drunk he could hardly stand. The old man introduced him to me. "This is Lajos [pronounced Lah-yosh]," he said.

"My name is also Lajos (the Hungarian for Ludvik)," I answered.

The youth had a very common last name, Farkas, and the old man announced to me, "Yes, he's willing to sell."

I asked to see the papers, and the other Lajos showed me a birth certificate, a police ID and everything else I needed.

"I'm interested," I said "How much do you want?"

"How much will you give me?"

"Five hundred pengos (the equivalent of about 100 U.S. dollars)."

"Good," he said. "Here, take the papers, I don't need them," which was obvious because he looked 100 percent aryan. If he were ever to be arrested, it would not be for being a Jew without papers.

I paid him and took the papers, which were so dirty and authentic-looking that I felt with them in my possession I would not have

to worry about the police accepting them as genuine. The whole transaction took less than half an hour, and I was soon back on the tram heading to my apartment.

Thanks to a hobo, whose name and age approximated mine, I was prepared for a "conversion" that might save my life.

The trip back home went without incident, and I was very relieved. The moment I got back, I resewed the Star of David on my jacket. At lunchtime I met with Bubi.

"Look what I have," I said, showing him the documents.

"Terrific! How did you ever manage to get them?"

I proceeded to tell him the whole story of my experience at the flea market. He could hardly believe how I had come by a complete, authentic set of aryan papers, and at such a bargain price. I didn't realize myself just how much courage I must have summoned up to bring off that entire transaction. I wasn't even concerned that the young loafer who sold me the papers might report his missing documents to the police.

"Do you think you can get another set for me?" Bubi said.

"I'll try my best. First thing tomorrow morning I'll go back to the same place, and hope I can find my man."

As I said I would, the next morning I made my way back to the Telekiter, this time with a little less apprehension, and found my source. He brought me another drunkard, a young fellow whose papers I bought for about 400 pengös. To the old man, I gave a commission of 50 pengös for his efforts—and I now had a complete set of aryan papers for Bubi. My blond partner looked even more aryan that I did. Actually, for the most part, Hungarians do not have a particularly "aryan" look, and I, as a fair-skinned six-footer, did not look different from most Hungarians.

I may have generally looked like an aryan, but there was one specific area where I did not. In Hungary in those years the only males circumcised were the Jews, and so the mark of the covenant between God and the Hebrews could easily mark the downfall of any Jew who had the temerity to pretend he was a gentile. Being found out this way was a constant danger, and an ordinary, everyday occurrence such as using a public lavatory required caution.

Meanwhile, the Hungarian S.S. apparently had decided that the early, wholesale confinement of Jews in internment camps was perhaps premature. And subject to a more orderly plan, they eased up their repression and let some of the Jews they had confined go home to a relativley normal way of life.

Still, I felt somehow this was the lull before a dreadful anti-Semitic storm, and I continued preparations. It didn't take long before I was deep into the false-paper business. Soon after I got the set of aryan documents for Bubi, I met a first cousin of mine, at lunch. He had come to Budapest from Torna to learn a trade.

"Archie," I said, "I'll tell you what I am doing, and maybe it would be smart thing for you to get ready for emergencies, too. We don't know what might possibly happen."

Then I explained that I had obtained false papers, and asked whether he'd be interested in getting a set, too.

"Of course I'm interested," he said.

I went back to the flea market for another transaction—papers for Archie. Then I obtained still another set for my older brother, Armin, and his wife, who would take on the identities of Mr. and Mrs. Novak Lajos.

I was far from finished. My cousin had confided to some of his acquaintances that he had genuine aryan papers and, of course, they wanted the same. Bubi told some of his friends; my brother told some of his, and it was the same story over and over: "Wieder, you must get me a set of original papers."

I received more advance orders for gentile papers than I ever had for textiles or for ladies' dresses.

Having gentile papers, of course, did not guarantee anyone being out of the woods; there were still plenty of problems. But it was satisfying just to know that, in case the situation got worse, you had a possible lifesaver in reserve.

The requests didn't bother me. I couldn't refuse them. I just hoped that my luck would hold out long enough to accommodate as many of them as possible. To help ensure my continued good fortune, I now began to steer away from my usual source of papers (the old man in the Telekiter) and began to enlist the services of four young hobos and drunkards—loafers, I call them—who had been losing at cards and were quite interested in earning some easy money. These characters I found at other, smaller flea markets, elsewhere in Budapest, and I set them to work in different parts of the city, finding me genuine sets of aryan papers, many of them to order. For example, the two sisters, Gita and Lily, who were the designer and sample-makers in our factory, had asked whether I could procure papers for them. And, I did.

By this time, I had stopped going to the Telekiter altogether be-

cause there were dozens of detectives in the flea market, investigating all the stolen goods that came to rest there. They would surely be suspicious if they saw me coming there day after day, especially since I never even made a pretense of buying any merchandise as a way of covering my real mission.

Because I could no longer keep coming back to the same place, I told the young members of my "organization" that I didn't want to meet them at the flea market anymore. I would designate a different street lavatory for each man, so none of them would meet each other and I worked out a time schedule of appointments about an hour apart.

Sometimes, I'd buy four or five sets of documents in one deal. I took only papers describing someone of an age or status I could probably use and rejected those I had no demand for. If the papers were those of a young man of military age, or a single girl about twenty, I always bought them, because they would always be in big demand.

In about two weeks' time, I managed to obtain more than fifty sets, some of which I stored at my brother Armin's for safekeeping. Although he and his wife, Helen, had aryan papers like the rest of us, he had not yet assumed his new identity. Therefore, he stayed at home most of the time, and was able to keep my secret supply of papers safe.

Just as I didn't want to wait like a sheep for my fate, I didn't want my parents to do so, either. I wrote to them, urging that they come to Budapest and live as gentiles. I told them I would get papers for them and that I had everything planned out so they could live in safety, but they did not want to hear of it.

My father's answer was always: "Please, Laizer (the diminutive name by which he sometimes called me), do me a favor and don't worry about us. We are old people. Whatever is going to befall other Jews is going to befall us. We don't want a different fate from the other Jews." In truth, he felt in no direct danger and I couldn't budge him. But he would be hearing from me on the subject again.

In his regular correspondence with his parents, my cousin Archie told them that, "with my help," he had procured gentile papers. His father, who was even more religious than my father, wrote, "I want you home immediately." He did not want his son to live for a moment as a non-Jew, and violate dietary laws and

other precepts. Archie, obedient as all of us were brought up to be, complied.

When Archie announced he was going to visit his parents, I couldn't very well tell him not to. All I could tell him was, "Archie, be careful," and wish him luck.

Days went by and Archie didn't return. In a letter to my parents, I asked whether Archie had arrived safely and, assuming he did, asked what had happened that he had not returned. My parents wrote back that his father wanted him to stay home, and that Archie would not act or speak contrary to his father's wishes. I didn't know whether Archie's way or mine was right; it was all blind thinking.

I was beginning to worry more and more about my parents and their future. It seemed increasingly apparent that they, too, would need aryan papers if they were to survive. Getting appropriate papers was only one challenge, however. Assuming I could get them what was needed, what then? In their village of Torna, where they were so well-known they could not, of course, use the documents. But if I could convince them to come to Budapest...

It would be ideal, of course, if the papers I got for them could have some connection with mine, so that we would be identified officially as being related to each other in a gentile family. It seemed far-fetched, but stranger things had come to pass.

I decided to play a hunch. I made my way back to the Telekiter and located the first hobo in my document-searching adventures—Farkas Lajos, who had sold me his papers. He recognized me, though he was a little under the weather. I told him I needed a set of papers for a middle-aged couple (my parents) and offered to pay him double the usual fee.

He wasn't excited about the idea. "How can I get papers like that?" he asked, staggering a little as he spoke.

"Listen," I said, "you have parents living, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Where do they live?"

"In Tapolca."

"Okay," I said, "here's what we'll do. I'll give you the train fare. You'll go home for a visit, and while you're there you'll steal your parents' papers. They can always get duplicates, if they report the papers are lost, you're not doing them out of anything. Bring the documents to me, and I'll give you a thousand pengös!"

This got to him. "Wonderful!" he shouted, and I had to motion for him to contain his greedy enthusiasm.

I gave him money for his train ticket and he left town as planned. Two days later, he was back with his father's wallet, and in it was neatly placed a whole set of papers necessary for a gentile man and his wife about sixty years of age. So my parents would now have the official papers of Farkas Ferencz and his wife, and I was their son Lajos. If I could only convince my parents to come to Budapest, we would make a nice aryan family.

I thanked Lajos, paid him his thousand pengos, as promised, and wrote my parents yet another in the series of letters I'd been writing to them pleading with them to give up their home in the town where they were known by everyone, and come live in Budapest.

Again, I tried to explain to them that in a large city they could lose their identity more easily and thus stand a better chance of escaping persecution when it came.

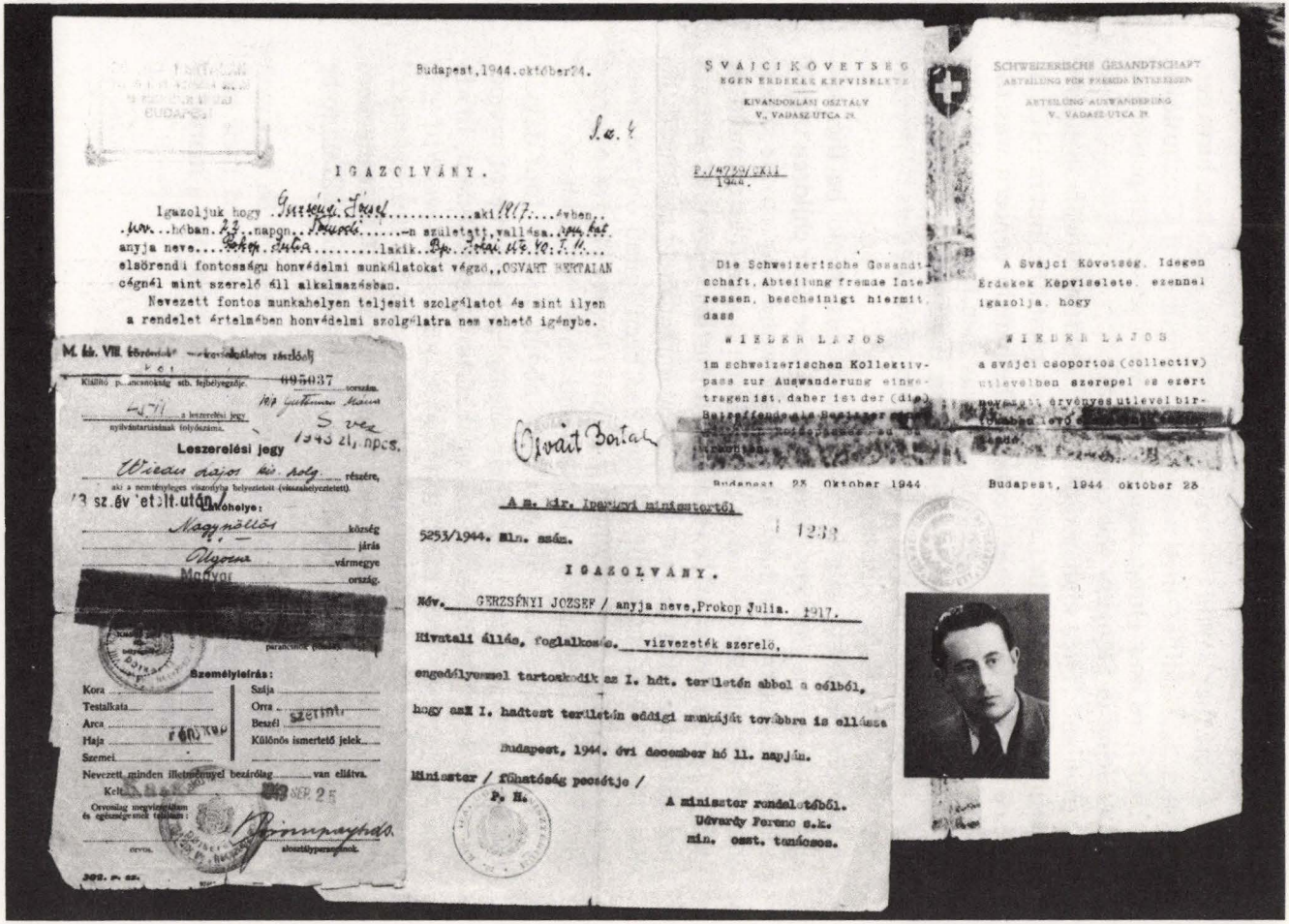
Inevitably, they wrote back begging me not to worry for them. They were quite ready, they said again, to accept the same fate that would befall all Jews.

I had not only my parents' welfare to be concerned about, but also my brother Armin's two children, Erwin and Judith, who lived with them. How the children came to be with their grandparents is a story in itself.

Armin had lived with his family in Nitra, a town in Slovakia where he had a thriving dry goods business. In 1938, the part of Czechoslovakia where my parents and I lived was presented to Hungary by Hitler, while Armin's region remained Slovakian. Unfortunately, Slovakia was the spawning ground of the infamous Hlinka-Guarda, who were as anti-Semitic as the Nazis. In early 1942, they started deporting Jews, especially young girls between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two.

To avoid imminent deportation, my brother and his wife decided they would make their way with their youngsters to Budapest. Hungary was just across the border from them, and there were peasants who, for a small price, would get them across the border safely—which they did one night.

Hungarian-speaking, they would not have a problem fitting in anywhere in Hungary, but they chose not to go to our village be-



Budapest, 1944. október 24.

I. a. 4

IGAZOLVÁNY.

Igazoljuk hogy Gerzsényi József ..... aki 1917. évben,
..nov. ..hóban. 23. ..napon. Budapesten ..... -n született, vallása. ..róm. kat.
anyja neve. Prokop Julia ..... lakik. Bp. Attila út. 40. I. 11.
elsőrendű fontosságu honvédelmi munkálatokat végző, „OSVART HENTAIAN
cégnél mint szerelő áll alkalmazásban.

Nevezett fontos munkahelyen teljesit szolgálatot és mint ilyen
a rendelet értelmében honvédelmi szolgálatra nem vehető igénybe.

SVÁJCI KÖVETSÉG
EGYEN ÉRDEKEK KÉPVISELETE
KIVANDORLASI OSZTALY
V., VADASZ UTCA 29.

P./4739/XXII
1944.

Die Schweizerische Gesandtschaft, Abteilung fremde Interessen, bescheinigt hiermit, dass

WIEDER LAJOS

im schweizerischen Kollektivpass zur Auswanderung eingetragen ist, daher ist der (die) Beizeichnete als Bürger

Budapest, 25. Oktober 1944.

SCHWEIZERISCHE GESANDTSCHAFT
ABTEILUNG FÜR FREMDE INTERESSEN
ABTEILUNG AUSWANDERUNG
V., VADASZ-UTCA 29.

A Svájci Követség, Idegen Érdekek Képviselete ezennel igazolja, hogy

WIEDER LAJOS

a svájci csoportos (collectiv) útlevélben szerepel és ezért nevezett érvényes útlevél birtokában van.

Budapest, 1944 október 25

M. kir. VII. kerületi ... kerületi kirendeltség

Kiállító p. ... személyig. stb. fejbélyegzője. 695037 ... sorszám.

4571 ... a leszerelési jegy nyilvántartásának folyószáma.

Leszerelési jegy

Ideiglenes dajor kis rolg ... részére,

aki a nemtényleges viszonyba helyezteteit (visszahelyeztetett).

1943 sz. év ... elölt. után

Lakóhelye:

Nagymaros ... község

Alsóma ... járás

Magyar ... vármegye

... ország.

Személyleírás:

Kora ...
Testalkata ...
Arca ...
Haja ...
Szemei ...
Szája ...
Orra szerint
Beszéi ...
Különös ismertető jelek ...

Nevezett minden illetőségnyel bezárólag ... van ellátva.

Kelt ... SEP 25

Orvosilag megvizsgáltam és egészségesnek találtam:

orvos.

alezredesi ... ezredorvos.

302. p. sz.

1233

A M. kir. Iparügyi miniszertől

5253/1944. Eln. szám.

IGAZOLVÁNY.

Név. GERZSÉNYI JOZSEF / anyja neve, Prokop Julia. 1917.

Hivatali állása, foglalkozása. vizvezeték szerelő,

engedélyemmel tartozkodik az I. hdt. területén abból a célból,

hogy ezen I. hadtest területén eddigi munkáját továbbra is ellássa

Budapest, 1944. évi december hó 11. napján.

Miniszter / főhatóság pecsétje /

P. H.

A miniszter rendeletéből.
Udvardy Ferenc s.k.
min. osztt. tanácsos.

A sampling of the ID papers that helped save my life, including (lower left) my authentic discharge from three years of labor camp, a falsified document (top left), my Swiss schutzpasse (top right) and fake work papers from the Hungarian Labor Ministry (bottom).

cause there they would be known as Slovakian. Both had birth certificates that testified they were born in portions of Czechoslovakia that were now Hungarian, so they were semi-legal persons as far as being in Hungary was concerned.

Armin and Helen managed to rent an apartment with an elderly Jewish couple, who didn't ask too many questions. But in 1943, as police raids became more frequent, their main concern was the safety of their children, Judith, who was then four years old, and Erwin, six. Fortunately, at that time in Budapest there existed a Jewish committee that specialized in helping youngsters by providing foster homes for any strays.

My brother and sister-in-law decided this would be the best course of action, and they hired a girl to take their children to this committee, saying she had found them wandering on the street, and to ask that they be taken into a foster home. The committee, comprised as it was of Jews, asked no further questions and did not challenge what the girl said. They immediately registered the fact that Erwin and Judith Wieder had been found on the street and were eligible for placement in a foster home. They also agreed that, in time, someone could come and claim the children.

After Judith and Erwin were there about three or four days, I made out an application for their release in the name of my parents, saying "We have found out that our grandchildren, Erwin and Judith, have been taken in by your agency. We want to take care of them, so we request that you release them in our custody." Officials of this committee were only too happy to release my niece and nephew, since they had an abundance of refugee children to be concerned about.

The safest, most "legitimate" place for them to be was with their grandparents (my parents), who legally adopted their two Czechoslovakian-born grandchildren. Now it became a matter of rescuing *them*, as well as my parents.

The Rabbi's Warning

At this time, although Bubi and I had aryan papers in our possession, we did not yet feel matters were so serious that we needed to use them.

If and when the day came when we would have to use the papers, Bubi and I knew that for our masquerade to be successful, we would have to *live* as gentiles in virtually every phase of our lives. This would certainly pose a very serious emotional problem for both of us. We were observant Orthodox Jews who *davened* (said our prayers) three times a day, donning *tallis* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries) every morning. Except for my days in labor camp, we always observed *Shabbos* (the Sabbath) and always adhered to the dietary laws or *kashruth.* As single young men in Budapest, we took our meals in kosher restaurants. If we were to pose as gentiles, this no longer would be possible. And we probably would be called upon to violate the Sabbath. These probabilities troubled us sorely, so we decided to pay a call on a rabbi and pose a *shiloh*, a question involving religious law.

Many revered rabbis had recently come to Budapest in their attempt to escape Nazi persecution. We learned the whereabouts of one such man, a grand, bearded rabbi from Poland, and paid him a call.

"Rabbi," we said, "we have a problem." Even a Talmudic scholar, who is conversant with the laws, must ask the rabbi. So we asked whether, in a dire emergency, we might be permitted to live as gentiles, in which case, we said, we might not be able to say

our daily prayers or keep kosher, and we might have to work on the Sabbath. I'll never forget his answer: "*Shoin darft ihr mechalel Shabbos zein, shoin kent ir essen trefess, shoin darft ihr nisht tefillin legen abee ihr zolt zich matzel sein eier nefesh.*" What he was telling us was that we could *immediately* violate the Sabbath, eat non-kosher food, refrain from praying—as long as by so doing we could manage to save our lives. I looked at Bubi, and his shocked expression reflected my feelings.

It was the rabbi's positiveness about our being permitted to do all this *immediately* that struck us—not *if and when* matters became worse, but *right now*! He was telling us that we were *now* in mortal danger, that we could *now* be killed for being Jewish. The refugees in the restaurant had been telling us this, but we never wanted to believe their stories. The rabbi knew what was happening in Poland, and that the same thing was imminent in Budapest. He shocked us into the realization that we were in great peril right now.

Just *how* perilous, it did not take us long to find out.

Early on a May morning, I was still in bed when a postcard arrived from my Uncle Josef, who lived in the same village as my parents. It described the terrible situation in just a few sentences.

Dear Ludvik,

If you don't hear from your parents for a few days, don't get worried. Last night, the Hungarian Jandamarines arrested your parents and took them away with your brother's two children to an unknown place. I will try to find out more about them and will let you know soon.

Your Uncle Josef

At the time my uncle wrote this letter, he didn't realize that his fate would soon be the same as that of my parents.

The night deportation started, only the wealthy Jews were arrested. Uncle Joseph, not being a wealthy man, hoped to escape with his family of ten, but, unfortunately, his optimism didn't last long. On the second night, the Jandamarines arrested all the remaining Jews in the village, and concentrated them in the village school, from where they were transferred by train to Kassa, the nearest big city.

I could not have felt more deeply wounded if a knife had sliced

through my body. My parents and their sweet grandchildren were in the hands of the hated and feared Jandamarines, the special suburban police force known for its brutality. These barbarians had been harassing my father for years, from the time we became Hungarians, and now they had my precious family in their custody, God-knows-where or for what nefarious purpose. Why couldn't I have been more persuasive, more insistent, and made my parents come to Budapest before this! A feeling of melancholy spread through me, and I pictured them being awakened from their sleep in the middle of the night and dragged from the house they had lived in for forty years as respected citizens, for a fate that could be only one of doom.

My day of despair had only just begun. Thirsting for news, for some idea of the actual situation, I headed for the kosher restaurant where I was hopeful the information "network" would still be operative. To my increasing sadness, it was. Sitting in the restaurant was a soccer-playing friend from the city of Nagyszollos, where I had spent about eleven months with my sister and brother-in-law and their five children, learning trades. There was no time or inclination for small talk.

"What's going on in Nagyszollos?" I asked.

He made no attempt to soften the report. "Last night," he said, "we were all herded into the big synagogue. I saw your sister and her family there. I took a chance and just went out and jumped over the backyard fence. I took off my star, went to the station, hopped on a train, and here I am."

"And the others?"

He shrugged and shook his head, as if to say what happened to them could not be good.

Dazed by the terrible turn of events, I returned to my room that evening, to encounter more shocking news. The afternoon mail had brought a postcard from my brother, Josef. He wrote that, with his wife and four children, he had been herded together with the entire Jewish congregation at the Nagyhalasz railroad station to await deportation to an unknown destination. He was writing to say "Good-bye."

This was more than I could bear. My parents, my sister and her family, and now my brother and his. I have heard that someone struck by a sledgehammer or a bullet is often so stunned and shocked by the impact that, for an instant, he feels no pain. With

this third blow to my heart in a single day, I felt nothing. My mind was blank. My once bright future now one of black shadows, I moved like a zombie to an open window. There was nothing to hold me back, no thread of hope, no fear, no consciousness of religious constraints against taking a life, even one's own. Trembling, tears welling in my eyes for what might have been, I took another step toward the window, and the seemingly inevitable plunge eight stories to the street below. It was as if I was being drawn irresistably forward by the force of a siren song promising an end to my torment. As I moved toward the window, a wave of nostalgia swept over me—a flood of longing for my beloved parents, my brothers and sisters, my childhood...

Reprieve

I was a step away from ending my life when I suddenly felt warm hands on my arm and my face, and a voice pleading with me. It was our housekeeper, the wonderful gentile woman in her fifties who loved us and whom we loved. When she served us the breakfast that was part of our rental arrangement, she made us feel like kings.

"What happened, Mr. Wieder?" she asked gently.

"Look at this postcard I got from uncle," I told her. For all I knew, she had already seen it. "And here's a card from my brother." I told her, too, what I had heard in the restaurant about my sister. "Can you blame me?" I asked.

She nodded sympathetically, but declared: "Listen, this is irresponsible. If you jump, you're not going to accomplish anything. Your parents are in danger, your brother is in danger, your sister is in danger, and you are the only one who is still free and can still help them. So, please, please, just calm down."

Her words made perfect sense, of course, and as I considered what she had said, she led me to a chair and made me sit down. Patting my face to calm me, she told me to wait there, and, convinced I was under control, she went to bring me a glass of tea. By this time, Bubi arrived, and as we discussed the postcards and my near suicide, we agreed that our housekeeper was right—it was my duty to stay alive and, instead of doing away with life, get into action to save it.

First, I had to inform my brother, Armin, of the bad news I had

about our parents and his children. I broke it as gently as I could, but I was still direct. Tragic news is not easily softened, and he and his wife, Helen, were totally distraught. We parted, Armin in stunned silence. I was determined to remain strong.

The next day I came to see him again and his wife told me, "Armin hasn't had a bite to eat since yesterday."

"Armin," I said, scolding him, "What's the matter with you? Why don't you eat?"

His face red with tears, he muttered, "I'm not going to eat until I see my children."

"And how," I demanded, "are you going to accomplish that, sitting here and fasting?"

He shrugged hopelessly.

I told him, "Go and eat your breakfast, and I promise I will bring your children home to you."

I had no idea whether I could accomplish what I said; but I promised so that he would eat. Based on his experience with me, my brother believed, "When Leichi (my nickname) promises something, he'll do it." I wasn't that sure.

A day or two later, the mail brought somewhat encouraging news. It was a letter from my parents telling me how they and the children had been rounded up by the hated Jandamarines at four in the morning and taken to Kassa with other Torna Jews, for further deportation. At least they were alive.

The Jandamarines were great exponents of police brutality. Cruel to the general public, they plied their trade of hurting people a little more harshly with Jews. Once you were accused of a crime—in this case, being Jewish—you were handled as if you were guilty.

As I was to hear from my mother later, they had burst into the house at 4 o'clock on the morning after Passover, yelling, "Hurry, hurry."

"Where are you taking us?" she asked as she packed some left over matzohs and milk for the children. They replied, "You don't have to take anything with you, because where we are taking you, you will not need food." This was their "polite" way of telling my parents, "We're going to execute you." Actually, they were empowered only to take the village Jews to the village school. Despite the urgency of the Jandamarines' commands, my parents were able to take along a few belongings, and some hidden money.

From the school they were marched toward the railroad station. Ironically, with all the friends and admirers my parents had among their gentile neighbors, the only people who expressed anything like sympathy or wished them well were some Gypsies on the road. "Why are they taking the Jews away?" the Gypsies asked. "Aren't they as good as we are?" In the next two or three weeks, all the Gypsies were deported, too.

When I jubilantly read the letter from my parents, I walked as quickly as I could to Armin's. "Thank God, I have good news," I announced. "Here's a letter from our parents. They are in Kassa with the children, staying with the Deutsches (cousins of ours)." Apparently once the Torna Jews arrived in Kassa, they were handed over to Jewish authorities, perhaps the Judenrat or Jewish cadre, and told that if they had relatives or acquaintances in Kassa, they could live with them. Otherwise, they would be assigned to Jewish families with large apartments in the city. My father was Mrs. Deutsch's uncle, and so my parents predicted—correctly—that the Deutsches would be happy to share their small apartment with them.

"So, Armin," I said, "they're alive and safe, and there's nothing to worry about."

"What do you mean, 'nothing to worry about'?" said Armin. "Why do you think they were taken from Torna—just to live in Kassa? There is something else in store for them, I'm sure. Maybe this is our chance to do something. I won't be happy until I see my children here, with us."

What he expressed was what I was feeling. We had to do something. But what and how?

A plan began to take form in my mind. As always, whenever I was desperate, my thoughts wandered to the Telekiter, that place of shattered dreams where everything seemed attainable. My plan was to hire a young man and woman to come with me to Kassa. Armed with the proper papers, the young man would bring the boy, Erwin, and the young woman would bring Judi back to Budapest. My parents would travel to the capital on their own, and I'd be on my own. Traveling separately would reduce the danger to all of us.

In the flea market, I went straight to my "allies" and picked out the most reliable boy and asked him if he would be willing to accompany me by train to Kassa on my mission to rescue my parents

and the children. His name was Bela, a stocky youth my age, with a typical peasant face and dressed in tattered clothes. I told him I would give him 1000 pengos, 500 in advance, and the balance of 500 pengos when he returned. If I didn't make it back, I added, my brother would pay him the balance. He agreed.

I considered offering a similar arrangement to one of the Skid Row girls at the flea market, someone who was probably a hooker, but there was always the chance she would spill the story to someone. The same danger existed with Bela, but he had worked for me before, and I trusted him to a degree.

Armin came up with a better idea. He and his wife, Helen, knew a gentile woman named Mary, who had married a cousin of Helen's and now lived in Budapest. The two couples got together frequently, and Mary had come to love my brother's beautiful little daughter, Judi. Perhaps Mary would undertake the mission. If she agreed, it would be much better than having an unknown streetwalker to do the job. Mary was known to Armin and Helen, she was a lady, and she could be trusted.

When we mentioned to Mary that we were looking for a gentile to travel by train to Kassa to bring Judi out, because a Jew was unable to, she said immediately, "Well, why can't I be the one to do it?"

"That would be a great favor," I said, and then proceeded to outline my plan. "I will give you a birth certificate that states Judi is your daughter, along with an address where you can find my parents and a letter to them telling them to let you have Judi."

The birth certificate I gave to Mary was one of two or three my brother kept on hand, that he had bought from the Polish refugees for emergencies. What made this an emergency and Mary's mission such an urgent one was the fact that at the restaurant where I still ate every day, I met some young refugees from Kassa, who told me that the authorities had started to build a ghetto in Kassa in the large brick factory at the end of the city. They said that high fences, reinforced with barbed wire, were erected around the factory and every day more and more families were being rounded up and moved there.

I gave Mary a letter that explained to my parents what we were up to. "Give her Judi," I wrote, "and, hopefully, she will succeed in bringing her to Budapest as her own daughter. I'm also planning to come down and bring both of you to Budapest, but I

haven't got all my papers in order yet, so it will take another day. Please don't let yourself be taken to the brick factory. I'm coming in a day—so wait for me."

Her trip went without a hitch. She found my parents at my cousins' address, showed them my letter, and they gave her Judi, who, of course, knew her well and felt comfortable with her. Mary and Judi, who, according to the birth certificate was now Julia, Mary's daughter, took the midnight train back to Budapest.

I did not meet them when they arrived, because I was on the train going in the other direction. Accompanied by Bela, I was on a mission of my own: saving my parents and Erwin.

As I embarked with Bela on this urgent business, I was quivering inside like a bowl of Jello. It was more dangerous than ever for a Jew to pretend he was a gentile, so as I took off my yellow Star of David before leaving my apartment, I felt as if I were signing my death warrant. But I knew I had to go through with the mission, and had to keep my fear bottled up.

Paranoia is a natural side-effect of living on the other side of the law. One form my paranoia took was the belief that the entire Budapest police force had nothing to do but investigate me. I was sure they would find the original Farkas Lajos, and he would tell the story of how he had sold me his papers and his parents' papers. Then, certainly, they would locate me and somehow trace my parents.

It really wasn't that far-fetched, so to make sure the authorities wouldn't ever link me with my parents, I did not use my Farkas Lajos papers, but another set: that of another young gentile, one Strublich Simon. I never knew or met the man whose papers I carried; he was just someone discovered by one of the loafers, a man whose papers I had bought for 300 pengos.

At the entrance to the passageway between the ticket booth and where passengers boarded the train, policemen were posted who asked to see each traveler's identification. Bela walked in front of me and casually showed his papers to the officer who requested them. The papers were returned, and he was waved on through. Now it was my turn. "Be still, my heart," I prayed fervently. "Stop churning, intestines. Don't blink, eyes. Don't tremble, hands." Had Valium been on the market then, it would have been worth a million dollars to me. I presented my Strublich Simon papers, continuing my conversation in Hungarian with Bela as if I

had nothing to worry about. The policeman returned my papers and motioned for me to continue to the ticket counter. I took courage from the fact that I had Bela to talk to and that his being a genuine gentile with proper credentials, who had been passed through, would make the authorities presume I was genuine, too. Passing that first test was very important. As time went on with Bela, I felt more and more confident that I could successfully play the role of a good gentile.

Controlling myself, I apparently showed no outside sign of being afraid. Being asked for my ID papers when I boarded the train was a much less frightening experience than showing them at the passageway. We settled in for the journey.

My cousins' home, where my parents had been staying, was only a short walk from the Kassa railroad station. I had expected to go right in, but as we approached the house, an unpleasant sight stopped me. There was a policeman right at the entrance, and carriages and wagons being loaded outside. Obviously, something was going on in the house.

"Wait a minute, Bela, I'm afraid to go in. You're a gentile, so you have nothing to worry about. I'm afraid to take a chance." I told him to go in and look for Herman Deutsch's apartment. Once there, he was to ask for my parents by their real names and tell them their son, Leichi, was here.

Bela went in without being stopped, and came out to report, "The deportation is in progress in this building; the Deutsches are just about to board their carriages. Deutsch told me your parents and Erwin moved during the night to the next street to avoid deportation and await your arrival, as you asked in your letter which was delivered by Mary."

Bela and I hurried over to the next street, Zrinyi, and found number 22, the home of a friend, where my worried parents greeted me with great relief.

"Why did you have to come?" my father said. "Why do you risk your life? If you want to help us, just do one thing—take Erwin to his parents and leave us here."

He was off on his usual path. "We are elderly people; we don't want to be different from all other Jews. Whatever will befall the other Jews, we want to share the same thing. We don't want to run, we don't want to escape. Don't worry about us. Just take little Erwin."

I tried to convince him with words from the Talmud, which says, "You have to save your soul; if you're in danger, you have to do something about it." Then I sounded my old theme: "You always pray to God that He should help you, but there is a saying, 'God helps those who help themselves.' So this is the time when we have to do something about the situation. Otherwise, you'll be taken to the ghetto, and from there deported. Your life is in danger. Polish refugees have told me how Jews are being deported, executed, tortured. You have to come with me."

He was still not willing, nor was my mother. "Just take Erwin away and forget about us; we are not going to come."

One reason for my father's intransigence about coming to Budapest was fear. He was deathly afraid of doing anything illegal. Reminding me of the terrible treatment the authorities had inflicted on him on the basis of unfounded charges, he said: "If they did all that to me when I did nothing, what will they do if I really do something illegal? They'll torture me to death."

Also, he didn't want to leave his congregation. In that attitude, he was behaving in a way consistent with hundreds of Jewish leaders of that place and time. For example, there was the beloved rabbi of Galanta, with whom Bubi and I had studied in 1934 and 1935 after Yeshiva in Nitra. When news reached us that deportation was inevitable, a group of young Jews in Budapest formed a delegation to approach the Galanter rabbi and urge him to come to Budapest. But he refused. "I want to go with my flock. Wherever my congregation goes, there is where I am going," he said. And so he was deported with his family and congregants, and perished with them in the gas chamber.

I realized I had to be more emphatic. Never before did I remember ever having spoken back to my parents. My mother was to me an angel, whose word I never questioned or wanted to, and my father was the absolute monarch of our house, so even if I had wanted to talk back, I never would have dared.

But this was such an extreme situation, it was necessary. "Listen, Mother and Father," I said. "I always listen to you and I was always an obedient child. But right now, I have to be in charge, and you have to listen to me. I know more about these things than you do. You are in real danger, and whether you like it or not, you are going to come with me to Budapest."

Predictably, my father said what he had been saying all along.

"My dear son, just take care of yourself and save your life. We're old and we don't want anything to happen to us that is different from the others; whatever is their fate will be ours. Just take Erwin to his parents, and don't bother with us."

"I didn't risk my life to come here to save only Erwin; I came to save my parents. Whether you like it or not, you're going to listen to me and do what I tell you. I know the dangers better than you do. I know what's going on and what can happen to you and all the Jews. You'll be taken away."

My mother spoke up using her affectionate name for me. "Listen to Laizerl. If he wants you to do this, why don't you listen?"

My father, usually the authoritarian, began pleading and crying. "It's no use crying," I said. "I'm in charge, and you are going to listen to me. You are going to do what I tell you."

Somehow, the intensity and determination of my words had their effect, and he said quietly, "All right, what do you want me to do?"

"Well, first of all, I want to shave off your beard."

This must have astonished him more than what I had said just before. For years he had worn his beard as a proud symbol of his religious Orthodoxy and his station in his community. The beard was an essential part of his self-identity.

"But why?" he asked in an anguished tone.

"I want to get you out of here tonight and take you on the train to Budapest, not as Jews, because Jews are not permitted to travel, but as gentiles. I want you to look one hundred percent gentile, and since gentiles rarely wear beards, I'm going to have to cut off your beard." (It was easy to spot a Jewish couple—the husband with his beard and the wife in her unadorned *sheitl*—wig—a mile away.)

There was no time for sentimentality, and I began my task. He cried like a baby having a precious belonging taken from him. He'd had that beard for thirty-five years. My mother also wept and so did I, but it had to be done. I took a regular scissors and cut around as much as I could. Then I used the pair of barber type scissors that my father kept with him to trim his beard of an out-of-place hair. Orthodox Jews are forbidden to use a razor—but I took one from my pocket, and began to shave him.

"What are you doing to me!" he wailed. I felt as if I were rob-

bing him of his faith, his manhood, his dignity all at once—but the shave continued until his face had the hairless appearance of any Hungarian gentile.

The next project was to dress him in the style of Hungarian peasants. When he was dragged from his home in Torna for transfer to Kassa, my father had followed a natural impulse and chosen the best suit and black hat he owned to wear on the journey. His shoes, too, were the finest—and, like the rest of his outfit, totally inappropriate for his new identity. I told him I'd be right back with proper clothing. The Kassa flea market was only two blocks away, and if I had any fear about being stopped and held, I suppressed it. For my father, I got a green hat with a big hole in the front, a riding habit made up of a filthy peasant shirt, and even filthier jodhpurs (riding pants), and stiff, second-hand riding boots. To complete the picture, I got him an old pipe and a tobacco pouch typical of those used by the peasants.

He took off his fine suit and put on what I had brought from the flea market. The clothing fit after a fashion, but the boots wouldn't go over his thick calves, so I cut the boots with a penknife, then arranged the pants so the cuts would not be visible. He complained, however, that he could not walk in the boots because they were too tight.

"Don't worry. We're only going to Budapest, and tomorrow, with God"s help, Armin or I will give you a pair of comfortable shoes."

He wasn't satisfied. "What if I should be caught and put in prison, and for months these will be the only shoes I have with me? I can't walk around in these shoes; they're tight and uncomfortable. What if I get caught?"

I held back a laugh. "Because you cannot walk in these shoes, " I said, "you're not going to be caught." There was no question he was uncomfortable, but I told him, "Don't worry. You have to bear a little discomfort. This is not a question of luxury, but whether or not we're going to survive."

With all my father's complaining, he looked like a nice peasant, and so did my mother. She was easier to deal with. She loved me so much she didn't question anything I told her. For her transformation, I bought a peasant blouse and skirt and an embroidered scarf for her head. The outfit I picked was something a middle-class peasant would wear. I remembered that when peasant women

travelled they carried a large straw basket containing their belongings, which was placed in a white bed sheet and tied aroung their shoulder and chest. In addition they carried a smaller basket with handles which held their food. So I bought these articles and put a loaf of bread and a piece of ham, together with a knife, in her hand-basket to complete her outfit. With these details taken care of, my parents looked like a handsome peasant couple.

Obsessed with getting my parents to Budapest, I allowed no other thoughts to distract me. It seems it extended even to myself. Ironically, while I was so concerned that my parents look like peasants down to the most minute detail, I was dressed in my black pin-striped Sabbath suit, the same type of dark conservative suit that I had made my father discard, and a dead giveaway that I was Jewish. To this day, I cannot understand why the implication of wearing that suit never occurred to me.

Friends in Kassa had given my parents some household articles, which I put in parcels. I rented a bicycle for Bela to take the packages to the post office and mail them to my brother's Budapest address.

When my parents were deported to Kassa, my father managed to take two thousand dollars with him. The money had come to my parents in payment for goods from customers who received it from relatives in the United States. American dollars were highly valued, and so my father decided to hold on to them rather than to exchange them for Czech crowns. Now, he gave me the money, all in nice hundred-dollar bills, most of which I sewed into his suit jacket and some into the waistband of my trousers. Coupled with what little money I would earn, this served to cover all our needs, especially the high rent for my parents' living quarters, and the monies that would be needed to pay for the protection of some members of our family.

It was about 6 p.m. when I presented my parents with their aryan papers. I urged them to learn all the data by heart, in case they should have to undergo any questioning about their identification, so that their answers would conform with what was in the papers.

"Okay, Father," I said, "here are your ID papers and working book. Your name is Farkas George. You live in Tapolca. If someone should ask you, 'What are you doing in Kassa?', say you were

visiting your sister, anybody. And when you go to the train, don't buy a ticket to Budapest, but to Tapolca.

"The train to Tapolca, the home of Farkas George, passes through Budapest, where you will get off, but it will arouse less suspicion if your ticket is straight through to Tapolca (a small village)."

My mother needed less of a briefing. She was so well acquainted with the behavior and customs of Christian peasants, that she even knew many of their prayers by heart. She knew not only the prayers, but how to handle a rosary properly. I planned to get her a rosary in Budapest; but, for the moment, my only concern was that they be considered passable gentiles.

On the subject of train travel, I knew that it was a usual habit of Jews to get to a train at the last minute, while peasants tended to get there early. Once my parents knew their new names by heart and would respond to the names, Mr. and Mrs. Farkas, I decided they should go to the station. The train left at 12:30 a.m. and it was only 10 o'clock, but I thought it would be a good idea to "just go to the station and buy tickets to Tapolca, and then make believe you are sleeping. Don't go to the train at the last minute, like the Jews or businessmen."

So it was all set. There was no turning back now. I knew that trying to escape was punishable by severe penalty. At that time none of us, including myself, knew for certain what lay in store for the Jews in Kassa (as much as I feared the worst), so it was quite a responsibility for me to encourage them to risk their lives by trying to escape. But I felt it was the only way they could survive and that, with God's help, everything would work out all right.

It was time to go. We embraced, and off they went. Bela was going to take Erwin, now known as Pishta to conform to the name on the false birth certificate I had made out in Budapest. I concocted a story for Bela to explain why he was in Kassa: He had a brother in the army who was stationed in Kassa, and Pishta, his nephew, had accompanied him on the visit.

An hour after my parents left, I told Bela he should leave with his "nephew," little Erwin. I had already trained Erwin to understand that his name from now on was Pishta and that he should call Bela "Uncle." I cautioned Bela not to go near my parents before the train left, so as not to confuse them. But at the same time,

he should keep an eye on them from a distance. And, should anything happen to me or my parents, he should carry out his mission of delivering the boy to his parents. I reminded him that my brother would fulfill the second part of the bargain if I could not, and Bela assured me he would do as ordered.

So everything was fine. For a few minutes after Bela and Pishta left the house, I joyfully reviewed the events of a very successful day. My parents and my nephew were on the way to being saved, and it had all gone without a hitch.

I left the apartment in a very optimistic mood. But I had barely gone ten steps, when I caught sight of a figure lurking in the shadows—a man with the appearance of a typical Hungarian detective in a long leather coat. Approaching him, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"Hello," he said. "Can I see your papers?"

The detective's request jolted me as if it were a physical blow. If they arrested me, I had confidence I could get out one way or another, but what about my parents? What if *they* were arrested? I had promised them—with one-hundred-percent certainty—that they would arrive safely in Budapest the following day, and now they would wind up in jail instead. My father had told me his shoes were uncomfortable and he could not walk without pain. What, he had asked, would he do about his aching feet if he were arrested? "You see, my son," he would tell me now, "I was right."

I was sick with worry, but when the detective asked me for my papers, I replied, in as calm and matter-of-fact a voice as possible, "Of course." I had no idea whether he had just come by at that moment by coincidence, or had come in response to an informant, some suspicious neighbor who had seen me go in and out of a Jewish house all day when I was not wearing the yellow star that identified Jews. Perhaps it was my *Shabbos* suit. Whatever had brought the detective, he was a real threat.

I handed him my wallet with the papers, which he did not even bother to glance at, but merely put in his pocket.

"What's your name?" he asked, pulling out an automatic revolver.

"Strublich Simon," I said, giving the name of the person those papers identified.

"Where are you going?"

"To the railroad station."

"Very well," he said. "I am also going to the station, so come along with me. I'll hold on to the papers. Once we get to the station, we will investigate you. We just want to make sure you're telling us the truth. So don't worry, there won't be any trouble. If you're going to catch the 12:30 train, and everything checks out, you'll be on it with no problem."

Holding the gun, he said this all very politely, almost as if he gentleman inviting a young woman to dance.

I docilely obeyed all his commands without protest. But as we walked toward the station, where he said he was headed to look for Jewish escapes, my heart was pounding, not only out of fear for myself—which I felt, of course—but for my parents and my nephew. I visualized them all being captured and punished severely.

It was about 11:45 at night and pitch dark, for while the main thoroughfare had electricity, the small side streets where we walked had none. I saw two familiar figures in the shadows just ahead—Bela and Pishta walking at a snail's pace. Somehow I had to warn Bela that I was in trouble and that he should get away from here and not go to the station.

As we passed, I said as loudly and naturally as I could, "Please, Mister Detective, please let me go."

Bela did not react in any way. He just continued on his way with Pishta. I knew that admitting the standard response to any male suspect contending he was Christian was an order to "Take down your pants."

So I took a chance and said to him, "If you want to know the truth, I am Jewish, but if you'll let me go, I'll make it worth your while. I'll give you a hundred dollars."

"No, no," he replied. "I don't want anything from you."

"How about two hundred?" I said. "Nobody has to know about it."

He wasn't buying, but luckily he wasn't outraged either. He just motioned for me to keep going.

When we got to the station, there was a room the police had commandeered for interrogation of those suspected of being Jews posing as Christians. They had already rounded up several suspects, and my heart palpitated wildly at the possibility that my parents were among them. But my parents were not among the eight

persons arrested, and I felt calmer. It was now past midnight, and there were still ten critical minutes when the police might sweep through the terminal and find my parents, decide there was something suspicious about them, and arrest them. If they were rounded up, it was doubtful my mother and father could fool their captors.

My mind remained fixed on my parents' safety. If the detective went into the waiting room, he might arrest them. Or he might start questioning Bela, and Bela, as a way of securing his own freedom, might reveal something about my parents. Too many things could go wrong in those minutes before the train to Budapest entered and left the Kassa station. I had to keep the detective busy, so he would not go out into the terminal to check other passengers.

Because I had admitted to him that I was Jewish he asked me, "Where did you get these papers?" I replied that I had obtained them in the flea market in Budapest.

"Don't tell me they have a booth that sells ID papers."

"Not quite. I had to find someone who wanted money badly enough to sell me his papers."

"How much did you pay for them?"

"Five hundred pengos."

"Why did you want gentile papers? Have you something to hide?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. It's just that I've heard rumors that life is going to be difficult for Jews, and it might be better for me to live as a gentile."

The detective seemed to be amused by my chatter, and sufficiently interested to keep up our conversation. Suddenly I heard a wonderful sound. It was the train arriving for Budapest. If only I could keep him occupied a bit longer.

When he asked me why I had come to Kassa, I told the detective an involved story that I had worked out in my mind as I walked with him to the station.

The sounds of that train moving again was indeed the most heavenly sound, and I knew that whatever happened to me now, my parents were headed for Budapest, where with God's help they would arrive safely in the morning.

The other Jews who had been detained, including myself, were now taken to the police station, where we were interrogated, one by one, into the early hours of the morning. It must have been 3:00

a.m. when my turn came, and by then they had a whole report about me and my papers, including the false description I had made up about the person who had sold them to me. Interestingly, there was no mention of the attempted bribe I had made the detective.

During the interrogation, the other Jews were understandably upset. Many of them cried, but I was relieved and quite content. My parents were en route to freedom and so was Erwin, in Bela's care. And, call it cockeyed optimism, but I always felt sure that I would be able to take care of myself and that nothing drastic would befall me.

The police gave me a few slaps across the face as a means of intimidation, but nothing more. There was no invective, such as "dirty Jew" or anything of that sort. It was just a standard police investigation.

Finally, I was put behind bars—or would have been, except that the cells were so overcrowded there was no room for us recent arrivals. So I just lay down on the cement floor of the corridor, and, without a blanket to cover me or a pillow for my head, I fell fast asleep, exhausted by the events of the nerve-wracking day that culminated in the arrest for the crime of being Jewish with gentile papers.

Sleeping in the rudest conditions, being fed the barest, most unpalatable food, and enduring oppressive overseers were familiar to me from my labor camp days.

My Guardian Angel

As it turned out, we men who were detained in the Kassa prison fared relatively well, working every day in the fresh air. Our job was to lug coal from one location to another for new air raid shelters being built for police by civilian workers. The worst part of my imprisonment was the insecurity of the situation—none of us knew what the next day would bring. And throughout I suffered great anxiety about the fate of my parents. Had they reached Budapest safely? Or, God forbid, had they been arrested? Deported? Worse? It was impossible to get any news.

Our work helped us keep our minds off our troubles. Carrying coal every day from one location to another eventually gave me the chance to approach one of the civilian workers, a woman in her forties, who carried bricks to the shelter. One day when I passed her in the cellar as I carried my load of coal, I asked her if she would buy certain articles for me on the outside. She seemed cooperative, and so I gave her a 100-pengo bill and asked her to buy me some cigarettes, toothpaste, a toothbrush, soap, a pencil and some notepaper.

The following morning when I met her again, she told me she had bought what I requested, and suggested that I go into a toilet in the shelter, where she followed me a few minutes later. It was my good luck that she turned out to be a Slovak who did not sympathize at all with the Hungarian regime. She had brought me everything I asked, and in appreciation, I told her to keep the change, but she refused. She told me she was more than happy to

do me a good turn because she felt very sorry for me in my plight.

Obviously, she was taking a risk helping me in any way, but she was willing. Her only motivation, as far as I could tell, was that she was a person of good will, sympathetic to someone in trouble. Because she seemed so sympathetic, I dared to ask her another, more serious favor. Would she object, I asked, if I used her address for my correspondence? Without a moment's hesitation, she gave me her name, Maria Stefanova, and address, and said not only would she be happy to receive my mail for me, but that if ever I had the chance to escape, I should not hesitate to come to her place and stay with her until the danger was over! I egotistically decided then that this very plain-looking, plump peasant woman was single and had taken a fancy to me. If I could escape, she would be quite content to keep me until the war was over. The arrangement I envisioned was not an especially appealing one, but her offer gave me confidence that I could escape.

Naturally, the first thing I did was write a letter to my brother in Budapest. There was no danger of the letter being intercepted by postal authorities—mail was not censored in those days. The only risk was that someone might see Maria taking a letter to or from me, so we were very careful, especially because, being a Slovak, she was a potential enemy and was watched a little more closely than a Hungarian worker would have been. The woman took my letter and quickly put it in her bosom.

Four days later, she had a reply for me. I could barely wait to tear it open. In the toilet, I quickly read what, to my delight, turned out to be a long letter from my parents! They and Erwin (now Pishta) had arrived safely and everything was all right. The only problem was how worried and unhappy they were about what they feared might have befallen me.

I wrote back that I was all right and happy to know that my mission had been fulfilled and that they were safe in Budapest. I assured them I would take the first opportunity I could to join them.

Meanwhile Maria and I had become friends, meeting every second day in the toilet for a few seconds for her to bring me mail or supplies, or to take a letter from me. Whenever we met, she encouraged me to try to escape, an idea for which I needed no encouragement.

I soon evolved a plan, and discussed it with a friend, Avrohom Berkowitz, an old schoolmate of mine who was imprisoned with

me. As part of our prison work, we had to carry coal from the prison basement to the police horseback riding academy, two buildings away. The circular arena was covered with sawdust and bordered by a wooden fence, which had doors a person could open to escape the galloping horses. The passageway formed by this wooden fence would become a temporary hiding place for me between the time we finished work and dark. On the outside wall of the academy were many high, large windows, which were locked from the inside and required a key to open.

When we made our coal deliveries to the academy, we passed a boiler room in which the maintenance supervisor kept all the keys—there were hundreds hanging on a long wooden board. Since there were no guards watching us, I was able to sneak into the boiler room each time we passed and put several keys in my pocket to find the one that would fit the window lock. After emptying my wheelbarrow of coal, I tried the keys while my friend Berkowitz covered for me. One had to fit the windows I decided, so each time we went back with coal, I tried out another five keys, standing on a wooden platform to reach the eight-foot-high window. If someone came along, Berkowitz would whistle or call to alert me.

I must have tried about fifty keys in my many trips back and forth between the prison basement and academy, until I finally found a key that would open the windows. I hid it in the sawdust under the window and returned all the rest of the keys.

My plan was to hide in the passageway of the academy after work until late in the evening, find the key to the window and make my escape to the street. Then I would try to find Maria's home.

Berkowitz seemed to like my plan, but he startled me with a plea not to try it. Even though everything might work out fine, he said, I should not attempt escaping because others would be left behind, and my escape would make their situation worse than it was at present. Until now, he continued, we were working in fresh air, unguarded except for one policeman who took us to and from prison. Conditions were not so severe that an escape that jeopardized everyone else was merited, he argued. As soon as the authorities discovered that escape was possible, they would stop outside work, put the prisoners under heavy guard and make their lives miserable.

I had to admit my friend was right, and inasmuch as working in the fresh air was one of the great advantages afforded the prisoners, I promised him I would not try to escape for a while, at least not until the situation got worse.

I had been in jail three weeks when one Sunday afternoon the alarm sounded and we were given ten minutes to be ready to march. They would not tell us our destination, but we soon found out we were marching toward the brick factory where fifteen thousand Jews from Kassa and vicinity had already been concentrated behind high barbed-wire fences under heavy military guard.

When we arrived, we were given good news. We were told we were now "free" and that everyone could make his own living arrangements in any of the barracks there. Of course, we were very happy to be out of jail, but our happiness was short-lived, as the very next morning we saw the long trains of cattle cars coming toward the factory to pick up Jews for deportation. On each car were two German S.S. men with automatic pistols at the ready, just waiting for an excuse to shoot.

While we were "free," I took the opportunity to roam a bit in the hopes of finding people I knew. I remember meeting Mr. Gluck, the man whose daughter I would marry after the war, and asking him of her whereabouts. He told me that she had gone to Slovakia with her brother's children to join her sister-in-law's family.

Most of the Slovakian Jews had been deported as early as 1942, but a few very well-to-do families were permitted to stay as long as they kept paying an enormous sum of money every month as ransom for their safety. That situation did not last indefinitely, of course, and eventually all of those Jews were also deported, except for the few, like my wife, who managed to go underground.

Mr. Gluck and I chatted some more before parting, and then I met another *landsman*, Mr. Lichtenstein. "Where is your son, Tibi?" I asked. "In labor camp" he said, adding, "why don't I see your parents here? Where are they?"

"Safely in Budapest, thank God," I said, and went on to tell him of the events preceding my arrival at the brick factory. I added that I hoped to make good my escape from here and join my parents soon.

"I want you to promise me something," Mr. Lichtenstein pleaded.

"What?"

"That if something happens to us, you'll take care of Tibi." He extended his hand, in a gesture that requested a clasp to seal the bargain.

"Here is my hand,"I said. "If God helps me to survive, I will take care of your son."

The factory was divided into two sections, which stretched out on either side of the highway. By chance, I had settled myself in on the right side, while the train pulled in to the opposite side. A heavy guard was posted between the two sections, and it was impossible for any of us to cross the highway and walk from one side of the ghetto to the other. Still, I was anxious to make that crossing because I had heard that my two uncles—Joseph, who had written me that dreadful card about my parents, and David Guttman—were on the other side with their large families. I hadn't seen them in a long time, and I wanted to say "hello." (Unfortunately, I realized it might very well also be "good-bye.") I was also very interested to see my cousin Archie, David's son, for whom I had obtained a set of aryan papers but who had never returned to Budapest.

It was impossible even to get word to the other side of the ghetto because of the guards all around, but I decided to try to get through. I learned that while Hungarian police and Jandamarines were patrolling the ghetto outside the fence, after 9 p.m. Jewish guards were added to patrol inside the fence. I thought that maybe a Jewish guard would be helpful, so about 9:30 that night I headed for one of the open latrines located near the fence.

"Young man, where are you going?" came the voice of a guard.

"I have to use the toilet, sir."

"You know it's after 9 o'clock, and you're not supposed to be here."

"Well," I said, "I don't know the rules because we were just brought here from the police station."

"Well, do it fast, and get lost."

I obeyed him, going back to my barracks immediately because it was clear there was no monkeying around, even with a Jewish guard.

In the morning, the cars kept pulling into the other side of the camp. I was lurking near the office of the Judenrat (the Jewish cadre), when I heard that one of the guards was looking for

"strong young men able to do some hard work. They're needed for the other side of the camp." Because I wanted to get to the other side of camp by any means, I said, "Here I am," and with eleven other young volunteers, was taken to the other side and given over to guards there.

Our assignment was to put the sick and elderly people who were sleeping in a hospital area into the first cars. In teams of two, we took the disabled and, as humanely as we could, lifted them into the cars. "My bones, my bones," they cried in pain. "My leg." "My back." We tried to be gentle, but we had to obey the command to load them on the wagons.

Because we were not occupied with this hateful task every minute, I managed to slip away for a while. As I strolled, I kept asking, "Where are the Guttmans? Where are the Guttmans?" and finally someone who knew my uncles pointed out the barracks where they were staying. I ran over and saw a sight that took me back to the story of the Exodus. When the Hebrews fled from Egypt, they made *matzohs* (unleavened bread) on their backs. My relatives, realizing that in a few hours they were going to be put in the cars and taken away, baked emergency rations for themselves.With plain paper and garbage as fuel (they had no wood or anything solid to burn), they were making a meagre, flat pancake from flour and water, baking it on a rusted metal plate cover supported by two bricks.

This was the bread of affliction, the *matzohs* of the Jews' last moments.

I embraced my relatives, including Cousin Archie.

"Archie," I said, "Why didn't you come back to Budapest?"

"My father didn't let me. His wish was that the whole family be together."

"Where are the papers?" I asked frantically. "The papers, the papers. Give me the papers—I can use those papers right now."

"I was afraid to keep those papers with me," Archie said, "and so I hid them under a big stone. Somewhere. I really don't know where."

We grew silent. I pressed his arm in a hurried farewell, wondering whether I would ever see him again.

Cramming those old people into those cattle cars that day was sufficient to make me decide that this was my last chance to escape. I concluded that I would be better off to be caught by the

S.S. and killed right on the spot, rather than be treated as were those innocent people who were shoved into those trains. Eighty people were crammed into each car like sardines. Even if there were fewer people, there were still no seating accommodations. In this horrible, crowded condition without food or water, these pitiable victims had the doors of their cars sealed by the S.S. before the trains left.

It took them four days to clear out that side of the ghetto before starting on mine, where another approximately ten thousand innocent victims were housed.

Standing near the office, I overheard a member of the Judenrat, an organization formed by the German S.S. of influential Jews, say, "It's no problem, nothing to worry about. Everyone's going to do farm work, and in the fall, everyone will come home safely."

I couldn't contain myself. I had to ask, "Sir, how do you know that this is the truth?"

"How do I know? This is my information."

"Well, I have other information," I said. "I have just come from Budapest, the Polish refugees there are saying that we might be taken to be killed."

But despite what I told him he naively believed the S.S. promises that if all orders were obeyed, nothing drastic would happen to the deportees. In turn, he and some other Judenrat members raised the hopes of the other Jews by telling them, that all the Jews transported from the ghetto were being taken to do farm work in the country, and at the end of the summer would be released and sent home.

I wasn't the least bit convinced, however, and so I made a decision: I was going to make a break for freedom.

Back in the barracks, I told the younger boys of my feelings, and encouraged them to join me in making a break. No matter how many of us fail in the attempt, I said, it will still be an ultimate victory for whoever makes it.

Unfortunately, most of the boys had been influenced by the S.S. promises.

Apparently, it was easier for these misguided young people to believe what they had been told than to listen to me asking them to risk their lives to make a break. They feared that attempting to escape would mean certain death for those who were caught, while the S.S. had promised them their "liberty" in due time, so long as

they were obedient to their masters.

"Boys, listen," I said. "It *is* more dangerous than you think. I came from Budapest, and I know more about the situation than you. I think it would be a good idea to break out."

"What do you mean, 'break out'?" a friend who was with me in jail asked.

"Well, all these fences are very primitive. If you just push them, they'll topple over." They were plain fences made of wooden frames with criss-crossed barbed wire, planted in very soft, fresh earth. One push and the whole thing would topple over.

"What if we organized a revolt of a thousand people?" I said. "We go to the fences and say the guards shoot. How many could they hit? Twenty percent? Thirty percent? A lot of people would still be able to save themselves."

The boys weren't buying my idea. "Wieder, it's so easy for you to talk, now that your parents are in Budapest and you're all by yourself. If *our* parents were in Budapest, we'd say you were right, but our parents are here and cannot run. They're elderly people and, anyhow, they wouldn't listen to us, so it's a hopeless case."

Their reaction was discouraging, but understandable. Later, two of my fellow prisoners—one sixteen, the other eighteen—approached me. They knew me from the prison that I was serious about wanting to escape. "Wieder," they said, "whatever you do, take us with you." I agreed.

High fences surrounded the ghetto and searchlights illuminated the area throughout the night. The Hungarian military force was on guard outside the fence, with each soldier no more than ten yards away from the next, while inside the fence we were watched by Jewish police organized by the Judenrat to guard against any escape attempt. The three of us settled down to work on our escape plan.

In view of the rigid watch that was kept, we first planned to find a hiding place right in the ghetto and stay there until the deportation came to an end and the guards left.

The brick factory had exceptionally tall chimneys, and our first idea was to crawl up into them and wait for the guards to leave. But we realized it was impractical. There was too much danger of falling asleep and losing our hold inside the chimney, with the result that we would fall and be killed or seriously hurt. Besides, we were so eager to get out, we didn't think we had the patience to

hide out for as long as it might take to complete the deportation, perhaps another week. For the same reason, we rejected two other ideas: barricading ourselves in one of the factory storerooms or hiding under some of the inactive metal railroad carts that were scattered around the factory.

Because of our impatience, we decided to escape through the fence. We made a reconnaissance of the grounds inside the fences all around the ghetto, and picked out three spots we thought were the least closely guarded through which to make our getaway. We agreed that a few minutes before dusk would be the optimum time for our attempt. The searchlights would be in action, but would not be very effective in the twilight. Also, it would not be until dusk that the Jewish guards came on duty.

All three of us had good friends inside who agreed to act as our lookouts. They would watch the movement of the guards and signal us when it would be safest to move.

I took up a position two feet from where the fence ended, close to a wall of a civilian house which was just at the end of the fence. Outside the fence, some five yards before the wall was a miniature railway comprised of several carts used for carrying bricks. The railway, which ran perpendicular to the fence, would serve to screen the ground between the carts and the house. The guard marched up and down only as far as the carts, and I asked the boy who was covering me to watch the guard closely and whistle each time the guard made his turn. I began digging in the soft dirt, stopping at each whistle. When the guard turned back, I dug two or three scoops. All in all, it probably took five tense minutes before the hole was dug and I had crawled under the fence toward the civilian courtyard. Each time I heard the whistle I crawled a few feet farther until I reached the courtyard.

Once inside the courtyard, I was able to stand up without being seen. Staggering like a drunken peasant, I made my way out of the courtyard along a narrow dirt path toward a tree that my two young prison-mates and I had selected for our rendezvous. It was about three hundred yards away across the open field outside the ghetto. Exhausted, I lay down under the tree to wait, but half an hour passed without either one of them putting in an appearance, and I decided I had better move on.

After the war I found out from one of them that both were caught escaping, were beaten by the guards and taken back to the ghetto.

My big problem now was what to do next. I had no identification papers with me and there were no Jews left in the city whom I could contact for help. I thought of my friend Maria, the only person I knew in town.

It was around 10 o'clock that night when I finally found her house—Szepsi Street 58. I entered the courtyard and stopped in front of the kitchen window, hoping to see her, but sitting in the room were a man in his late forties and a young boy. At the time I had become friendly with Maria, I was under the impression that she must be either a widow or a spinster. It had seemed obvious from her manner that I appealed to her, and I had thought that was probably the reason she had offered me her home for shelter and had encouraged me to escape. Seeing a man and child in her home was something I hadn't bargained for, and not seeing the woman herself made matters worse.

I didn't know what to do. Should I go in? Should I stay out? Police and Jandamarines were constantly passing along the street and they would surely notice me standing in the backyard. I debated for some ten minutes, until I realized there was nothing else I could do but take a chance and go in.

The man was dressed in Slovakish attire, so I greeted him in his own language with a hearty *"Dobry wecher"* which means, "Good evening." His response was a brusque, "What do you want?"

"I am very hungry. Could I have a piece of bread?"

He measured me for a while in silence, then asked me to sit down. He put some bread and a knife in front of me, and as I started to eat, asked me, "Are you Jewish?"

I was glad he had asked. I wanted to know immediately whether he would help me or not, whether or not he would try to turn me into the authorities. It had to be resolved. Dressed as I was in my best suit, which I had not taken off since the day I was arrested, I had a typical Jewish appearance, and so his question wasn't remarkable.

When I said, "Yes, I am Jewish," he asked, "Aren't you the young man from the jail who my wife told me so much about?"

I nodded yes, relieved that he knew about me. "Where is your wife?"

"You won't believe this, but my wife has been out looking for you every night since the deportation started. She's looking for you right now—and here you are."

As we spoke, his wife, looking disappointed, came into the room. When she realized it was indeed me in her home, she drew a deep sigh of relief and hugged and kissed me. Overwhelmed by relief and happiness, she said over and over again, "I'm so glad." I was embarrassed, but also pleased that the couple apparently would live up to her promise of help. She explained to me that she had learned Monday at work that we'd been taken to the brick factory. Every day she saw the trains loaded with Jewish deportees leaving and, every night since then she went close to the ghetto after work—civilians were allowed to go there—hoping to catch a glimpse of me through the ghetto fence and once again offer to help and plead with me to escape.

Well, now I *had* escaped, and I was taking her up on her offer of help.

She motioned for me to hold off on my conversation until she put the boy to bed, to keep him from overhearing what might be damaging if he were to repeat it outside. Then she offered me hot soup, which I ate with relish. When I finished my dinner, they both were visibly shocked to hear me say that I had to hurry up and leave them, as I wanted to catch the 12:30 train for Budapest.

"Don't commit suicide," they pleaded. "Going to the railroad and taking the train to Budapest is signing your death warrant. For heaven's sake, stay here through the war. We'll give you food, and you can sleep in the attic."

"I thank you, but I must go."

"If you insist on going, don't go *now*. Wait until the police aren't looking for Jews any more. Go after all the Jews have been deported."

What they said made sense, but all I could think of was seeing my parents. I was determined to go. "At 12:30 a.m. the express train leaves for Budapest, and I'm going to be on it. If you can help me I would appreciate it very much. If you cannot, I still want you to know that I am grateful for all you have done for me. But I won't rest easy until I see my parents."

It was clear that my decision distressed Maria, but she said, "Sure, we want to help you."

"Then maybe you can help me with some papers," I said.

She understood I meant the papers of a gentile and thought a moment. "I lost my first husband about five years ago. I still have his papers." She searched through the drawers in their house and

found her late husband's ID documents. They were not exactly the best identification for me, since, according to those papers I was supposed to be thirty-five years old when actually I was only twenty-six. But, having no other choice, I accepted the papers, which they so gladly gave me.

So now I had papers which identified me as a Slovak, except that the Slovaks dressed differently than the Hungarians or Jews did. I was still wearing my good *"Shabbos"* (Sabbath) suit that I had been wearing the night I was arrested, and although a little the worse for wear, it still identified me as a Jew. I overcame this problem by offering my suit to Maria's husband in exchange for one of his old ones. My suit happened to be a very good one, but in the circumstances in which I found myself, his looked priceless to me. To further establish the identity I wanted, I took some ash and soot from the oven and smeared my face and tousled my hair so that I resembled a wild man. By the time I finished my make-up, not even my father would have doubted I was a drunken Slovak peasant.

To complete the picture, I asked him for a small sack, in which we put a big chunk of bread and a piece of ham, and closed it with string, and in the manner of a Slovak beggar, I slung the package over my shoulder on a stick. I was particular even to the point of carrying my money the same way the Slovak peasants used to—I put some small change and pengos into an embroidered white handkerchief that Maria gave me. Now, I felt I looked completely aryan.

I gave them my leftover Hungarian money about a thousand pengős and my gold watch, one of my most precious possessions. As far as I was concerned, this was just a down-payment. I made a vow to myself that after the war I would repay them properly.

Being in dire situations makes people nervier than they would ever dare to be in normal circumstances. As if she hadn't already done enough to save my life, I had the *chutzpah* (gall) to ask her to endanger herself more than ever, in order to help me.

My plan, I explained, was to buy a train ticket to a village called Barca, located not far from Kassa, where my new papers indicated I was born. Barca was a one hundred percent Slovak village; it would be natural for a Slovak peasant like me to buy a ticket for Barca. But, of course, Budapest was where I wanted to go. So, to complete my plan, I needed someone to buy a ticket for Budapest

and hand it to me just as the train was coming into the station. Who would possibly do me such a dangerous favor? "Would *you*?" I asked Maria, and she said she would.

She put on her most attractive Slovak national dress, and, before midnight, we set off for the station, with me "drunkenly" and loudly singing all the Slovakish songs I had learned in school.

Close to the station I asked her to go ahead and buy a ticket to Budapest, which by itself, was a suspicious act. However, with her traditional Slovak appearance we hoped that there would be no reason for Maria to be suspected of any wrongdoing. I asked her to buy the ticket, spend some time around the station and then slip me the ticket as my train arrived.

While she bought the ticket, I reeled into the station, a song gurgling from my lips. Two policemen were standing at the entrance, but didn't even bother to ask to see the identification papers of the drunken Slovak who walked between them. But, one of the two did follow me to the ticket counter. Perhaps he was suspicious; perhaps I was overacting. But when I undid my handkerchief to take out money for the ticket, and said in Slovakish, *"Daju mi Kartu Do Barci"*—Give me a ticke to Barca," the policeman looked disappointed, and turned away. If I was going to that typical Slovak town which had no Jews, he must have surmised I was a legitimate aryan.

No more than five minutes elapsed before the train arrived. Hearing it, I walked toward Maria. The train would be in the station for only a few minutes, so there was no time for long goodbyes. In the movies, such an event would have been surrounded by music mounting to a crescendo, but in real life it was much more austere. She handed me the ticket to Budapest, along with a 50-pengo bill. "I saw that you gave all your money to my husband and you have nothing left, so please take this for emergencies," she said. I was more touched than I can say. We quickly clasped hands and whispered "good-bye."

When I boarded that train, I searched out what I thought would be the safest place. You might think I would seek a deserted corner. Instead, I found a compartment occupied by seven German soldiers. Inwardly trembling, outwardly still pretending to be drunk, I entered the compartment and settled in among three of the Germans, taking the last remaining seat. My instincts told me that if the authorities were to look for Jews on this train, they

would not dare ask these German soldiers for their papers.

I started to snore "in character," and actually fell asleep. I slept on and off until the train arrived in Budapest at 8 o'clock the following morning. Not once was I asked for my papers.

Reunion

In Budapest, the police identification procedures were not particularly thorough, and after passing through, I felt like a free man again.

My first dilemma was where to go? In my present attire, I could not possibly go to my apartment or to my brother's. Usually, one had to ask the superintendent of the house to unlock the front door, and when I did, the super in either place might recognize me despite my disguise.

My best bet, I decided, was to go to the home of the two sisters who used to work in our factory, Gita and Lily. I would have taken a cab, but certainly did not look at all like a person who could afford one, so I decided to use the public means of conveyance, a tram.

At the sisters' apartment, I rang the bell, and Gita came to the door. She opened the little peephole, saw a drunken Slovak, closed the viewer and went away. I rang again, and the same thing took place. A third time I rang, and when she approached once more, I cried in desperation, "For heaven's sake, open the door, it's me, Leichi."

When Gita finally opened the door and realized who was standing there, she screamed, "Lily, look who is here, it's Leichi!"

Ignoring how I must have looked, they embraced me, while one of us, I don't know who, had enough presence of mind to close the door behind us. They looked at me as if I were someone who had returned from the dead. They had known only that I was in police

custody in Kassa, perhaps never to be seen or heard from again, and now suddenly I was here.

While I was imprisoned, they had kept in contact with Bubi and with my brother Armin and my parents. "What do you hear about Leichi? " the sisters would ask, and my parents would tell them, "He keeps writing us, and he says that one day he hopes to escape."

Which is what had happened. "Thank God, thank God, you are here, " the girls said over and over again, touching me as if to make sure I was real and not a mirage.

"Sit down and relax," Gita said excitedly, her expressive dark features reflecting her relief at my escape. "Have something to eat," she said, and they prepared a good breakfast for me. Somewhat relaxed, I bathed and changed into one of their brother's suits (he was in labor camp) and carefully hid my life-saving peasant costume in their cabinet. Somehow, I never wanted to discard it, and I kept it with me in the dangerous months to come.

It was still too early to go to my brother's apartment, so the girls helped me kill time by bringing me up to date on the events of the last three weeks.

"I suppose you know what happened to Bubi," Gita said.

"No, I don't know anything," my voice dropping as I sensed something ominous in her tone. "What happened to Bubi?"

She told me the bad news:

Bubi was walking along the street, apparently as self-confident as ever. He had his gentile papers in his pocket, so he wore no yellow star on his overcoat. Through an oversight, however, he had a star on the jacket he wore underneath and somehow his overcoat opened to reveal it. Apparently, a passerby noticed it and called the police. An officer approached Bubi, asking, "Can I see your identification?" But he didn't really have to ask; with a star on his suit, but not on his overcoat, Bubi was obviously a Jew hiding the star. The policeman placed him under arrest, but Bubi resisted, kicking and punching. He finally was subdued and taken away to an improvised camp in Kistarcsa, from where he was deported.

This was, of course, most shocking and depressing news for me, second only to the earlier reports that my parents had been taken away. How I would miss Bubi—my best friend. We had been so fond of philosophizing and sharing our dreams of a Jewish homeland.

Now my despair was deeper, for Bubi was gone, perhaps lost forever. I felt a terrible ache in my heart.

My pulse raced as we neared my brother's place, so eager was I to be reunited with my family. But when I arrived I was disappointed—and, for a moment, concerned—that neither of my parents was there, though Armin and Helen and their children were.

"Where are Mother and Father?"

"Don't worry," Armin said. "Father has admitted himself to the hospital and mother is meeting with your good friend, Bela. The scoundrel!"

Scoundrel? Hadn't he carried out his rescue mission?

He had indeed. The coolest person I have ever known, he had seen me in the custody of the detective and had not been frightened off. I had selected him from all my Skid Row contacts because he was the most reliable of them, a supreme hustler who always came up with the best sets of papers.

Bela had witnessed me under arrest, and had seen my parents, disguised, sitting in the railroad station, but he had never gone to them to say, "I just saw your son with a detective; he's caught." He didn't even talk to my parents the whole trip to Budapest. My parents didn't know I was arrested until the following day when everyone arrived in Budapest, and *then* Bela told them, "By the way, I saw your son. He was taken by a detective. I saw it."

So what made him a scoundrel?

He had seemed to be very loyal to me. But after my parents arrived in Budapest, Bela began showing up at my brother's apartment, where my parents were now living, and demanded blackmail money. My brother had already paid him what he was due for escorting Pishta, but now Bela was saying that I owed him and his cohorts an additional 500 pengos. "If you don't give us the 500," he warned my brother, "we're going to report you." There was no alternative; my brother had to come up with the 500 pengos. Every second or third day, Bela, alone, or with someone, would come to demand money. During the three weeks I was away, my family had six or seven such visits from Bela, usually with someone else, who also claimed I owed him money. Sometimes a cohort alone, someone obviously sent by Bela (the only one who knew my brother's address) would come with the same demand. It was out-and-out blackmail, but my family kept paying.

And now my mother was out meeting Bela, apparently paying him some more "blood money."

As my brother and I spoke about this scheme, my mother returned to the apartment. The moment she caught sight of me, she hugged and kissed me as if I had returned from the dead. "Thank God," she said over and over again, "for being so merciful and allowing me to see you alive."

We talked excitedly about each other's experiences on the day they left Kassa. She told me that almost everyone at the station, except for her and my father, had been asked by police for identification. Fortunately, my parents' peasant disguise was so thorough and authentic-looking, they apparently were not in the least suspected of being Jewish.

Over and over again, my mother stroked my cheek and kissed me and thanked God for her good fortune. It is hard to put into words the beauty of that reunion.

As thrilled as my mother was to see me alive and safe, she was a nervous wreck over what she had experienced with the blackmailers. She'd been out with Bela, all right, but this time to give him an ultimatum.

"Listen, Bela" she told him, "this is the last money I can give you. Unfortunately, we've run out of funds, so if you want to report us to the police, go ahead and report us. But I want to tell you something—if you come once more to my son's place, *I*, not you, will be the one calling the police, and you will be arrested for what you did. I have no more money. If I'm arrested, fine, but you will not get away with it; you'll be arrested along with me."

Bela and his friend apparently believed her, and they never showed up again. Can mothers inherit *chutzpah* from their sons?

My father, meanwhile, had been very afraid of the blackmailers and feared that eventually they would indeed report them to the authorities. He felt, as many Jews in Budapest did, that the safest refuge those days was the Jewish Hospital. He had a bleeding ulcer, and in the short time we became Hungarians he had already gone to the hospital for treatment two or three times.

By now, he knew the doctors there, and was confident he would be taken in. So he announced he was going to the hospital and, sure enough, when he told the physicians there that his ulcers were hurting him and he wanted treatment, they admitted him.

With my yellow star back on my breast, and my mother at my side, I went to the hospital to visit my father. When he saw me, he cried with happiness, as would any father for a child who had been in mortal danger. I did the same. We told him that mother had put an end to the blackmailing, and urged him to check out of the hospital. This was no problem; the doctors were only too happy to get the *"noodge"* (pest) out of there.

Although the situation regarding Jews in Budapest seemed to have quieted down for the moment, I felt very uneasy about our future. I felt we could not afford to become complacent or leave ourselves unprepared for any eventuality.

For the first five or six days that I was back in Budapest, I continued living as a Jew, traveling to and from my brother's with the yellow Star of David on my coat. My brother was also living as a Jew, and so were my parents. They had their aryan papers, but felt that there was no need to use them until "God forbid, the deportation comes to Budapest."

I didn't want to wait.

Knowing that most of the Jews in Hungary had already been deported, I realized it was only a matter of time before the same fate befell the Jews of Budapest. So I told my parents that there was no alternative. I was going to get them settled in an apartment, where they were going to live as gentiles, "whether you like it or not." I said I intended to get to work on it while I had the chance and not wait until the last minute, when it might be too late again.

As expected, my father objected. "Others are continuing to live as practicing Jews," he said. "It would be terrible if I had to live as a gentile and not be a practicing Jew."

I replied that I would take the blame. "We should all live to be one hundred twenty," I said, "and then I will be the one who should be punished."

He would not be put off so easily. "Why do I have to live as a gentile?" he argued. "It's not necessary. If it were a question of life and death, if we were in mortal danger, then it would be all right; it would be allowed. But right now all the Jews of Budapest are living as Jews. So why should I eat unkosher food? Why should I not recite my daily prayers? Why shouldn't we live as Jews?"

The discussion went on and on. My mother, who as always sided with me, said I knew best and she would accept whatever I recom-

mended. Finally, I told my father, "You're going to have to listen to me now, the same way you listened to me in the Kassa ghetto. I'm, in charge now." And, at last, he relented.

It took me a couple of days to acclimate myself again, to reestablish my bearings but once I was used to my surroundings I began to look for a place for my parents to live. I went to investigate an apartment that was advertised for couples. It was beautifully appointed and kept by a very refined woman, the widow of an officer of high rank. Meals were included in the rental. Altogether, there were three rooms for rent to accommodate that number of couples in the apartment.

It seemed to be all that was required, so I unhesitatingly left the woman a deposit, telling her I wanted to rent a room with full board for an eldery "uncle" and "aunt." I was expecting them to arrive the next day from Tapolca (the village where my parents' identification papers indicated they lived). They intended to stay in Budapest for a couple of months, I said, to take the "cure" in the famous Lukacs baths, which were only two blocks away from the house. They were natural warm springs, which people "took" for rheumatism. In the good old days, my mother had spent a month taking the waters there.

The day after I rented the apartment, my guests from Tapolca—"Mr. and Mrs. Farkas" (my parents)—arrived. They had three good meals a day, served in their room, and they were able to spend most of the day in the park across the street from their new home. My mother actually did go to take the baths, and under the circumstances, my parents seemed to be quite content with the new set-up.

My father, however, used to tell me that my mother cried every night in bed for hours and prayed to God to save her children and grandchildren who had been deported. We knew nothing about what had happened to them, except for rumors we heard from Polish refugees, rumors we did not want to believe.

For her part, the landlady appeared to be quite happy to have such a nice religious Catholic couple living in her apartment. My mother, who had been brought up in a small village among Catholic friends, was well acquainted with their religion, and this was useful in performing her new role as a gentile. She asked me to buy her a rosary and prayer book, which I did, and every Sunday morning, she and her husband "Mister Farkas," went to church.

My father of course, could never have imagined himself going to church, and although he went along, it was always begrudgingly and with self-hatred. How much it must have hurt him to betray his upbringing! My mother told me he would lock the door to their room in the apartment and say his Hebrew prayers by heart every morning, afternoon and evening. He would say his evening prayers after everyone else in the apartment was asleep, and recite his morning prayers and psalms before anyone had awakened. For days he begged me to give him his *tefillin* (phylacteries), worn by Jewish males during weekday morning prayer, and his *tallis* (prayer shawl), but I was afraid someone would find them. For safekeeping, I gave them and my own to an elderly second cousin, Mr. Grossman, whom I used to visit regularly.

My father attended church, much as he did everything else during this period—dragging along like a poor unfortunate soul. All through their hiding, my mother led and he followed. When it came to paying the rent, I gave my mother the money and she paid the landlady. There were other tenants in the apartment—two intellectual Hungarian couples—and there had to be a certain amount of socializing. My mother carried on all the conversations. My father spoke Hungarian well but with a Czech-Jewish accent, and he was afraid it would give him away, so he chose to act like someone who either didn't know or didn't care, a moody, embittered man.

Nevertheless, for the time being at least, my most important problem was solved. Now it was *my* turn for "conversion."

By this time, Gita and Lily had managed to change their apartment. As a protective measure they now lived separately and had adopted their new aryan names. Gita was now, Arany Margit, and her sister Lily was Szabo Julia.

The sisters had also found jobs—Lily as a seamstress and Gita in a knapsack factory.

One day, Margit came to me with the good news that her landlady wanted to "let" the sofa in her kitchen. Margit thought this would be a good opportunity for me to start my existence as a gentile, because the widowed landlady was a simple soul who would not ask too many questions about me.

The following day after work Margit took me to meet Mrs. Kovacs. After being introduced, she showed me the old, worn, lumpy sofa in her kitchen that she would let for forty pengos a

month. It was not very inviting, but having had the experience of sleeping on the concrete floor of the prison corridor, I knew that I could sleep anywhere. Without hesitation I paid her the first month's rent.

I moved into the apartment, hung my few clothes in a tiny cabinet in the vestibule and took up residence at Jokai Street 11. Most important, I felt comfortable with the first step of my "conversion."

The whole apartment consisted of the big room where Margit and the landlady slept; the kitchen which served as my bedroom, and a small side room, rented by a tall, handsome aryan Pole named Leon. I would encounter him every morning when he came into the kitchen to wash up. He always seemed to be trying to please me, to ingratiate himself with me, with a cheery greeting: "How are you, Lajos? How is everything?" I, on the other hand, was not very anxious to strike up a friendship with this young man, for obvious reasons, and remained somewhat aloof.

One day he showed me some photographs of his sister and her family. One picture was of two little girls kneeling in prayer under a beautifully decorated Christmas tree.

Meanwhile I kept up appearances as a gentile, even to such details as my ring, which had a skull and cross-bones design, the emblem of the S.S. Anyone seeing it on a Hungarian would have to assume the wearer was a member of the Arrow-Cross, the Hungarian S.S.

I had bought the ring at my favorite "store"—the Telekiter, believing it would be an excellent symbol of my aryan identity. To further establish that I was a gentile, I wore a Catholic religious medal on a chain around my neck, while on my nightstand I kept a photograph of "my girl friend"—actually a stranger from among a group of Rumanians in beautiful, colorful native costumes, whose picture I had taken one Sunday when I was in the labor camp.

I did other things to reinforce my aryan identity. Whenever a Hungarian S.S. rally took place in Budapest, I made it my business to be there. I could not bring myself to cheer the barbarians, but I stood silently by, knowing that I was safe there. As with the soldiers on the train, I believed the lamb was sometimes safest in the company of the lions.

I had found work in a paper factory, which still had a Jewish

owner, Mister Fisher. I was employed there for about three months and worked very hard indeed, hauling heavy paper rolls from the storage room, but it was still preferable to hauling coal in the Kassa jail. My boss, and everyone else there assumed from my ring that I was a member of the Hungarian S.S. It was not until after the war that Mr. Fisher and I met and he found that his "anti-Semitic" employee, Farkas Lajos, was not such an anti-Semite after all.

The only friend I had at the factory was a typical aryan named Pishta. My pal was quite a simple boy and I never had to worry that he might be suspicious of me. He never thought to ask whether or not the ring I wore meant I was an S.S. member. Pishta and I used to go swimming on Sundays in the "Palatinus," which was located in the park of Margit Island in the middle of the Danube River, which separated the capital into Buda and Pest. I felt quite secure in the knowledge that I had a genuine aryan at my side.

Now that my parents and I had been resettled, our next assignment was to "convert" my brother and his family. Because of their two small children, this was not easy. Not many people were willing to rent or share their apartments with couples who had two young children. What added to our concern was the possibility that the youngsters, especially Judith, who was only four, would not readily take to their new roles as Christians. Both children had been brought up in strictly Orthodox Jewish fashion, and it would be easy for them to slip. My brother feared that one false move or word by the children might lead to catastrophe for the entire family.

I found myself confiding in Lt. Asboth more and more. (Now that I possessed a new police registration card with my new name, Farkas Lajos, and my new address, I started to move around more freely.) On a visit to the lieutenant, I told him how I had managed to find living accommodations for my parents and for myself, and then I described the very real problem we had with my brother and his family.

Talk about examples of "greater love hath no man." Immediately, Asboth offered a suggestion: He and his wife, who had no children of their own, would take little Judith (Marika), and bring her up as their own, for the duration of the war. It struck me as a wonderful suggestion.

"Don't worry," he said. "I have a bunch of relatives way out in the country, where nobody knows anything about Jews. At least they haven't had any exposure to anti-Semitism and we are planning to move there anyway."

As bombardment of the city by the Allies became more and more frequent, well-to-do families were leaving the city for the suburbs. It would be natural for the Asboths to do the same. And, even if little Judith, who had a birth certificate saying her name was Marika, were to say something suspicious, his relatives would never turn them into the authorities.

"But," I said, hoping he could come up with a reason that would allay my fears, "how could you explain to your relatives and friends where this baby suddenly came from? You never had children. How can you suddenly explain Judith?"

"I'll tell them she is an illegitimate child of mine," he said.

"You—and especially your wife—would be willing to endure the shame?"

"Of couse," he said, and he was right. His good-hearted pretty wife was perfectly willing to endure whatever was necessary.

We agreed that I would pay Asboth 300 pengös a month for Marika's food and upkeep. But whenever I brought the money to them, Mrs. Asboth, who came to Budapest from the country about once a month, insisted that I accompany her to Budapest's only department store, the Parisi Aruhaz, which was like New York's Macy's or Gimbel's, to help her pick out toys for Marika. Each time, she spent the entire 300 pengös on toys for the little girl she loved so much.

For several days, we put little Marika into training, impressing upon her as well as we could the dangers of confiding in anyone except her new mother, Mrs. Asboth, whom she started calling "Mother." I presented Marika with a little cross to wear around her neck, and she left for the country with her new parents. As he said he would, the lieutenant introduced Marika as his illegitimate daughter, born to him in Budapest. He had never informed the family before this he said, but in view of the bombardment of Budapest now taking place, he feared for the child's safety and had decided to bring her along with them. His family accepted the story, and "Marika" behaved herself wonderfully.

(Actually, Marika did slip up once. Delirious with fever, she began speaking about being Jewish and having a dark-haired

mother as well as a blond mother. When the lieutenant's family confronted him with this, he assured them that the little girl's identity was as he had described it to them—she was his illegitimate child—and he said that she was fantasizing, based on what a little boy had once told her about his own life.)

In the following weeks, her new mother taught her how to pray and act like a good Catholic. The little girl became a credit to her new parents, who in fact treated her as if she indeed was their own. They did not look forward to what they foresaw as the inevitable heartbreaking parting that would take place after the war. The farewell now between Marika and her *real* parents was sad enough.

After we solved the problem of little Judi, we looked for new lodgings for my brother, his wife and their son, little Erwin (Pishta), who would stay with them through the remainder of the war. We found quite a nice apartment in a private two-family house occupied by an elderly couple. My brother and his family newly "baptized" with the aryan identification papers I had obtained for them two months earlier in the Telekiter, moved in without any difficulty.

Because his new home was situated in a section of the city made up of new one- and two-family homes, all owned by respectable gentile families, he did not have to worry about the frequent identification raids the police made all that summer in the city's apartment houses. There was a pleasant courtyard and beautiful garden adjoining their house, and on Sundays I would take my friend Margit (Gita) there to visit "the Novaks," whose son Pishta, enjoyed playing in the garden all day with the landlord's dog. My brother found a job in a factory drilling holes through mother-of-pearl buttons, so we were all now reasonably secure.

Three times a week we visited my parents, who seemed to be adjusting to living as gentiles, although my father continued to bemoan his fate, especially since he observed, correctly, that most of the Jews in Budapest were still able to live as Jews.

What made this possible was a combination of several factors. The reason the Germans succeeded in deporting all the Jews from the suburbs was the fact that they did it in a blitz. They did it one, two, three, with the help of the Hungarian Jandamarines, who were always one hundred percent anti-Semites, before the Jewish leaders even had a chance to appeal to higher authorities. Also, I mentioned, the Germans managed to mislead the Judenrat of the subur-

ban cities, promising them that they would be taken only to do farm work, which was easier to believe than the rumors of deportation to the gas chambers.

During those critical five weeks of the suburban deportation, the Budapest Judenrat had a chance to investigate where all those trains were going—they were all headed for the same destination, Auschwitz and the gas chambers.

Of course the Judenrat contacted Hungary's highest authority, Admiral Horthy, as well as neutral and Western governments, to help stop at least the deportation of the remaining two hundred thousand Jews of Budapest.

Even though Horthy was not considered a friend of the Jews, he never issued any special anti-Semitic laws on his own. Also, some of his most influential friends were Jews, many of them industrialists. His son, Horthy Miklos Jr., would often come with his friends to one of the kosher restaurants I formerly frequented, the well-known "Mr Stern's" on Rombach Street, to have its famous *cholent* (a simmering bean stew) and *kugel* (a noodle pudding).

Another powerful deterrent against deportation of the Budapest Jews was a serious warning Horthy received from the Americans, who had learned what had happened to Jews elsewhere in Hungary. Since Budapest was bombarded by the Allies almost daily, the authorities were afraid that if they made the city "Judenrein," free of Jews, the bombardment of the city might increase drastically as a repercussion.

There was still another factor that held up the deportation from Budapest. Thousands of Budapest Jews were converts to the Catholic faith, and since, according to the Nuremberg Laws, a Jewish convert or the children of mixed marriages were considered Jews, thousands of gentile families were also threatened with the deportation of at least one or two members of their family. Therefore, all the local priests were appealing to the authorities on behalf of their parishioners who were in danger of being deported.

Because of all these complications, the Budapest Jews gained a little time.

While the Budapest Jews were spared deportation for the time being, they did, however, face new restrictions daily. For example, Jews were allowed a maximum of two hours, from ten in the morning to noon, for marketing; otherwise, they could not leave their homes. The purchase of cigarettes was taboo, and, as mentioned,

rail travel was forbidden and private vehicles confiscated.

In mid-April, 1944, about four weeks after the Germans had marched into Hungary, Budapest Jews were ordered to put a large yellow Star of David over the entrance of every house where they lived, even where gentiles shared the living space.

The reason for the requirement that a yellow star be erected on each house where Jews resided was all too clear. Whenever the authorities might decide to round up the Jews, it would be a simple matter to find their victims. As talk increased about the inevitability of deportation for the Budapest Jews, some of them began to organize so-called "protected houses" with the benevolent aid of such countries as Switzerland and Sweden and, in a few cases, the Vatican, although there you had to be a Jewish convert to Christianity. Convert or not, Jews remaind Jews in the eyes of the Germans or Hungarian S.S., but the Vatican issued a paper that they were under Vatican protection, and consequently quite a few Jews were saved.

To Jews living in these protected houses, a nation willing to be a "protector" issued a *schutzpass*—a protective passport. It stated that the person or persons to whom it had been issued had been granted a visa to that country and therefore was considered a citizen of that nation. Actually, those certificates had little legal status, but they worked in nine out of ten cases, serving to save Jews from the deportation that finally came. Most of those who could present a *schutzpass* to the Hungarian S.S., who were in charge of deportation from the city, were automatically released.

The homes of the families with a *schutzpass* displayed not only the Star of David, but also the flag of the country that issued the certificate to them. There were no official guards of that country posted in front of those houses, so it was just a matter of luck that the passes were respected. Whoever had the slightest connection with the Swedish or Swiss Embassy (and many who did not) applied for a pass. Of course, they could not accommodate 200,000 people in those houses, but they did what they could. Wherever there was room, a Jewish family moved in. All in all, Switzerland, Sweden and the Vatican saved between 40,000 and 50,000 Budapest Jews. Many of them were saved through the efforts of the now rightfully famous Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg, who issued those passes by the thousands. If ever anyone deserved the admiration of the world and the gratitude of the Jews for his self-sacrifice, it was this exceptional man.

I still have in my possession my Swiss *schutzpass*, which I carried hidden in my jacket pocket during those fearful days, in case I were ever caught living as a gentile. I had hoped to be able to save my skin as a Swiss citizen, but, thank God, I never had to use the pass.

Within a few weeks, the entire Jewish population were concentrated into houses marked by the yellow star. Being Jewish-owned property, the factory where I was employed also was marked with the yellow star, which made it fair game for constant identification inspections by the S.S. Although I never had a problem identifying myself to the inspectors, their frequent "parades" through the factory made me unhappy, and I wanted very much to change jobs to a place that had no apparent Jewish connection.

When I told Margit my feelings about this, she said that the knapsack factory where she held a nice position was moving to larger premises in about ten days. At that time, she predicted, the management would be looking for additional help, and she felt sure I could easily get a job there, especially if I applied with her recommendation. This sounded like a fine opportunity to change jobs. I applied for work in the knapsack factory and I was hired at three times the salary I was getting in my last job—120 pengos a week, after deductions, compared with 40 in the paper factory. The work here was much easier, to the bargain. After a few days I was trained to operate an electric sewing machine, which was easy for me because I had learned how to handle a sewing machine when I studied custom skirt-making three years earlier. In an hour or two I was able to operate the electric machine quickly and efficiently.

A major advantage for me of working in this factory—besides the fact that it was an aryan concern and I drew a good salary—was that it was considered very important for national defense. Because the knapsacks we produced were used by the military, we were virtually "defense workers." The factory also employed a few Jewish girls, who had been given special permits allowing them, as "irreplaceable defense workers," to travel to and from the factory. A special yellow star with a black stripe diagonally across identified them as having special permission from the Ministry of Defense to work and travel.

As cozy as my situation seemed, I was never completely at ease about it. There were good grounds for my concern. New regulations were issued that aryans my age had to report to their respective battalion stations within 48 hours. My boss told me that I need not worry about the directive because he needed me in the factory,

and therefore he would obtain a special permit exempting me from military service. He had wonderful connections at the Ministry of Defense and, true to his claim, within 24 hours I had my special permit, bearing my photograph and the stamp and signature of the Defense Ministry. It certified that I was engaged in an important defense job and therefore relieved of all military service obligations.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but it was premature. One day shortly thereafter, a new poster was issued declaring that every young man of military age must have, along with all his other ID papers, his military book. This four-page document would attest to the fact that he had already completed his military service or that he was now stationed at a particular location. Previously, it was not necessary to present the military book, because not everyone of eligible age had yet been required to serve. Now, everyone *was* required, so if a young man was not in uniform, the authorities wanted to know why.

This posed a new problem for me. I had aryan ID papers, all right, but they did not include a military book, for the simple reason that the original Farkas Lajos had never served in the military. All I could envision now was that I would be the first one stopped on the street and asked to present his military book.

I turned to the man I had found I could consistently rely on, a military man, at that—Lieutenant Asboth. He had been called to active duty two weeks after he and his wife had taken Marika to the country, so I wrote to him at his Air Force base, explaining that I was now afraid to walk on the street because I had no military book. Four days later, I received a registered, special delivery letter from him, which I opened with curiosity and then amazement. The letter contained a brand new military book issued by the Air Force and stamped by the unit in which he served. All I had to do was fill in the blanks with my name and such other details as date and place of birth and home address. Where it asked for military rank, I wrote "private first class." It was tempting to write in a high rank, but that would have been inviting trouble. It was remarkable that the lieutenant had dared to go to the office of the post where he served and obtain a book for me.

His being called to active duty was a good thing for him, as well as for me. Because he was such a strong Jewish sympathizer, I always feared for his safety. But now, as an Air Force officer on ac-

tive duty, he was above suspicion and could come and go as he wanted—without difficulty.

The lieutenant performed his acts of kindness to me as naturally as if he were my brother or uncle. He was just wonderful to me and my family, and his philanthropy and compassion didn't end with adopting Marika or mailing me the military book.

A woman named Anna, who was from Bubi's hometown, managed to escape the deportation there and came to Budapest with her two daughters, aged six and eight. She met Edith, Bubi's sister, and told her how much she feared deportation from Budapest. Edith decided to introduce her to Lt. Asboth and present her predicament to him; perhaps the lieutenant would be willing to help. As soon as the good lieutenant heard of Anna's plight (her husband was in a labor camp), he offered a solution: she and her daughters should come with him and his wife to the village of Nyul where Marika was and live there among his big family. She gratefully accepted Asboth's generous offer.

With all his good-will, the lieutenant, who was not a rich man, could not provide food indefinitely for four strangers (my niece and



My benefactor, Lt. Asboth, with his family in their country hiding place. Left to right, Anna's daughter; my niece Judith who was then called Marika; a niece of Asboth's; a cousin of his; the lieutenant; his wife, Maria; Anna, the Jewish woman the Asboths were protecting, and her second daughter.

Anna and her daughters), so, in addition to the three hundred pengos I gave him monthly, Anna gave the Asboths five or six hundred pengos a month, just to cover expenses. It certainly was not for money that the Asboths offered their protection and hospitality; they were just exceptionally good human beings.

Before he left for the country, he had given me the keys both to his apartment and to his business premises, along with a letter legally authorizing me to take care of all of his interests and properties. It stated that I was entitled to move into his living quarters and use them if the necessity arose. Informally, he also gave me his permission to use his shop if I ever needed it as a shelter or hiding place.

During the summer months, I accumulated a lot of food and stored it in his shop. It was closed, a note on the door stated, because the owner had left for military service. The note was signed, "Lieutenant Asboth."

I always expected that the situation would grow worse, in which case I would need a good hiding place, so I reconstructed the inside of the store into a small shelter. I boarded up the glass door panels with good, heavy wood that I bought, cut to measure, at a lumber yard, to shield against any blast that might be caused by bomb explosions in the vicinity. Then I blacked-out the inside with cardboard to prevent any light from showing through to the outside. From the lieutenant's apartment I brought a recliner, which could be opened into a bed, and I also kept an electric pot and some dishes there. Fortunately, the shelter also had running water, so I was well prepared in case of emergency.

I dared not turn on a radio in the shelter to hear the news broadcast from England at 9:00 every night. But I was eager to find out what was happening in the war, what the Germans were up to, what was happening to the Russians, whether there was any reason to be optimistic about an Allied victory. So I went to the Asboth apartment, locked all the doors and dialed the BBC to hear the news, given in Hungarian by Professor McCarthy from London. (After the war, he was invited to speak in Budapest, where I was able to thank him in person for his encouraging news.)

The threat of deportation still hung over Budapest's Jews like the blade of the guillotine. Yet, feeling more and more at ease in my role as a gentile factory worker, I managed to live a fairly normal life. On Sundays, I would still go with my aryan friend Pishta to the Palatinus pool on Margit Island for a swim. There we would drink

beer and leisurely converse like two good friends.

One Sunday afternoon on the island, I was horrified to see a whole platoon of Jandarmarines arriving. They came there to enjoy a swim, but what they were doing in Budapest could only mean trouble of the worst kind.

My distress intensified when Pishta recognized one of them as Janos, an old schoolmate. They cheerfully exchanged cries of "What are you doing here?" and enjoyed a happy reunion. Pishta insisted on introducing me to his friend. As we shook hands, I thought I'd die, but as always when my life was in danger, I betrayed no sign of weakness. Pishta invited him to join us for a beer. I grew bolder, and decided to try to get some information from this enemy wearing the characteristic Jandarmarine hat with cock's feathers.

"By the way, Janos," I said casually, "what are you doing in Budapest?" Jandarmarines were usually assigned to the suburbs.

"We came to deport the Budapest Jews."

I tightened my grip on the beer stein. "Really?" I asked, trying desperately to keep the fear and anger out of my voice. "That's a good thing. But how are you going to do it? This is a big city. In a village, you could easily concentrate them in one or two nights, because everyone knows who is or isn't Jewish. But how can you do it in Budapest? The first day they hear Jews are being rounded up they're going to run. How are you going to control them?"

I meant it to come across as a naive, but sincere, question, and it was received that way. "What are the plans?"

"Well," Janos said, "we are going to start on the outskirts of Budapest, three or four thousand of us Jandarmarines, and encircle the entire city. Then slowly and carefully, we're going to draw that circle tighter and tighter, until we get into the heart of the city."

The plan was as simple—and deadly—as that. I was thunderstruck, but kept cool. "That's interesting," I said in a matter-of-fact tone. We had a few more drinks before saying good-bye to each other.

As soon as I could, I went to the Jewish part of the city and sneaked into the headquarters of the Jewish Council to report what I had learned, then quickly left, as surreptitiously as I had entered.

The following day there was a heavy bombardment of the eastern railroad station, where major arrivals and departures took place. American bombs made a direct hit on a train filled with Jandar-

marines coming into Budapest for the deportation. Several of them were killed, and for the time being the whole deportation was called off. My report to the Jewish Council had nothing to do with the bombardment because the Council had no means for contacting the Western Allies. The bombing on that particular day at that particular time on that particular target was just a very fortunate occurrence for my fellow Budapest Jews.

The first bombing of Budapest by American planes had taken place the first night of Passover, 1944. Bubi and I were having a quiet *seder* in our room when the siren sounded, and everybody ran to the shelters, actually the basements of the buildings. We heard the explosion of a few bombs and the answering sound of Hungarian anti-aircraft guns. The whole thing was over in half an hour's time, leaving just slight damage.

But by the middle of summer, the raids were constant and heavy. Every day American planes bombed the city. Sometimes only fifty to one hundred took part, but some involved as many as two hundred to four hundred planes and caused great damage and a large number of casualties. At night, the Russians would come, usually with not more than twenty planes in a single raid. They tossed firebombs that illuminated the city. We called them "Stalin Candles." After a Russian raid, there might be twenty or thirty different buildings aflame. The Russians came precisely at 8:00 p.m., so by 7:30 anyone walking on the street or riding a street-car or taxi would start running for his life, in order to be off the street by the time the bombers came.

Margit and I lived in quite an exposed spot, right in the heart of the city, just one block from the famous Western Railroad Station, which became a daily target. Fortunately, we never had any really serious hits there. Our shelter was a good one, located well underground below an eight-story building, but, most important, we were lucky. Had there been a direct hit by the American bombers on our house, none of us would have stood much chance of getting out alive from beneath the ruins. Major raids by the Americans one Sunday left about fifteen thousand dead in the burning city! In general, the raids were becoming more frequent every day and increasingly dangerous.

Late in July, when we went out on the street after a bombardment we found thousands and thousands of yellow leaflets dropped by the Americans. An illustration showed hairy hands being washed in

a basin, while an inscription read: "Imredy," (who was Prime Minister at that time) "you are still washing your hands. On [this and this] day in Auschwitz, 12,000 Hungarian Jews were burned in the gas chambers." It also told of large numbers of Jews executed at another concentration camp. And then, under an illustration of red blood dripping from his hands, the headline was repeated, "Imredy, you are still washing your hands?"

This was another indication that Jews were being killed, and it was powerful enough to make us fear for our lives.

The bombings stirred mixed emotions in me. They were good as a strong sign of the Allies getting closer to victory over the Nazis and other Axis powers, but I was worried for my parents. What if they were involved in a direct hit? Even a small raid caused two or three thousand casualties.

My mother had no ambivalent feelings about the bombings. "For me," she said, "this is the nicest music."

Early Celebration

What was sweet music to *all of us* was an announcement that came over the radio at noon on Sunday, October 15, 1944.

Rose, the youngest sister of my brother-in-law, Adolf, who was killed at the front serving in a working camp for the Hungarian army, had invited us for lunch. It was the first time I had ever taken my parents out, and it was a good feeling. Suddenly, the radio program we were listening to was interrupted for a special announcement. It was stunning news: Admiral Horthy had proclaimed that Hungary had lost the fight and was capitulating to the advancing Russians. He had sent a command to all Hungarian forces on all fronts to lay down their arms and surrender to the Russian troops. He begged the Allies for peace, and pleaded that they stop the bombardment of Hungarian cities. For us, the war was over!

At Rose's, we hugged and kissed each other, delirious with happiness. In the street, Jews rushed joyously from their marked houses, tearing off their Jewish stars and shouting, "We're free; we're free." They danced in the streets and cried for joy. Those from Jewish houses tore down the big Stars of David that marked their dwellings. A wave of relief swept the Jewish populace that, at last, their days of persecution and torture were at an end.

Back in the house, we huddled near the radio, eager for more details of this best possible news. At about 4 p.m. all programs were interrupted again for a special bulletin: the Horthy government had been overthrown and a Nazi sympathizer named Szalasi Ferenz, the leader of the Arrow-Cross (the Hungarian S.S.) who

had been jailed by Horthy, had taken over. Completely in command, he announced that Hungary was going to carry on the fight against the Russians and the Allies to the bitter end.

Stunned beyond words, we were enveloped by a deadly silence. In three hours, the Budapest Jews' great happiness had turned to grief. Tragedy deeper than what had already transpired was soon to come.

I took my parents home, leaving them with the admonition, "I don't know what's going to happen. Just stay in your room, and don't go out on the street for at least a few days."

The woeful radio announcement that Szalasi, the Hungarian "fuehrer," had taken over the leadership from "the traitor" Horthy was punctuated by the appearance of German "Herman" tanks lumbering all over the city's main streets. Aboard them were two or three German troopers equipped with full battle regalia and several Hungarian S.S. hoodlums, armed with machine guns and hand grenades. The latter wore just an armband and green shirt to identity them as S.S. members; from the tanks, they shouted, "Down with the Horthy dogs!" "Long live Szalasi!"

As I watched them, my heart was pounding. Every Hungarian had to make up his mind whether to be on the side of Horthy or Szalasi in what amounted to a revolution. The civil servants had the hardest decision—whether to be loyal to Horthy or obey the new regime, which was pledged to carry on the fight.

The first project the Szalasi followers undertook was the persecution of the helpless Budapest Jews. With the aid of the German storm troopers, they attacked the Jewish houses, and began a massacre of the inhabitants that lasted all that Sunday night and the following two days. It was as if all hell had let loose; the devil himself seemed to have taken over the city. Though relatively safe in my aryan guise, I could picture myself very clearly as one of the Jewish victims of this new pogrom.

I did not want to sleep in my old apartment that night for fear that I would be trapped in a local raid in which the authorities searched for Jews. Although I had proper aryan papers, the slightest suspicion would lead them to order me to take down my trousers, and that would be the end. Afraid for my life, I went to the Asboth shelter to spend the night. The cries of the dying and the sounds of the firing kept me awake. I was just a block away from the Danube River, where hundreds of Jews caught in the raids

were marched to the edge of the river, and machine-gunned, their bodies thrown into the river, saving the bother of gravedigging.

The screams of the victims and the sound of the barrages that were killing them pounded at me as if there were no walls separating us. No one answered their desperate cries, "Help me, help me."

I could hardly wait for morning to give the aid and comfort I knew my good friends remaining in Jewish houses would be needing. I was especially concerned for Rose and her two children, who had been living as Jews in an apartment house marked with the Star of David. So, early the next morning, I left my shelter and went to see her. Luckily, the house in which she was staying was still intact. I urged her to leave her home immediately and join me in my shelter with her two children, ten-year-old Eva and eleven-year-old Marton. But the poor woman, a good looking, popular, happy-go-lucky mother of about twenty-eight then, was so frightened that she couldn't make a decision.

"What should I do?" she said, seeming not to want to leave, but unhappy about staying.

"Get out of here," I said. "Otherwise, they'll take you away."

But the best I could do was convince her to allow me to bring her some aryan papers that she would keep handy for "possible use" if the situation became even more critical. I gave her my address in case she needed my help, and she gave me a photograph of herself to use on the false documents I planned to draw up.

Back at the Asboth store, which was about a ten-minute walk from Rose's, I took one of the lieutenant's business letterheads and typed very neatly, "This is to certify that Marossy Julia, age twenty-eight, of Catholic religion, has been employed by me as my secretary since March, 1942." I signed it "Asboth, Lieutenant" and pasted and stapled her photo to the sheet, and put Asboth's business stamp across the photo. To make the paper appear more authentic I wrinkled and dirtied it a little to have it look worse for wear.

I rushed back to Rose, who I feared would need the identification letter at any minute. Before I had a chance to go over her new identification with her, a neighbor who lived in the same apartment rushed into the room, crying in panic, "The Germans are here! They're taking over the house. This is the end of us!"

For the moment I couldn't think. I ran into the fourth floor cor-

ridor and looked down, almost blacking out from what I saw. Four German soldiers and four Hungarian S.S. troopers armed with automatics had entered the second floor. They were going from door to door, shouting "Hands up," and commanding all the inhabitants to get out of their apartments, and into the lobby within two minutes. Pale with fear of death, the residents poured out of their apartments, hands above their heads, and started toward the main staircase that would take them to the main floor, where more S.S. men were waiting for them to assemble.

Panic-stricken, I ran back to Rose and asked her to hide me in the storage compartment of the sofa-bed, or in one of the closets. But she became hysterical with fear and, instead of helping me, begged me to leave the apartment immediately. If the Germans found me in her home and discovered the truth about me—that I was a Jew posing as a gentile—she was sure that she would be killed along with me.

In even deeper panic, I ran out to the corridor to see where the Germans were, when someone equally desperate came after me and closed the door, shutting me out of the apartment.

At the same moment that I heard the click of the lock, I saw that the Germans had just about finished their round-up on the third floor and were already mounting the staircase toward the fourth floor where I was standing. Fear, beyond anything I had known before, gripped me. My heart was pounding, my stomach felt as though it would drop to my shoes, my thoughts were frenzied. My mind groped desperately for a way out.

I looked around me like a cornered animal, hoping for some avenue by which I could dart to safety. I saw a little sign, "Emergency Exit," over a narrow doorway leading to a small staircase and ran through. If ever there was an emergency, this was it. I was going to go down those stairs, but I noticed an open door to an old toilet, and I entered the room, desperate for a hiding place. Right next to the toilet, someone had left a wooden basin used for washing clothes. I crouched in the corner and pulled the basin over me. Fortunately, it was wide enough to cover me and possibly hide me from view, in case the gang of persecutors glanced curiously through the doorway. I had left the door open, so as not to raise suspicion. Still I trembled in fear that they would come through the doorway and shoot me on sight. I could hear them on the fourth floor, where the apartment that Rose shared with several

other families was located. In German and in Hungarian, they were shouting, "Hands up. Everybody out." I heard the footsteps of the Jews heading down the main stairway to be taken away.

Perhaps five minutes later, there was absolute, deathly silence. To be safe, I remained in my hiding place another five minutes and then cautiously came out and back to the main corridor. There was the eerie sensation of being in a ghost town. None of the occupants had bothered to lock their doors, which were now flung open, and because it was mid-day, when Hungarians had their main meal, fresh food was still simmering on the stove of the apartment I entered. It was as if the people had just been swallowed up, as in a science-fiction story.

The occurence, however, was all too real. I imagined that Rose and the others would be locked up for a few days, the way the suburban Jews had been, and then be taken by cattle car to Auschwitz. The leaflets the Americans had dropped in July had told me all I needed to know.

I made my way to the street, thanking God that once again He had spared my life.

Had Bubi still been with me in those days, I'm sure we would have spent our nights philosophizing about what God was doing or not doing to or for us and our fellow Jews. We certainly would have discussed questions of faith. But Bubi was gone, and I really had no one I could talk with about those matters. I didn't dare bring up the subject with my parents.

And, although I might have raised issues of faith on a philosophical level, in those dark days my faith in God was one hundred percent. Not once did I question Him, not once did I ask, "How can this be happening, how can God let this befall our people?" All I knew was that God would help me. I didn't know how, exactly, but I was confident He would. There was a song we used to sing that meant God's help can come in the blink of an eye. And we believed in it. I knew Jewish history, and believed that, like the persecution in Egypt and in the Russian Pale, this was just another chapter in the unfolding of Jewish history. Jews were always in the middle, but somehow they would always survive.

So my faith never wavered. I prayed daily—mainly prayers I knew by heart, perhaps once a day. I was asking for, "Just another day, just another day. I have to survive and save my parents." That Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I managed in the evenings

to slip briefly into a Shul where, amazingly, they were still holding services.

People asked why the Hungarian Jews didn't fight back, as did the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. For one thing, they had no guns or other weapons, and, more significantly, they were never told what was going to happen to them. If they had, they wouldn't have believed it anyway. Even someone sentenced to death clings to the hope that an appeal will be upheld or the governor will commute the sentence. Those of us in our early twenties, of course, could never really believe we were going to die or be killed. So we hoped for a miracle—that Hilter would be killed, that the war would take a favorable turn for the Allies, and we would survive.

I didn't have the slightest idea where Rose and the other sixty families who occupied the house had been taken, but four days later she and her family, together with the other inhabitants, returned to their home. She told me they had been taken to the big synagogue on Rombach Street, where they were confined under guard for three days. After they were stripped of their valuables, the S.S. released them. Even after this frightening experience, Rose still did not want to take a chance and start a new life as a gentile. She hadn't accepted the logic of my advice to live as an aryan rather than be killed for being a Jewess.

In the meantime, in some parts of the city the situation became more and more tragic. There, the Jewish occupants decided to rebel against the new command and barricaded their doors from the inside against the German and Hungarian S.S. who wanted to enter. Unfortunately, this action tended to make the Germans even more bloodthirsty than before. They rolled up to these houses in their big tanks, which were equipped with flame-throwers, and shot up these buildings until nothing remained of them except burned-out ruins that covered thousands of dying martyrs. The slaughter went on for two days, until the new regime felt it had established its brand of law and order. Life began emerging on the streets again, as new proclamations ordered the gentile civilian population back to work. However, according to these new regulations, Jews were not permitted to leave their homes at all, not even for a moment, and there were no exceptions, even for the defense workers of Jewish origin. Like the others, they were confined to their homes, where they awaited their sad fate, frightened beyond words.

My parents knew very little of what was going on because I restricted their movements, forbidding them to go on the streets for several days. My brother and his family also knew little about those events because the suburb where they lived was several miles from the city and, during the slaughter, there was no transportation into Budapest. Chaos had resulted from the take over by the Szalasi regime. The regular daytime and nighttime bombings had left their toll, and the debris had not been cleared from the streets by organized crews, as had been done before. Because the rails were covered by ruins of the houses demolished by Nazi tanks, the streetcars could not proceed.

Once order was restored, however, the deportation of the Jews began, though not in a very organized fashion. Essentially, the Hungarian Nazis were in charge, and they did not have the help of the city police, because they remained half-way loyal to Horthy and did not particularly want to kill Jews when they realized the Russians were advancing on the city. For many of them, once Horthy proclaimed the war was over, it *was* over. And while a small portion of the police did sympathize with the Hungarian Nazis, the important segment, including the high command, did not want to help any more. What help the Hungarian Nazis did have came from the Germans, but even they could not concentrate on doing their usual thorough job because they were concerned with their own welfare, realizing the Russians would soon have the city.

Nevertheless, with Szalasi in command, the deportation got underway. Daily, the men and women between the ages of eighteen and fifty of a particular district had to report to the Tattersahl, a sports palace and convention center in the heart of Budapest. Each day a new poster and the radio would announce that those living between such-and-such a number and such-and-such a number on a particular street were to report by eight the next morning at the sports palace. Most of the group would be women because most of the working-age men were already in work camps. The superintendent would appoint one of them to be a leader, and off they would go toward the Tattersahl. Every morning after seven, you could see groups of Jewish girls, with their belongings in their knapsacks, heading toward the center. They weren't *taken* there, they went voluntarily, because it was an order. As soon as one hundred or one hundred and fifty of the deportees had gathered at the Tattersahl, Hungarian S.S. were

assigned to escort them on a march toward Vienna. the Austrian border was some ninety miles away. at that time, because both important railroad stations had been bombed out, there were no trains entering or leaving Budapest, so those being deported were spared the cattle wagons and instead were transported on foot, along *Becsi* Street (which means "Vienna" Street in Hungarian).

To what extent life depended on a piece of paper was dramatically demonstrated on one of those deportation marches.

On a Sunday afternoon, I was on my way to visit my parents in Buda when I saw a group of several hundred Jews marching toward the road that led to Vienna. Somehow, a young girl marcher in that group made eye contact with me, looked down at her hand, in which she held a piece of paper and, when she saw me nodding in acknowledgment of her plight, dropped the paper to the ground. I waited until the group had marched out of sight, then retrieved the paper, which, although it had been stepped on, was still legible.

"My dear parents" she had written, "I was caught," describing the place where she had been apprehended. "I am being taken to be deported to Vienna. I have my *shutzpass* in my drawer, but since I didn't have it with me, I couldn't prove anything, and they are deporting me. Could you try to get me the *shutzpass* before I leave Hungary?" On the other side of the paper, she had written her parents' name and address, and so, instead of going to *my* parents, as I had intended, I just turned around and walked as quickly as I could to hers.

Their place was on Visegradi Street, in a wealthy part of the city, like New York's Fifth Avenue, near the location of Asboth's store. Abruptly I handed them the paper and said, "I've brought you a letter and I'm hopeful you can help her. I would like to come back in two days to find out what happened."

"By all means," the grateful couple said. "Come back, and we'll let you know."

Two days later when I returned, the girl was at home! Her parents had located the *shutzpass* and then hired a taxi to take them ten or twenty miles until they caught up with the group headed for Vienna. They presented the *shutzpass,* and incredibly, the girl was allowed to go home with them.

To this day I marvel at how much a piece of paper meant—whether you lived or died, whether you were deported or could go

home for a while to await the next problem. No wonder so much acclaim is accorded Raoul Wallenberg, who issued these passes by the thousands, at considerable personal risk. The *shutzpass* I had in case of emergency came from a group of young Zionists operating in a house under Swiss protection, on Vadasi Street. No S.S., either German or Hungarian, crossed their threshold, but I always considered this place as dangerous as the mouth of a lion and never went there. A friend of mine, Moshe, brought me the pass from them.

I am still safer posing as a gentile, I told myself, as I walked along Budapest's main boulevard.

Deep in thought, oblivious to my surroundings of bombed-out buildings and the rubble on the street, I was suddenly brought back to reality by an odd object hanging from a tree shorn of its leaves by the early fall winds. I stared in disbelief as my stomach seemed to curdle. The strange object hanging from the tree was the body of a man. As I came nearer, I saw that there was a sign suspended from the corpse's ankle: "This Jew posed as an aryan."

Knuckle Duster

During the summer, while working at the Jewish paper factory, I had become acquainted with another Jewish girl in a quite dramatic way.

One beautiful day the American bombardment of the Western Railroad Station was particularly heavy. The station was just two blocks away from the factory, which had a very poor air raid shelter, only one flight down. The sound of the explosions was terrible, the air pressure was deadly, and one of the women fainted.

In the middle of the raid, the shelter door opened and an attractive blonde Jewish girl, who'd been on her way home when she got caught in the raid, ran in seeking shelter. She appeared to be a trained nurse because she lost no time getting into action, giving first aid to the fainting woman. When I offered my help, she asked me to open her purse and find a bottle of smelling salts which she said she always carried with her. Opening the purse, I noticed a heavy knuckle duster (here, you'd call it brass knuckles) in one of the pockets. At this time, it was regarded as a dangerous weapon, and civilians—even gentiles, let alone Jews—were forbidden to carry one. Her courage impressed me very much, and it made me feel very proud that a Jewish girl would dare to try to defend herself.

After she finished ministering to the ill woman, I confronted her. "Aren't you afraid to carry a knuckle duster in your purse?"

"Not at all," she replied, without a moment's hesitation. "I will defend myself at any time."

I felt such a kinship with her. She was a fellow Jew, who, like

me, was ready to do anything in self-defense. She was very attractive, and I was taken with the fact that, although there was no reason for her to think I was Jewish, she didn't appear to be the least bit frightened of me; not even when I asked, "Aren't you afraid that I will hand you over to the police?"

"No," she replied, indicating that she didn't care about what the law prohibited. She even trusted me with her name, Rado Vera—and address—Rozsa Street 78, only three houses away from the factory. I could hardly wait for the end of the work day. I was anxious to find out about this brave girl and I was curious to learn whether the address was, in fact, really where she lived.

After work, it didn't take me long to get there. The address was the right one—a house set aside for Jewish families and marked accordingly. She introduced me to her mother and young sister, with whom she lived. Her father, Vera told me, was in a working camp in the city and permitted to come home only occasionally to visit his family for a few minutes.

From that day on, I became a regular visitor, and we became close and sincere friends—as far as friendship was possible between a "gentile" boy and a Jewish girl. I didn't trust her sufficiently to confide the fact that I, too, was a Jew. Everyone in the house appeared to become more cheerful as a result of my frequent visits. It made them feel a little more secure that at least one "gentile" in the city was sympathetically inclined toward Jews, and probably they secretly hoped that, in case of real danger, I might do some good for them.

In the meantime, they asked me for little favors, such as to do a day's grocery shopping for them, since they could go out only two hours a day to shop. Many things were already in short supply, and they had a difficult time. With a shortage of food, Jews with yellow stars coming into gentile stores were turned down. "We can't help you with this, we can't help you with that." It was almost impossible for a Jew to buy cigarettes, which were also in short supply, so, as a gentile, I would buy five or ten cigarettes for Vera's father.

Adjoining Vera's house was a little garden filled with flowers and small trees. There, Vera and I used to have long talks together about the war, and what the outcome would be.

We spoke about the Germans, but not very much about their treatment of the Jews. I told her I hated the Germans and their

politics, and the best proof of my feelings was that I was trying to help Jews. As time went on, it became more and more difficult to keep the truth about my identity from her. But, apart from being afraid to trust her with my secret, I could not bring myself to disappoint her and the other occupants of the house by admitting that I was "only" a Jew like themselves. They seemed to be happy with the situation as it was, and I was reluctant to shatter their illusion. Revealing that I was a Jew would surely discourage them, because they would immediately be aware they were in even greater danger, were it ever discovered they were associating with a Jew who was in possession of gentile papers.

Besides Vera's family, two other Jewish girls with their families lived in the house. Sometimes they'd join us in the garden with their boyfriends, one who wore a sergeant's uniform and the other was introduced to me as Lieutenant Kamaras. Both were very friendly toward me, and both appeared to be ashamed that, as gentiles, and even more so, as Hungarian army officers, they were calling on Jewish girls. But they admitted they couldn't help themselves because they were both deeply in love with their girls and planned to marry them after the war. The two soldiers and I stayed generally clear of politics in our discussions. As a civilian and as a Jew masquerading as a gentile, I was a little bit afraid of them, and as it turned out, they were a little afraid of me—because *they* were Jewish! (I found that out after the war.) In the garden, we'd just exchange brief greetings and then go with our respective "dates" to our individual corners to carry on our own conversations.

My relationship with Vera and her family and friends continued through the summer. With the outbreak of violence that followed the ouster of Admiral Horthy and his regime, I was very much concerned about Vera. As soon as it was possible, on October 17th, I visited her and asked her mother if she would let Vera leave the house and to go into hiding. I told her I knew of a safe place. My thought was to take Vera to Lieutenant Asboth's store, which was already converted into quite a safe shelter. Of course, I couldn't tell her mother about the shelter, and so she was naturally a little skeptical and afraid to send Vera with me. She asked me to wait another day, when, if the situation had become more dangerous, she would consider entrusting me with Vera.

On the 18th of October, three days after the Horthy Proclamation, transportation in the city was restored, and we went back

to work in the factory, which I felt was still the safest place for me. The whole factory was in the basement of a large apartment house. Every shelter was actually a basement. It was only a question of whether the basement was one or two flights below ground—obviously, the deeper, the better. Ours was one flight down. The factory shared the basement with the regular air raid shelter which was for the use of the people who lived in the house, as well as for us factory workers. The large basement was sectioned off into several rooms, one for the factory, several rooms for air raid shelters, and one dark room that contained the furnace for the building's central heating in which coal was stored. Having the factory located in the basement allowed our work to go on uninterrupted during bombardments, the frequency of which was now up to two or three times a day.

Soon after our day's work started on the 18th of October, we were shocked to see one of the Jewish workers, Suzi, come in to report for work, although Jews were no longer allowed on the street. She appeared pale and strained. The foreman asked her how she had dared to leave her apartment despite a new law that threatened the death penalty to any Jew leaving his home. She replied that while she was still in bed, Hungarian S.S., together with the Germans, had encircled her house and evacuated everyone from it. At the last minute, she managed to put on her overcoat and escape over a fence. The poor woman still wore her nightgown under her coat.

Because they were talking right near the machine I was operating, I overheard the entire conversation, and I was relieved to hear the foreman give her permission to sit down at her machine, which was right next to mine, and start to work.

About half an hour later, the boss came in, wearing a brand new German S.S. uniform. He greeted the entire factory with the newest slogan, "Long live, Szalasi," Hungary's new Hitler.

A man of about thirty-five, our boss was of German origin and a strong German sympathizer. His allegiance got him the factory and the contract to supply the military with knapsacks and covers made of heavy material for guns and various kinds of munitions. Later, he supplied uniforms for the Hungarian S.S., consisting of overalls, a green shirt and an armband. He also provided all of his workers with the S.S. uniform, which came in very handy for me later.

Interestingly enough, he never made any comments, disparaging or otherwise, about the Jews.

But this morning, he immediately noticed the Jewish woman sitting at the machine next to mine and ordered the foreman to throw her out, the sooner the better. He also ordered the foreman to have her sew back the yellow Star of David on the front of her overcoat. This was like issuing a death sentence; it was forbidden for Jews to be on the street, and the moment she stepped outside the factory, she would be picked up by an S.S. patrol, who walked the streets by the thousands. Picturing myself in her predicament, I knew I had to act to save this Jewish woman. I barely had time to think, but, sensing the danger, managed to warn her not to go onto the street when she left, but rather to hide in one of the empty shelters adjoining our factory in the basement until I arrived to give her further help. Because we didn't have any toilets in the shelter, anyone needing facilities had to go up to the main floor. Therefore, it was possible for me to leave the factory a couple of seconds after she left, without arousing suspicion.

I met her at the basement stairs, grabbed her by the hand, took her straight to the room where the coal was stored, and told her to get on top of a pile of coal and hide in the dark corner until lunchtime, when I would bring her something to eat and we would have more time to discuss her future.

The poor girl could not understand my interest, because during the five months she had known me at the factory, she had assumed I was an anti-Semite. She saw me wearing the skull-and-crossbones ring, and I never spoke to any of the Jewish workers in the factory, so now she was thoroughly confused. But undoubtedly, she thought that whatever I was going to do to her could not be worse that what would happen to her if she went out into the street.

I went back to my machine, as if I had just come from the bathroom. About ten minutes later, the door opened to admit two uniformed S.S., armed with automatics. They demanded a report from the foreman about the Jewish woman who had come into the factory, but who had not been seen to leave. They asked that a search be made for her. The supertintendent of the building had seen the Jewish girl entering the building, but had not seen her come out, and he had reported this observation to the S.S.

Hearing them order a search, I felt as if my heart had fallen into my boots. I was sure that when they found Suzi, she would imme-

diately admit that Lajos had taken her to her hiding place. Unaware that I was Jewish, how could she have known that I intended nothing else but to save her life?

To my good fortune, when the boss heard the foreman argue that the woman had indeed left the place, and that in fact she had been thrown out, he came out of his office to confirm the foreman's report. Seeing this man in the uniform of a high-ranking German official, the S.S. apologized, and left. Based on the boss's testimony, they accepted the fact that Suzi was not there.

We were allowed an hour for lunch. After eating some of mine, I bought some sandwiches and carefully made my way to visit my "prisoner." She was trembling and so terribly frightened that I decided to reveal my identity as a way of calming her.

"Listen," I said, "I'm Jewish. Don't be afraid of me."

She was astonished at the news. I had never given her the slightest hint of being anything but an S.S. sympathizer. "Suzi, don't worry," I continued. "I went through what you're experiencing seven or eight months ago. I was in a ghetto and ran away, and went through hell, and now I'm here as a gentile. But don't worry; you're in good hands, and I'll see to it that you have papers. Just be calm and, with God's help, I will help you to survive. If you were daring enough to decide to run away from the S.S., then I'll help you succeed." This quieted her down, and she waited patiently to see what I was going to do with her. All I wanted, I reassured her, was to see her safe.

We decided that after 5 o'clock, when all the workers had left the factory, I would return to the building and kick three times on one of the shelter's metal doors that faced the street. This would be a signal for her to come out, and then I would join her on the street and take her by tram to my shelter at the Asboth store.

About three that afternoon, the foreman announced he had just heard on the radio that there would be a curfew beginning that evening and that no civilians would be allowed on the street after 5 o'clock. Therefore, he said, we could leave the factory at 4:00 to get home in time.

This raised a new problem for me, because I was supposed to visit Vera, to discuss her coming to live in my shelter that night. Now, I had committed myself to take care of Suzi, and there was just not enough time to do both. I thought that the best thing I could do was talk the matter over with Suzi, and I went straight to

her to tell her about the new problem.

She was most understanding, and suggested that I go directly from the factory to save Vera, while she volunteered to stay on the coal pile overnight, waiting another day until I had a chance to bring her to safety. There seemed to be no alternative and I went straight to Vera's home after work.

Vera wasn't there! Her mother told me that through a good friend of her sister, she had arranged with some nuns to take Vera into their convent and to hide her there as a nun. (Vera stayed in the convent and we didn't see each other again until after the liberation.)

Of course, I felt very sorry that I had left Suzi overnight in such uncomfortable surroundings and such precarious cirumstances, but I could not go back to the factory, as I had to be home by 5 o'clock, the civilian curfew. The next morning, I got up early and went to the factory with a good breakfast for Suzi. She had experienced a terrible night and was a nervous wreck. She told me rats and mice had been crawling over her all night. She showed me the red marks on her hands, which she said were evidence of rat bites she had suffered during the few minutes she had fallen asleep during the night. I felt terrible for Suzi, but there was nothing I could do, except promise her that that very afternoon, after we finished work, I would take her to a safer place. I begged her to be patient, and, of course, she had no alternative but to stay there and wait for me. The commotion of the workers leaving after work would alert her that I would soon be coming to get her.

Everything went according to plan; I lightly kicked the metal door three times, as we had agreed, and Suzi came out of hiding. She looked dreadful; her light grey coat and her pale face were all smeared with black coal. I was afraid to be seen with her, fearing her grimy appearance would draw too much attention on this busy thoroughfare. Instead, I passed her by, whispering that she should follow me. We ducked into the first doorway and, luckily, there was no one around. I spat on my handkerchief and used it to clean her face a little and tidy up her coat. At best, she resembled a drunken street girl.

Because it was an emergency occasion, I had dressed accordingly. I was wearing a green shirt and light green necktie, which was the uniform of the Hungarian S.S. To look even more realistic, I put on my Arrow-Cross armband, with which I had come pre-

pared. Dressed as we were, nobody on the tram would suspect us of being anything but an S.S. man and his girl friend or wife.

About 4:30, we arrived safely at the shelter. I demonstrated how to open the chair into a comfortable bed, and then showed Suzi where I kept my food reserves. I told her to shut the door and not to open it until I returned the next day at the same time. I would give a special sign by knocking lightly three times and calling her name.

Suzi stayed in the shelter for about five days, until I managed to find her a birth certificate with her new name, Balogh Maria, and on Saturday morning, after she had regained her self-confidence, she went out to look for a job. We had marked off a few newspaper advertisements for jobs we thought she might find suitable, and, armed with those leads, she set off. It didn't take two hours before she returned, in great spirits, with the good news that she had accepted an office job at a one-man concern, a plumbing and building supply store in the heart of town.

The Second "Mrs. Szekeres"

When I met Suzi in the evening after the first day at her new job, she was so full of self-confidence that she decided to look for an apartment and she found a room for herself quickly. After that, we arranged to meet three times a week at a fairly busy street-corner, where it was natural for people to meet and converse. The shelter, we agreed, was to be kept strictly for emergencies.

Suzi was quite successful at her job. Her boss, a man in his forties, became very fond of her, but she managed to politely stave off his advances by telling him that she had a fiance in the city, (meaning me).

Meanwhile, matters in general became worse, and the deportation of the Jews became more intensified. This started me worrying again about Rose and her children. I urged her not to go with the others, which in addition to everything else, would mean leaving her children with strangers. Rose was very much afraid of not obeying the laws, and she resisted my advice. But after several hours of my arguing and pleading, she agreed that, when her turn for deportation came she would attempt to escape and take refuge in my shelter.

The night before her district had to report to the Tattersahl, I visited her and was stunned to hear her tell me that she had changed her mind. Afraid of retaliation on her children, she had decided to report with the rest of the people in her house the next morning at 7 o'clock.

I lay awake that night, thinking of how I might possibly help Rose. She was close family to me, the youngest sister of my very wonderful brother-in-law Adolph, whom I loved and adored.

The next morning at 6:45 I waited for her at the front door where I knew that the group marked for deportation would be exiting. At 7 o'clock, the door opened and about forty to fifty people started marching toward the Tattersahl, located about a mile away in the National Park.

A Jewish girl, put in charge of the entire company, led the marchers. I saw Rose in their midst with a big pack on her back and a heavy bundle in each hand. Because there were no guards, I took a chance and joined the marchers, even though I did not have the yellow Star of David on my coat, as the others did.

I managed to make my way to Rose and took her bundles from her without attracting attention. The deportation of Jews was an everyday occurrence, and the gentiles seldom bothered to watch. In the early morning, there wasn't much traffic, so even less attention was paid than usual. The other marchers were not concerned about me and Rose and didn't bother to listen to us; they had enough to worry about, concerning themselves.

"Rose," I asked, "are you *meshugah* (crazy)? You're going to leave the two children? Who's going to take care of them? This is your last chance. You're going to listen and come with me."

"No, no," she whimpered. "I can't. I'm afraid."

"You must," I replied. "It's still not too late. I can help you escape and supply you with all the papers you need to pass as a gentile."

"But the children."

"I'll get them out, too, I promise you."

Still marching slowly with the group, she hesitated a moment, then finally said, "What should I do?"

"Step out into the doorway."

Quickly, we slipped out from among the marchers, who were too occupied with themselves and their uncertain fate to notice us. Rose stepped into the first doorway, and I stepped into the next. When the group had marched away, I came over to the doorway where she was standing and said, "Listen, we haven't got much time, I have to go to work."

There wasn't even time to remove the Star of David from her coat, so I just told her to take off her coat and fold it. She had no

star on her clothing beneath the coat. I hailed a taxi and installed Rose and her baggage in it, then got in and gave the driver the address of our shelter, Legrady Karoly Street 48, the Asboth store. When we arrived, I quickly opened the door. "Okay, here you are," I said. "There's a couch. You can sleep or rest all day. There's food you can help yourself to. I'll be back by 5 o'clock, and we can discuss further what's going to happen. Just don't open the door for anyone." I gave her the same instructions I had given to Suzi—"When I come back, I'll give three quiet knocks, say your name and identify myself, and then, and only then, should you open the door."

I said good-bye and went to work, managing to report only half an hour later than our 8 a.m. starting time. Nobody questioned me. For all the others knew, I might have been late because of transportation delays, which were common in those days.

After work I went to visit my new "tenant." She couldn't thank me enough for saving her from deportation. I was pleased to have done it, of course, but I now had additional problems—finding Rose proper ID papers, a job and a place to live, and rescuing her children, who had been left in the care of an elderly couple.

Rose stayed in the Asboth shelter for several days. One night, there was a terrible bombardment of the section where the shelter was located, and after the raid there were many rescue workers and people on the street, so I was able to go out and check on her. Luckily, she had survived all right, but the shelter's windows had been destroyed by the blast and Rose was hysterical. I prevailed on her to stay just a few more days, when, I promised, I would find her somewhere to live.

The next day I looked for a room for Rose and found an expensive but appealing one in the home of a high-class woman. I told her that I was seeking a place for my cousin, who had escaped from Debrecen, which, as the radio had already reported, was in Russian hands. Consequently, people from there were pouring into Budapest in search of shelter. The woman accepted my story and agreed to rent me the room for my cousin and her two children, who, I said, were with their grandparents and would join their mother as soon as she had a place to live.

This part of the game taken care of, I now had to bring in another player. Before the Germans occupied Hungary, Rose's husband had a small chemical factory in Budapest with a Hungarian aryan

partner, Mr. Szekeres. When her husband (Mr. Friedman) was called into labor camp service, Rose was left with the responsibility of carrying on the business with Mr. Szekeres. That partnership didn't last long—Rose had enough of a job just taking care of her children and, anyway, had no say over events that were unfolding—but she remained on good terms with Mr. Szekeres after he took over the business. Although she did not receive any salary or any of the share due her husband, Mr. Szekeres was generous to her, at least to the extent that he visited her and the children and never came empty-handed. I met him occasionally on my Sunday visits to Rose, when she served me what was a real luxury at that time—fresh, delicious bread and butter and honey, compliments of Mr. Szekeres.

When the need to procure papers for Rose came about, she decided to enlist Mr. Szekeres' help. I outlined the problem and he was kind enough to give me some of his ID papers, including his wife's birth certificate and their wedding certificate. I relied on his generosity, and he came through handsomely with money to pay the rent. With the necessary papers in hand, Rose moved into her new living-quarters as Mrs. Szekeres.

After Rose was safely installed in her new apartment, we had to start looking for a way to get her children out of the Jewish house in which they were living. Another friend of mine, Moshe, was living in Budapest as a gentile. I knew him from days when he was in trade school with my cousin Archie. We were all like one family, and whenever we needed favors from one another, all we had to do was ask.

I asked Moshe if he would go to the Jewish Agency, which remarkably, was still permitted to function—and tell them that there were two children whose mother had been deported and were therefore left unattended with nobody looking after them. Moshe was to report that the children had an uncle two blocks away, and ask whether the agency could give him an official paper empowering him to transfer the children to the uncle. Moshe identified himself as Jewish to the people of the agency, and they gave him the semi-official documents that he sought.

The night before our planned transfer, I visited the children who still thought their mother had gone with the other women for deportation. Can you imagine their relief to learn not only that she was safe and in hiding, but that I was going to take them to join

her! How frightened they must have been, left with an old couple, not knowing what their future would be.

I explained our plan to them. "Tomorrow, I am going to send somebody for you. Go with him. I'll be waiting for you downstairs and I'll take you right over to your mother." Before I left, I removed their Stars of David and re-sewed them with just a stitch, so they could be removed one-two-three as soon as they reached the street.

I told the elderly couple in charge of the house that a young man in S.S. uniform would be coming tomorrow to take the children away. They should not be frightened, I said, because the man would turn the youngsters over to me and I would deliver them to their mother.

The next day Moshe donned his S.S. uniform, consisting of only a green shirt, green tie and armband (which anyone could purchase in a dry goods store). He went to the super of the building where the children were staying and said, "I have an official paper for you." He showed the super the document, which read, "We hereby order that the Friedman children be taken over to their uncle..." Reading this document with the official seal certifying everything was in perfect order, the superintendent was only too glad to comply—especially since a man in Hungarian S.S. uniform had presented the paper to him. The super knew the children's mother had been taken away and presumably deported, so he was happy to turn over the responsibility for their care to someone else. He handed the children over to my friend without any question.

As soon as the children reached the street, we removed their Stars of David and put the yellow insignia in my pocket. We took a cab to where "Mrs. Szekeres" (Rose) was now living, and in fifteen minutes the children were safe with their mother in their new home. Theirs was a wonderfully happy reunion.

Rose's new home was not far from where my parents lived, and one night I took her and her children along with me to surprise my parents. Instead of appreciating the surprise, however, my father became angry with me, saying that I should never have trusted anyone with their address. But I assured him there wasn't a thing to worry about, as Rose and her children were quite safe in their gentile environment. Nevertheless, my father's concern was not completely without foundation. A few days later, when I went to

visit my parents, I found Rose there with her children. She was crying and my parents seemed scared to death.

Rose told me she had taken all her husband's and family papers, in the original name, with her to her new apartment. The unheated bathroom was not in use in the winter and so she thought it would be a safer place in which to hide the papers than her bedroom. She chose the small oven used for heating up water for the bathtub as the repository of her Jewish papers. Unfortunately, when the maid went to prepare a bath for her employer, Rose's landlady, she discovered the papers and reported her discovery to her mistress. The name of the new tenant and her children was Friedman, not Szekeres, and so, of course, they must be Jewish.

As sympathetic as she might have been toward Rose and the children, the landlady was nevertheless fearful for her own life. If any official were to find out that a Jewish woman and children had been hiding out in her apartment, she could have been arrested and deported herself. So when she realized Rose was a Jewish woman, she went to see her and said simply: "Listen, I just found out your name is not Szekeres but Friedman, and surely you are Jewish, and I want you out of this apartment within ten minutes." That was all she had to say. She was kind enough not to call the S.S.

Rose became so frightened, she grabbed the children and ran with them out of the house, leaving everything behind. She went straight to the address she remembered as my parents', about a fifteen-minute walk from where she was. She had no place else to go.

I had to start all over again, finding them a place to stay, so I took Rose and her youngsters to the Asboth shelter, where they lived for several days, until I could think of a way out of this new situation.

We contacted Mr. Szekeres once more and asked for his help. When I told him that Rose and her children were in my shelter, he immediately came up with a bold suggestion:

"Why don't they come to my home, and live with us?"

He was sincere in his offer to have Rose and her children move in with him and his wife in Zuglo, a suburb on the outskirts of Budapest, several miles in the opposite direction of where my parents lived. This in itself was very pleasing. In case Rose made another mistake, at least she wouldn't be able to frighten my parents again.

Rose took Mr. Szekeres up on his kind offer, and now he had a

household of *two* Mrs. Szekeres and two children.

After I got Rose safely settled, at least for the time being, I soon found additional responsibilities for myself. I was walking along the street when I happened to encounter a woman from my hometown who had married a Budapest man long before the war. They were still living as Jews in the capital.

In the course of our conversation, she mentioned that her nephew, Lichtenstein Tibi, was in a labor camp in Budapest. I asked for his address and she told me where I could locate him. He and his fellow laborers had been transferred to Budapest to clear the ruins left by the recent bombardments.

I remembered that the last time I had seen Tibi's father was in the ghetto in Kassa, just before I had made my escape. At that time, you may recall, his father asked me to take care of his son. I gave Tibi's father my word that I would do my best for him if I survived, so it was providential that I should meet the boy's aunt. When I visited him soon after the meeting, I told him about my last conversation with his father. Under the circumstances, I said, I felt obligated to take care of him.

Tibi, only twenty years of age, was afraid to leave his battalion. He showed me the barracks in which his group was billeted and indicated that there were plenty of places he could escape through in case of sudden danger. But, he said, he and his comrades weren't working very hard as of now and, as far as he knew, they would be stationed in Budapest for a while at least, so he would rather stay with his unit.

I wasn't happy with his decision, but I gave in. Presenting the young man with one of the extra gentile birth certificates I had with me, I said, "You're in the labor camp, so you're legitimate for the time being. But I want you to promise me one thing—the minute you hear your group is being taken out of Budapest, you'll just walk out. Carry this paper with you and come to where I live, Jokai Street 11, or where I work under the aryan name, Farkas Lajos.

Tibi thanked me, and gave me the promise I sought—that if it became necessary, he would escape and find me. But, although his unit was transferred from Budapest shortly thereafter, I didn't hear from him. It was only after the war that I learned of his fate.

By entrusting Tibi with my addresses, however, I set into motion a chain of events that subsequently saved my first cousin, Jacob Guttman.

One afternoon I left my factory job after work with my fellow

workers, and noticed a young man waving discreetly in my direction from the other side of the street. I could hardly believe my eyes when I recognized him—my cousin Jacob. I acknowledged with a gesture that I had recognized him and that he should stay put. I walked a short distance with my group and at the next corner turned around and came back for Jacob. After we greeted each other as warmly as circumstances permitted, he told me he had been afraid to come inside, so he had waited for me until quitting time.

"How did you know where to find me?" I asked, as curious as I was delighted to see him.

Jacob told me he had been in a labor battalion on the front lines, which was almost wiped out by advancing Russian troops. He and the few other survivors were brought to Budapest and billeted temporarily in the same barracks as Tibi. They knew each other from home, and one of the first pieces of news Tibi greeted Jacob with was, "Do you know who's here in Budapest? Your cousin Lajcsi. He's living as a gentile." And then Tibi gave him my working and home addresses.

"You're not going back to your group," I said. "You're coming with me to my shelter." He was sorry to have to leave all his belongings back in the barracks, but his happiness at finding me and the prospect of freedom far outweighed his sorrow over his abandoned possessions.

Now, of course, I would need to find papers for Jacob. Luckily, I still had a reserve of credentials—not a complete set, but documents sufficient for the purpose. I provided Jacob with a birth certificate and then, at Lieutenant Asboth's, put a photograph of Jacob on Asboth letterhead and certified, as I had previously done for others, that this man, a Roman Catholic, had worked for "my company" for the past two years. That was all he needed. With that, he could go to the police and have them issue a certificate that this-and-this man of such-and-such an address was employed at this-and-this firm.

Now I had a new boarder in my secret hiding place, someone who had to get used to the idea of being a free man again. Jacob proved to be very adaptable and within only two days found a room for himself—and a job. He got work with a damage-disposal outfit, which was always looking for new help to clean up the ruins made by the increasingly frequent bombardments.

With Jacob safely established, I thought my rescue efforts were over. However, when Margit saw how easily my cousin Jacob adapted to his new lifestyle, she asked if I would do the same thing for her young brother, Mendu, who was also in labor camp in the city.

"Last Sunday," she said, "my brother sneaked out of camp and came to visit me. He reported that several of his comrades had been killed in an air raid the previous day because they were working at the Chepel factory, one of the city's largest steel mills and therefore an obvious target of air attack. When the planes came, the 250 Jewish boys in the work force had to stay out in the open, because the shelters were reserved for the gentiles and there was no room for the Jews. So during the raid the boys stayed out and, as you might expect, several perished."

This story clinched it for me—I had to help Mendu. I told her to bring her brother to our little "hideout" where he could stay until we could make the necessary arrangements for his reentry into civilian life.

Captured

A solution to Mendu's immediate needs came quickly. Jacob told me he could get a job at the place where he worked, and he also offered to share his room with him. So this problem was quickly alleviated.

But meantime, the war situation intensified and that brought new problems, even as it became more hopeful to us. As the Russians advanced, more and more, Hungarian recruits were needed as gun fodder. Almost daily there were orders making previous exemptions from military service invalid. Young men formerly exempt because they were "irreplaceable" workers now had to report for regular military service. The military book I had in my possession, courtesy of Lieutenant Asboth, was no longer sufficient, even though it indicated that I had already completed military service. Unless a new exemption could be obtained from the Defense Department, I would have to report to my unit in three days. Once again, my boss, with his extremely good connections, came through, and Lajos was spared.

My meetings with my friends continued every second night at various city street corners. At one of the sessions, Jacob reported that he and Mendu were afraid to walk on the street because the ages on their papers (eighteen and twenty, respectively) put them in a category that was no longer exempt, even though they performed the essential work of clearing ruins caused by air raids. They would have to report for military service within three days. The news was troublesome, but it did not make us distraught. We

were so deeply involved we just devoted our energies to coming up with a solution. We didn't know how, but we were confident that in a matter of days or hours, the problem would be solved.

Sure enough, Suzi came up with a solution. Her boss, she said, had also been ordered to report to his command, but he did not want to go, and he asked her if she would be willing to take care of him if he stayed in a shelter he intended to build in a corner of his shop.

"Why not?" she replied.

He then acknowledged that he was afraid that, unwittingly, she might talk to someone about him and thus expose him. He had a suggestion to alleviate his concerns. Suzi's "fiance" (myself), whom she used to discuss, would probably have to report, too, he said. Suzi should invite Lajos to go into hiding with him, her boss suggested. That way, it would not be lonesome for him, and he could be doubly assured that, with her fiance in hiding with him, she would not talk and give him away.

This gave me an idea. I told Suzi to tell her boss that Lajos was willing to go into hiding with him, but only on the condition that he could bring along a friend, who also had been ordered to report for military duty. I had in mind, of course, that Jacob and Mendu would be "Lajos" and friend, since her boss had never met me.

The next day, Suzi brought the good news that her boss had completed his shelter and was more than glad to take in two people. At least, he said, he would have company for playing cards. Needless to say, we were all very happy that Jacob's and Mendu's problem would be solved. We decided that the next day they would move to Suzi's shop with her boss, and she would feed the three of them.

Within the hour, our delight turned to terror!

After finishing our conference, Suzi, Margit, Jacob and I went for a walk. I remembered I had promised to make a call for a Jewish man I had met in the house of a friend. Actually, although I was living as a gentile, I was still in contact with some Jewish friends and relatives, who lived in marked Jewish houses. Occasionally, I managed either to call or visit them on the sly, bringing them cigarettes and asking if they needed any help. On one such visit, a Jewish resident of the house where an uncle and cousin of mine resided asked if I would make a phone call for him to a gentile friend, whose number he gave me. The message he asked me to

communicate was that he was running out of funds and needed some money that he had left in his friend's care.

Since I had no chance to use the phone at the factory where I worked and because there was no phone where I lived (only important homes and offices had phones), I had to use a public phone—which, in this case, was in the post office at the Western Railroad Station. The public telephones were one flight up, and I thought my companions would wait for me downstairs, since it was risky for our foursome to be together in such a public place. But we were having the first snow and they wanted to warm themselves. Besides, they were filled with self-confidence. So they just came along with me.

I had just started my telephone conversation when I noticed that one of the postal workers was looking very suspiciously at our company. He picked up his receiver to make a call. Sensing trouble, I immediately put down the receiver I was holding and went to my friends. "Suzi and Jacob, you must leave right away. I will follow with Margit in a few seconds."

As I had ordered, Suzi and Jacob left at once and Margit and I prepared to follow. But a young S.S. boy came in and told us we were not premitted to leave the premises; we had to wait for a particular man to arrive. I was terribly frightened, but I dared give no evidence of it. I knew that my pockets contained so many false papers and other provocative items that, once I was searched, I would be condemned beyond hope. Desperate, I took a chance and managed to drop two separate sets of reserve aryan papers into a wastebasket, without the S.S. youth noticing it.

Soon, a fat man in the conventional uniform of the Hungarian detectives—long, brown leather coat and leather boots—entered. He came directly to me and said, "Young man, can I see your ID papers?" He didn't bother to look at the papers I gave him, just put them into his pocket. He asked me a few questions, which I answered quite calmly—a remarkable feat, considering how agitated I felt. Then he asked Margit for her papers, which he also put in his pocket. "Okay," he said, "let's go."

We walked downstairs and saw Jacob and Suzi under police guard. Later they told me that the fat man called to the policeman on guard at the entrance, "You watch these two (Jacob and Suzi), I'm going to get the others (Margit and me.)" Now the fat man searched all four of us for weapons or explosives. Finding none, he

ordered us to march to St. Istvan Korut No. 2, the address of the infamous Hungarian Arrow Cross headquarters. He said that if our papers were found to be in order there, we had nothing to worry about. He showed us a loaded revolver and warned against attempting to run away. If we tried to make a break, he said, he would shoot.

For all his menacing appearance and what it implied, the fat detective was not so rough with us, just business-like. I had no fear that he would shoot at us, providing we didn't run. There were still certain procedures that the authorities in Budapest followed, even with those suspected of being Jewish. We attracted little attention on the street—suspects were always being escorted by police.

Luckily, to cover all of us, he kept quite a distance from us as we marched, so the four of us could converse without being overheard. We spoke quietly to one another, and the fat man did not object.

I told my companions, "They're going to find out that Jacob and I are Jewish, no matter what we say, but they can't prove that you girls are Jewish, so don't admit it. Your papers are good, and they won't be able to prove otherwise. Jacob and I will have to admit we're Jewish before they find out anyhow. Then we'll see from there what happens to us."

It was bad enough that I would have to admit I was a Jew posing as an aryan; worse, I had compromising documents still on my person that would cause tremendous difficulties for Lieutenant Asboth. I had a letter from him telling me how my niece was faring; I had a paper from him authorizing me to use his apartment and conduct all his business transactions; I had two sets of keys for his apartment and his store—everything that would jeopardize not only his career but his life. I also had one other piece of contraband—a Russian dictionary. I had bought it to prepare myself for the liberation of Budapest by the Russians. I wanted to be able to speak to the liberators in their own language, and so I had purchased the dictionary. Now, I hoped it would not help seal my doom before the Russians arrived.

It was snowing heavily, and I decided to take a chance of ridding myself of all this damaging evidence. I folded and dropped the papers one by one, and, thanks to the snow and darkness, the detective didn't notice. I also dropped my S.S. ring, which could have caused me great grief. As we approached the notorious S.S.

headquarters, I still had the Asboth keys in my possession. I took a last chance and dropped my gloves, commenting aloud that I had, and then, as I picked the gloves up, left the keys in the snow. Thank God, the deception passed unnoticed.

Whatever relief I felt at divesting myself of this "contraband" was more than offset by the terror of knowing where we were headed. This had the reputation of being the most dangerous headquarters of the Hungarian S.S. Few Jews got out of there alive. Those who didn't die of beatings administered by the S.S., were marched to the shore of the Danube in the evening. There, they were machine-gunned to death and conveniently fell into the river, saving their murderers the problem of disposing of their remains. My hope now was that, with the Russians so close to liberating the city, maybe the S.S. would be slightly more lenient.

The shred of optimism I clung to quickly vanished, as we walked through a long corridor and up a stairway to the third-floor interrogation section. I had never seen such a gruesome sight as the tapestry of horror I witnessed there—Jews dead and dying, unconscious, semi-conscious, some whimpering in pain and fear, bleeding, stunned, their faces splattered like smashed melons. The most grotesque was a man who had endured such a beating that his head was swollen to twice its normal size. He was not dead, though it might have been a blessing if he had perished. I pictured myself looking like these unfortunates in the next hour. The question that ran through my mind was not *whether* I would be executed but *when*. I was so frightened, I felt my insides quivering, but I knew I had to mask my feelings if I were to have any chance of surviving.

The fat detective delivered us to the S.S., reporting matter-of-factly, "Here are four suspected Jews who have been living in Budapest with aryan papers." They took what little remained in my pockets, and my interrogation began. The four of us were taken to a small, dimly lit room, where four S.S. men surrounded us. I was the first one taken to a desk for questioning. Presiding was the chief murderer, himself, Bokor Testver ("brother" Bokor, as he was called by his S.S. comrades). He was constantly celebrated in the papers for his evil accomplishments, and was pleased to be known as the most bloodthirsty Jew-hater and Jew-hunter.

His first question to me was right to the point. "Are you a Jew or a Christian?"

In our over-optimism, we had never prepared a story for use in case we were ever caught and interrogated. Our only preparation

was having such good ID papers that they would never be challenged. I never thought for a moment I'd be caught. As I heard him ask me whether I was Jew or gentile, the picture of those beaten Jews on the stairs and in the corridor flashed through my mind like a terrible nightmare. And I blurted out a story spontaneously in the hopes of saving my skin.

"Yes," I said, "I am Jewish." And before he could interrupt, I (who, under ordinary circumstances would make a terrible liar) continued with a long story that I made up as I went along. I was born a Jew, I said, but when I was about three years old, my parents became Catholics and, of course, so did I. I was raised as a good Catholic and a patriotic Hungarian. For the best proof of how patriotic, I suggested they call the factory where I worked. They would find out, I said, that I was one of the best workers there, one who would work twelve to fourteen hours a day when necessary.

Bokor Testver's tone softened, as he apparently believed my story. "You are lucky, my boy, that you admitted you're a Jew. Otherwise you'd soon look like some of the men you saw in the corridor." The "Inferno"-like scene flashed through my mind again. I was too frightened to feel hatred for the S.S., pity for the victims, or any other emotion. I just knew I was in mortal danger.

"We're not going to do to you what we did to the others," Bokor Testver continued. "They denied they were Jews, but since you didn't deny it, justice will be done and you might be spared."

All my testimony was noted down, and I awaited the determination of my fate. Bokor Testver ordered one of his henchmen to escort me to the next room and take down my pants, "to check on whether he's Jewish or not."

By this time, some of my nerve had returned, and I asked, in a joking tone, "Since I admitted I'm Jewish, don't you believe me? This is embarrassing. Why do you have to check?"

He answered seriously. "Very often we have gentiles who don't want to serve in the military and they run away. Their punishment might be even more severe than yours, So sometimes these AWOL's pretend to be Jewish. If you were lying and we find out you're gentile, we'll have to put you on trial for running away from the military, and it involves a different jurisdiction than if you're just a Jew." So he checked me and, of course, found I definitely was Jewish

I was brought back into the interrogation room, where Jacob

was being questioned. He followed my instructions by admitting that he, too, was Jewish. What he offered as an explanation, I don't know. I was too busy concentrating on what was going to happen next, specifically whether the girls would be strong enough to deny they were Jewish.

It was Margit's turn now, and she proved that when a person is in a life-threatening situation, it is incredible what he or she is capable of doing for self-preservation. A life-or-death situation brings out your best and worst. From Margit, this brought out the best. Margit, who had never acted, gave the acting performance of her life. An award-winning performance.

Margit turned around to look at me and shouted accusingly, "You dirty Jew! How could you dare take me out and kiss me and even propose marriage to me! You rotten Jew, and me a decent Catholic girl! How dare you!"

I took her cue and looked down at the floor, as if feeling very guilty about deceiving her. I even felt my face flush, as nature gave our act an assist.

Margit's performance encouraged Suzi, who probably would not have been capable of launching such an imaginative attack on me. "I am Margit's friend," Suzi told her inquisitors. "We work in the same factory and we double-dated. I certainly never knew these two are Jewish." That was all she said. I think Margit's perfect acting saved all four of us. She convinced them our stories might be true.

Listening in on everything was a handsome young man, who was sitting in a corner doing some administrative work. When he noticed that his chief and the other S.S. men seemed to be undecided about what to do with us, he approached his commander. "Bokor Testver," he said, "I think the smartest thing to do would be to send these four over to the police, to make sure whether the girls are Jews or Christians. After their investigation, he said, the group could be brought back to the S.S. headquarters and be taken care of 'in the usual way.'"

Bokor Testver thought for a moment, then seemed to like the young man's idea. "All right," he said. "You know how to type so make a nice protocol for the police, and then escort this group over there."

The young man typed up a detailed report, situplating that on a particular date and at a particular place, the S.S. had caught four

people. The two boys admit they were born Jews and said the reason they were living as Christians was that they were patriotic and had nothing to do with their religion. The girls deny being Jewish. The S.S. is asking the police for further investigation, the protocol went on. When the investigation is completed in two or three days, the four should be returned to S.S. jurisdiction.

"Let's go," he said. "I'll take you to the police station." He followed us with a drawn revolver, ready to shoot if we attempted an escape.

The police station was on Vadasz Street, about a twenty-minute walk from the S.S. headquarters. As we began our march, I tried to figure out what had motivated the young man to help us get away from the clutches of the S.S. Was he Jewish? Was he gentile, but just being realistic that the war was almost lost for the Nazis, and feeling there was no reason for four more Jews to be needlessly killed? I couldn't decide, but I sensed a definite sympathy on his part for us. Figuring there was nothing to lose and much to gain, I addressed him. "Young man," I said, "I would like to speak a few words directly to you, confidentially. I can't shout because people are on the street. Would you mind if I came near you?"

"No. Come on."

I stepped back and asked him, "Why did you want to save us?"

"Well, I just wanted to help you a little bit."

"It's obvious," I said, "you don't believe in what the S.S. is doing. Otherwise, you wouldn't have done what you did. You actually saved us from sure death. I know, because I saw what was going on; I saw the victims on the steps. If we stayed at the S.S. headquarters, after 10 o'clock tonight we would have gone, tied one to the other, to the shores of the Danube and be shot to death. So we're very grateful to you for saving our lives." I decided to plunge further. "But could you do a little more?" I asked.

"Like what?"

"Like just let us go?"

"I *can't* let you go. I'm responsible to my headquarters for what happens to you. They entrusted me with four prisoners. How could I account to my superiors?"

"Tell them that we ran away."

"If you run away, I have to shoot. That's why I'm carrying this revolver. And if I shoot, I might kill you."

Deciding I still had nothing to lose, I dared to ask. "How about

if you escape with us? You seem to be an intelligent man, and you know damn well the whole fighting can't last more than five or ten days. The Russians are going to be here, and they're going to be tough on any S.S. men. If there's a record anywhere of your having been in the S.S., you'll be hunted down like the rest of the Nazis and be put in jail or maybe even killed." (I had the naive notion that, as in Haman's day, the Jews marked for execution would be able to turn around and take vengeance on the S.S.)

He shook his head, no, but I persisted.

"I have a good hiding place," I said, "which you can share with us. You'll live out these critical days the same way we do, but once the Russians come in, we'll save your life. The four of us will testify that you saved Jewish lives and therefore should be spared. I'll go all the way with my life to protect you, because you saved four Jewish lives. I'll be your protector."

What I revealed to him was grounds for him to shoot me, but something about this S.S. man reassured me. I was hopeful he might accept my offer.

"Ah," he said, "I'm really not afraid of what happens when the Russians come. Just be satisfied and happy with what I did. I can't do any more for you."

Having gone this far, I wasn't going to be put off. "Okay," I said, "then how about letting *one* of us go. I don't care which one. But we just want to tell our families what happened to us. How can it be that all four of us disappeared in one night? Let one of us go—whomever you fancy—to inform our families."

"No, I can't do that, because the moment one of you tried to escape, I'd have to shoot."

I was about to pursue my argument when he suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, we passed it." We'd been so deep in thought, he hadn't noticed that we had gone by the police station. He turned back to look at our destination, and at that instant, I made a break for it. From detective stories I had read as a child, I remembered that the runaway always ran in a zigzag pattern, and that's exactly what I did. Four shots rang out, but—I don't know whether he missed me intentionally—none hit me. Would he pursue me? Would others join in the chase? I didn't know what to expect, but simply ran as fast as I could, as far as I could. In a matter of minutes, I was once again a free man—if you can apply that term to a Jew posing as a gentile in Nazi Hungary, without ID papers, fleeing from the S.S.

I ran like a maniac for some five or ten minutes. Between my agitation and my excellent physical condition, I think I could have run for an hour. It was about ten at night and few people were around, but I continued running. Slowly, I began to gather my wits. "What am I doing?" I asked myself. "What if a policeman approaches and asks, 'Hey, where are you running? Let me see your ID.'" With nothing in my pockets in the way of identification, I was headed for trouble.

By this time, I was in front of the Hungarian parliament building, which was located in a big secluded area surrounded by parks. "Lajos," I told myself, "relax, relax. You are safe." I sat down on a park bench to rest and plan my strategy. I knew I could not walk around without ID papers. In all my days as a gentile in Budapest, I had not been stopped and asked for identification more than four or five times, but it was too risky now to try to exist without at least a birth certificate that would satisfy the authorities that I had a legitimate identity. Not only did I have no papers, but I had no keys, no Asboth shelter, no place to go. I could not go back to my apartment because the S.S., in possession of my Farkas Lajos papers, would undoubtedly already be there. They had my name and address, and the moment they knew I had run away, they would look for me at the apartment.

What to do? It was a bold gamble, but I decided to try to retrieve the ID papers I had thrown into the wastebasket at the post office. Hopeless as it seemed, I returned to the post office, hurried up the stairs and found the basket where I had thrown away the ID papers two hours earlier. The papers were still there. I took out a bunch of them, put them into my pocket, and was out of the building within seconds. On the street, I walked along the very path we had taken before. On patches of sidewalk where the snow had melted, I spotted something made of paper—it was my Russian dictionary. A few steps later, I found one of the Asboth documents. Now if I could only find the keys.

When I dropped them, I never thought for a moment there was any chance that I would have reason to retrieve them, so I took no special notice of where I dropped them. I remembered generally that I dropped them when we were about fifty or sixty feet from the guard permanently on duty in front of the S.S. headquarters. I couldn't very well go close to the guard and look in the freshly melted snow for keys. If he were given any reason to be suspicious, I'd be a goner. I came up with a simple plan: I pretended to be

someone waiting impatiently for his date, who was late. I constantly looked at my watch, murmuring, "*Tch, tch*, it's late," and paced up and down in the area where I thought my keys might be. Taking very small steps, I hoped to feel the keys with my feet. I must have paced near the guard for ten minutes, when suddenly I felt the keys and heard their click. Miracle of miracles, I might be saved after all. Again, dropping a glove as I had before, I bent over and retrieved the keys along with the glove. Then, sighing as if I despaired of my date ever showing up, I left.

I was not out of the woods yet. It occurred to me that my brother, posing as Novak Lajos, supposedly a cousin of mine, worked this time at the same factory as I did. When the S.S. went to look for me at the factory—as they inevitably would—they would tell the boss that I was Jewish. This would lead to suspicion of my "cousin" (my brother), as well, and he and his entire family would be caught. I decided that instead of going directly to my shelter, I would go at once to my brother and warn him not to go to the factory any more.

I reached my brother's at about 1 a.m. and, to my great surprise, Margit was there, like the rest of them crying over me. They thought I had been shot, perhaps fatally. If I were all right, they reasoned, I would have done just what Margit did—come back to warn him not to go to the factory. Since hours had passed, they feared the worst. No wonder they cried. It was a joyous reunion. We didn't sing and dance, but we felt very much like doing that.

Margit told me that Suzi had also been released and that Jacob was the only one kept. She felt that he was not in dire jeopardy. "Don't worry about him," she said. "He's in police custody, and the police are not going to execute him." We did not find out anything about Jacob's fate until the end of the war.

Margit then recounted the whole story of what had happened after I ran away. The young S.S. man (whose pleasant face looked to me to be more Jewish than aryan) reported to the police that four young people had been caught, but one boy had run away. The girls seemed to be Catholics, he said. As mentioned before, many of the police were already trying to save the Jews from the S.S. because they (the police) were regular state troopers loyal to Horthy and wanting to enforce his proclamation ending the fighting. The police told the S.S. man that if the girls were gentiles, there was no reason to hold them, and Margit and Suzi were released.

They emerged from the police station with the S.S. man, who turned to Suzi and said, "You can go home. But you, Margit, I would like to invite you to my home for the night."

Margit, still in possession of some nerve, replied: "Look, I realize that what you did saved our lives, and we appreciate it very much. You are also a very sympathetic and good-looking young man. If you would like to invite me for dinner tomorrow or some other day, I would gladly accept your offer. But I want you to know that I'm a proper girl, not some common streetwalker you can pick up on the street and take home for the night."

When he heard Margit's answer, he said, "Well, it seems to me you're still in love with your Lajos, the Jewish boy, so I better say good night and beat it."

And the S.S. man left. To this very day, I cannot determine whether he was so helpful to us because he was actually Jewish, or because he took a fancy to Margit, or for just plain humane reasons. Whatever his motivation, we're eternally grateful.

By the time Margit finished her account, it was already after two in the morning, and we had no time to lose. We had to go back to our respective headquarters—Margit to her home and I to Asboth's shelter, for which I now once again had the key. We tried always to make everything appear normal, so Margit and Suzi both went back to their respective jobs the next day. My brother and I, though, were permanently unemployed.

I never went back to my living quarters, even though I needed underwear and other supplies. I didn't even ask Margit to sneak into my cabinet to take something out; in case of an investigation, they might think Margit had some connection with me. I was to learn later that my landlady knew within a day or two that I had been arrested, but had run away.

Although we had lost Jacob, at least temporarily, we still didn't want to lose the chance of having a wonderful hiding place for two boys in Suzi's boss's shelter. So I sent Margit for my friend, Moshe, who helped me save Rose's children and who also had military service to face, to tell him to take Jacob's place there. "Here is your chance," I said, "for you and your friend, Mendu, (they both attended trade school in Budapest before the Germans came) to live in safety and be well provided for in a splendid shelter, with plenty of food and nothing to worry about."

As it turned out, Mendu and Moshe were certainly much better off than Margit, Suzi and I were. The two boys had a wonderful

time, playing cards and eating well every day. I think they were the happiest Jews in Budapest the last four weeks of the war.

My own situation was not as comfortable. Since escaping from the S.S., I dared not venture out during the day, although late at night I would furtively go out for a breath of fresh air. The only identification papers I had were a birth certificate and a document that Suzi and I rigged up, certifying that I was employed by her company as a defense worker. She put my photograph on the document, but it was very poor identification, especially since I had no military book or police ID to support it. And, paranoid as ever, I was convinced that every S.S. man in Budapest was out looking for Farkas Lajos. As the target of that manhunt, I was determined not to do anything to let them catch me.

Margit also decided to move from her apartment and she rented a small room just two blocks away from the house we lived in before. Even though she escaped the critical evening unscathed physically, she was under constant fear that the S.S., having my address, might come to look for me, and our landlady might tell the investigating officer that actually Lajos had been recommended to her by Margit, and so they would put her under surveillance in an effort to track me down.

I left even the visiting of my parents to Margit and Suzi, who visited me regularly. One night, Margit reported that my father couldn't stand the place where he lived any longer and had decided to enter the Jewish hospital for a while. On the surface at least, the hospital appeared to be the safest place for Jews because the Swiss Red Cross had taken it under its protection and no S.S. men were allowed to enter the hospital gates.

For some intuitive reason, though, I didn't like the idea of my father being there, so the following night I took the chance of going there, hoping to convince him to go back home. But he refused to be persuaded. He feared that he would be killed in the ever-worsening daily bombardments of the city, in which case he would be buried in the Catholic cemetery as a Catholic. I pleaded with him all evening, but he remained steadfast. He was, he said, much happier, staying in the hospital among Jews.

Supposedly, the S.S. weren't to be allowed past the gates, but while I was visiting my father I noticed two of them enter the hospital office, make some notes and leave. Later, I casually asked the secretary what the S.S. men had inquired about. She said,

"Oh, they only wanted to know the total number of Jews living in the hospital. Nothing to worry about."

"Thank you very much," I said, worrying very much. I left, almost shuddering with foreboding. I knew I had to get my father out somehow, so the next day I sent Margit to enlist my brother to help me force our father to leave.

When we approached him, he began crying almost immediately. "My dear children," he said, "why don't you leave me here. If I have to die, my wish is to die among Jews. Every day there are so many bombs and so many deaths near our apartment. If we get killed we will be buried in a gentile cemetery with gentile rituals." As if in the midst of all the bombing and chaos, they had time for burial rituals of *any* kind! He pleaded again, "Leave me here in the Jewish hospital, so if something happens I'll be buried as a Jew."

I decided to take the same approach I had in Kassa—rough and strict. "You're going to have to do what we say. This is not *kinderspiel*, (child's play), this is a question of life and death. You survived until now and I don't want you to perish at the last moment."

This time, we didn't wait for a reply. Armin and I just helped him to his feet from his strawsack (the hospital was so overcrowded with Jews who thought the hospital was their salvation that he didn't even have a bed) and escorted him out. When the S.S. head count came, my father would not be there for execution.

My paper war againt the Nazis was not over yet. When I visited my father in the hospital, I met a young man by the name of Neuman. He used to come from Tornaalja to visit his grandfather in our village every summer. He was working in the hospital as an orderly, and we struck up a conversation, and he introduced me to two pretty girls in nurses' uniforms—his sisters. It broke my heart to see them and the other Jews living in such danger. I asked him if he thought the hospital was safe enough to stay in, and he replied that as far as he was concerned it was the safest place in Budapest to survive as a Jew. I told him I disagreed. Living with gentile papers would be a much safer proposition. The boy laughed at the idea, but I took a birth certificate from my left-over reserve papers and gave it to him. "Keep it, it might come in handy. In case of emergency, you should have something."

(After the war, I met this fellow and he told me the sad story of

Szeretet Korhaz, the Jewish hospital: Several days after I had taken my father out of there, the S.S. arrived early in the morning and surrounded the hospital. Everyone—patients and staff alike—was ordered into the courtyard. The S.S. asked if any gentiles were working at the hospital, and young Neuman stepped forward and said he was a gentile. When they asked him for his papers, he showed them the birth certificate I had left with him. Along with a few others who claimed to be gentiles, he was advised to go to another hospital about a mile away and report for duty there. The group had proceeded only a short distance, when they heard the sound of shooting. More than two hundred innocent Jewish patients and aids, including Neuman's two young sisters, were shot to death. After the massacre, the S.S. poured gasoline over their victims' bodies and set fire to the entire hospital.)

Once back in his apartment, my father promised me he would not try to run away again, so I felt somewhat at ease. Being confined to the Asboth shelter was something of a relief, and even a luxury—not in the sense of having food, which I had accumulated all through the summer, but in that I could just lie down and dream or sleep or think or read. I had a small radio, on which I listened to local news. The volume, of course, was turned down as low as possible, barely audible, so no one would discover me. When there was a knock at the door, it was always one or both of the girls. As for our own need, whenever we could get hold of an extra loaf of bread, we toasted it to keep it from spoiling. At one time there were ten breads, toasted and sliced, in reserve, but gradually we ate them, and as the war in Budapest drew to a close, we were left without food.

In my "prison" I had time to contemplate my fate and whether the struggle for a miserable existence was worth it. I concluded that, as bad as things were, I wanted to survive and I wanted to see my parents and everyone else survive as well. Knowing there were many, many Jewish casualties, made me aware that I would have to keep doing my best and, with God's help, I would survive.

Not many weeks earlier, we had been working hard and managing to have some fun, despite the horrendous circumstances in which we lived. It was a paradox. We were in constant fear of possibly being caught and perhaps executed, but at the same time we were not desperate but optimistic. The future was going to be good. The future—the future.

Right now, all I heard was the constant artillery shelling of Budapest by the Russians, who might very well prove to be our salvation.

The girls brought me daily news that my parents were well, as were my brother and his family. Also, they reported, everything seemed to be quiet and non-threatening. Suzi's boss, Mr. Gerzseni, was keeping Suzi and his permanent house guests, Mendu and Moshe, well provided for in terms of food and card games.

Margit was still going to the factory every day, where it was taken for granted that since "Mr. Novak" (my brother Armin) and I were no longer reporting to our jobs, we must have been injured or even killed in the air raids. She also said that since my disappearance, she had never seen any police or S.S. entering the factory office. This was a good sign that the S.S. men were not half as worried about my escape as I was convinced they were.

About January 1, 1945, the Russian forces celebrated New Year's Day by encircling Budapest, and the explosions from their artillery shells became more and more frequent. My hiding place (Asboth's textile shop) wasn't a strategic target for Russian bombing, but, because it was located close to the Western Railroad Station, the neighborhood was constantly under severe bombardment. One of the blasts broke not only the glass doors of my shelter but also the inside thick wood reinforcement I had nailed to the back of the glass. Realizing it was not safe to stay there any more, I decided that I should move to the Asboth apartment, which was still in good condition.

I had to be careful in this new hiding place that I didn't meet the super or anyone else who knew that Asboth was in military service and his family out of town. The city's entire population already lived in the shelters and nobody was allowed to go to his apartment, except with a special permit from the house commander, which every house had. It would be extremely difficult to explain why I was living in the building. Furthermore, the super knew me from my early days in Budapest—our factory was there—and he knew I was Jewish. If I did bump into him, my only hope was that he would be friendly enough toward me not to turn me in. Despite the human danger the apartment posed, it had advantages. It was located on a narrow, quiet street, Aradi Street II, on the second floor of a five-story building, and it seemed to me to be a bit safer from the explosions than my previous hiding place.

But it wasn't out of the danger zone, either. One day when I was in the kitchen, the five-story building opposite mine received a direct hit from one of the big American bombs, and was flattened completely. The pressure of the blast blew out all the windows of my apartment, with such force that it threw me against the wall.

The bombed-out building, a one-time printing establishment, burned all day long and not a single firefighter tried to extinguish the blaze. The reason was that, in those critical days, Russian planes flew low, strafing pedestrians who, for all they knew, might be an S.S. member or a German. Therefore, few people—official or otherwise—ventured out into the street.

By this time, there was no transportation in the city, no electricity or any of the other conveniences we had come to take for granted. Adding to these shortages, I was now also without windows. There was obviously no way to replace the panes to make the rooms habitable in the freezing cold, so I moved into what had been a maid's room, a small windowless cubicle in the middle of the apartment. It was the one room that had remained intact, and though it had only a small hole for ventilation, I was pleased to move into it.

A few days later, Margit's apartment house was completely demolished by bombs. Luckily, she was at work when her home was destroyed. Coming back at the end of the workday, she saw nothing but tremendous ruins where the great house had been. She wanted to go up to her room, but there were no stairs and she could salvage nothing of her belongings.

Margit came to visit me. "My apartment is one big ruin and I have no place to go," she said. "Can I sleep here?"

"Of course you can," I said, but she felt uneasy about sharing a room with a single man. In an emergency everything is passable, yet she was a proper girl—and while nothing more than friendship passed between us, she asked if we could invite Suzi to join us as a roommate. Up to this point Suzi was still going to her job, mainly because her boss and Mendu and Moshe were hiding there and good food was available. By now, she wasn't able to move around the city very easily. As mentioned, transportation was at a standstill, and though her job was about a mile away, it was too dangerous to walk on the street. The Russian firebombs had turned the city into a raging inferno. The boys were well provided for—they had plenty to eat and were under the protection of a gen-

tile (her boss). They didn't need Suzi, but Margit did, so Suzi decided she would come and stay with us. We squeezed a second sofa into that small room, and the girls slept on one sofa and I on the other.



My sister Margit and her children, (standing) Joseph and Rachel, and seated, (left to right) Jacob, Hindi and Blima. They all perished at Auschwitz.

'Tovarisch'!

The war in Budapest was coming to a climax. The Russians managed to encircle the city completely and to cut off all the roads and food supplies. The hundred thousand or so German and Hungarian soldiers who were still in Budapest dug in in the historic fortress of Buda Castle, and kept fighting the Russians fanatically from there.

When it became obvious the city could no longer be defended, the advance Russian garrison decided to save the city's civilian population from senseless killings and sent two parliamenteurs, a truce delegation carrying white flags, to the Germans with quite a reasonable offer. They said they would allow free passage out of the city for all the encircled military personnel if they would surrender the city peacefully. But the trigger-happy S.S. not only rejected their own last chance for escape, but disregarded all international law. When the Russian truce officers were on their way back from their peaceful mission, the S.S. shot and killed both of them. This, of course, made the Russians furious, and their artillery went into action from every side of the city, showering it with a constant bombardment of shells. The machine-gunning of the walking population from low-flying Russian aircraft continued at a deadly pace.

Combined with the Russian firebombings were the big bombs of the Americans, who bombed at will. Anti-aircraft positions were occupied by the Russians and so the anti-aircraft guns were silent.

In our tiny haven, Margit, Suzi and I did the best we could. There was little problem cooking since we had run out of food ex-

cept for a few slices of dried toast, which we kept soaking in water to make them edible.

Looking out our paneless windows, we could see the victims of the bombings lying helplessly, but even then the main concern of the Hungarian S.S. was not to help their injured brethren, but to liquidate the Jews. Even under the heaviest bombardments, the Nazis were rounding up Jews. The Arrow-Cross herded the few remaining Jews who lived in Swiss and Swedish-protected houses into the ghetto they had just built, in order to concentrate all the Jews in one place. The rumors were that the S.S. planned to mine and explode the entire ghetto before they capitulated to the Russians. If not for the very fast action of the Russian army, which made an all-out assault on the heart of the city just in time to liberate the ghetto (on January 17th and 18th), the Nazis might have carried out their plans.

We were completely out of food, and food stores were no longer open. Even if they had been, we didn't dare leave our hiding place, because it was dangerous for anyone to know about our being there. Facing starvation, Suzi volunteered to sneak out at night and get some food from her employer, but it was too far to walk, and I refused to let her go. We had no idea whether the section where her boss was hiding was still held by the Nazis or had come under Russian control.

I remembered that a grocery shop was located across the street from the paper factory where I had worked. I used to buy my food there and I had become quite friendly with the owner, a widow who operated the small shop with her son, who was my age. They lived just behind their store, which was only two blocks away from our hideout. She was a very nice woman, who had taken a liking to Pishta and me, when we had lunch at one of the tables set up in her grocery store. I wrote a note asking her to sell me some food, and I asked the two girls to try to deliver it to her in the evening. Luckily, they found her at the shelter. After reading my note, she told Margit and Suzi that she was very short on food herself, but she remembered me wearing a very nice gray suit, which would fit her son, and she said she was willing to give ten pounds of potatoes and two pounds of bread in trade for my suit. It was the only suit that I had with me—the rest of my belongings were still at my old apartment, to which I dared not return after my escape from the authorities. I gladly gave up the gray suit in return for food. I was

walking around in Asboth's pajamas and robe all day anyway, so I told the girls to make the deal. They brought back only a partial payment—enough food for at least three days.

There were street fights all over the city now, and the Russians were fighting hand-to-hand with the Germans for every building. Budapest was really being captured from underground. Each house had a bomb shelter, which was connected by a safety exit to the shelter of the next house. If a bomb demolished a house and the ruins blocked the exit passages, the inhabitants could escape through the shelter of their neighbors.

Normally these safety exits were blocked by a very thin wall in an effort to preserve the privacy of each house. But near these walls were a pickaxe and shovel, so that, in case of emergency, anyone could break through in seconds to open the way to escape.

The Russians exploited these safety exits, breaking through as soon as they took over a house, capturing the neighboring shelters along with the civilian inhabitants. Then the fight would begin with the Nazis awaiting them in the building or backyard. The Russian method of operation after capturing a block of shelters was to check with the shelter commander of each house as to whether any S.S. men were hiding in the building. Once they were assured no S.S. men were left, the Russians would head upstairs to take over the building. But sometimes they were fooled and bloody fighting ensued.

On the night of January 15, 1945, we settled down to try to rest in our tiny apartment, which by that time had been shattered by the frequent explosions. By now, not only the windows but the furniture and dishes had been wrecked by the impact of direct hits on our building. Still, the windowless room that Suzi, Margit and I shared remained intact, as if God had been holding His right hand over it. The terrific explosions made it almost impossible to sleep, and through much of our waking hours we repeated one prayer: "Please keep protecting us, God, for just a few more days."

About 5 a.m., we heard the terrifying sound of a crash at the front door, and the noise of screaming people pouring in through the lobby. Startled, I said in a loud voice to my roommates, "This is it. The S.S. has found us," and we began to chant, "*Shema Yisroel*" the prayer a Jew chants before dying.

My loud shout had ruined any chance of our remaining undetected.

Within seconds the door was being pounded by machine gun butts. Our hearts beating wildly, we were too scared to even speak. Suddenly we heared them yelling "*Odkroy Dvere, Odkroy Dvere*" (open the door). For a moment it didn't register and then, the realization hit, they were Russians, not Germans, Russians.

Trembling, I fumbled for the key, which was on the inside of the door, but I shook so much, I lost my hold on the key and it fell to the floor. It was pitch dark—electricity being a thing of the past—and I dropped to my knees, frantically searching in the dark for it. The terrible thought flashed through my mind, that the Russians had been assured there were no civilians in our building (no one had known we were there) and now, hearing our voices, they must be assuming we were German soldiers.

"*Tovarisch,*" (comrade), I kept yelling in Russian, "*Ne strielaj*" (don't shoot). "*Ne strielaj,*" (Please don't shoot). The key continued to elude me. Any moment, the Russians would fire through the door, killing us, the very people they should be liberating. Their thumping on the door grew louder, and finally—it must have taken half a minute, but to me it was an agonizing lifetime—I found the key and, still trembling, got it into the keyhole and opened the door.

In a moment a dozen flashlights were shining into my eyes and a dozen machine guns were pointing at my heart. They were a squad of Russian Tatars, who, I feared, would not believe we were anything but Germans. I immediately thrust my hands up in the air and kept repeating, "*Ne strielaj, tovarisch*" (Don't shoot, comrade).

My flimsy Russian, picked up in that paperback dictionary that was almost my undoing, must have been my salvation. What ever it was, something created reasonable doubt in their minds —perhaps I was not an enemy—and they gave me a chance to speak.

"Who are you?" the commander of the squad asked.

"I'm Jewish."

"Why aren't you in the basement shelter?"

"Because I'm Jewish and I'm supposed to be in the ghetto. I was afraid the people in the shelter would turn me over to the S.S., so I was hiding here."

Their commander must have understood me. He was certainly sympathetic. He patted me on the shoulder and said in Russian,

"*Ne bojsza*," (Don't be afraid, don't be afraid). Seeing my agitated state, he patted my shoulder again and shook my hand. "*Ne bojsza*" (Don't worry), he said, "simmer down," and I finally did.

A moment earlier I had been petrified at the ironic probability that, having survived the Nazis. I would be gunned down by my "liberators," the Russians. Now, I felt reassured.

But the tension returned almost immediately. "Who is *this*?" the commander asked, gesturing toward Margit.

"*Moja zsenka*," I said. "My wife."

"And who is the other girl?" (referring to Suzi).

"My sister."

There was a reason for my white lies. These were front-line fighting men, who could take anything or anyone they wanted, do anything they wanted. And the girls were young and attractive, especially for men who must have craved female companionship.

"Okay," they said, "your wife and sister," indicating they would keep a respectful distance. But I knew any minute the soldiers could change their minds.

The commander wasted no time before ordering his men to search the other rooms and then, after they found no one else there, to search through the rest of the building. He told them not to harm us. At daybreak, he had four men set up machine guns in each of the four windows we had facing the main street, a primary Budapest avenue called Terez Korut. Across the street, Germans were still in the fight, and throughout the day the Russians in our apartment and the Germans in a big hotel, the Abbazia, on the opposite corner, exchanged machine-gun fire.

Every hour, the four Russian machine gunners were relieved and they rested near Margit, Suzi and me. The way the men looked at those girls, it was clear they were dying to take them. But when I reminded them the women were my wife and sister, they controlled their impulses. "*Charasho, charasho*" (okay, okay), they responded, smiling and friendly. We were almost free.

At the end of the day, the Russians left to continue their fight to take over the city. All that was missing from our room was my watch. Whoever took it had certainly earned it. He was welcome to it as a symbol of my gratitude.



The author in 1945, in Budapest.

Famine

We were liberated by the Russians on January 16, 1945; the ghetto was liberated two days later, and our part of the city (Pest) was now completely under Russian control. But we were not yet out of danger.

My poor parents and my brother were living in Buda, where the fighting was still raging—and where it would go on for weeks. Most of the Nazis in our part of the city managed to escape over the frozen Danube River to Buda and take up positions in the fortress of the King Castle. Bridges across the Danube were bombed out of commission and no longer could I visit my parents, who lived about a hundred yards from the Buda shore of the Danube. Every day I would go to the Pest bank of the river and watch the bombardment of Buda by Russian planes, hoping and praying that no bombs would strike my parents' home. To think they had survived the whole war and now might be killed by "friendly" fire.

That wasn't the only danger. The only communication I had about them was that people in Buda had nothing to eat and many were dying of starvation. In Pest, too, famine was a harsh reality, but we were able to ease our situation.

At this time I was living with Suzi, Margit, Lily and the boys, Jacob, Mendu and Moshe, in Lieutenant Asboth's apartment. It was bombed out, but we had made it habitable by paneling all the broken windows with wood. We lived like a family. Jacob, the only one of the four of us who was detained by the police after we were arrested by the S.S. that critical night in December, had told us that after he was left by the S.S., the police treated him quite le-

niently. They transferred him the following morning to a house of detention for Jews, where they at least had food, and the final week before the liberation all the detainees were taken to the ghetto, where they were soon freed by the Russians. He joined up with us at Arady Street ll the day the ghetto fell.

The hard currency in Budapest at that time was alcohol. If you had whiskey, you could buy just about anything from the Russians—sugar, bread, potatoes. Paper currency was worthless, but gold still had value. One gram of gold could be exchanged for four kilograms of bread or a kilo of sugar or lard, and you could then take a kilo of bread and barter it for four kilos of potatoes. The Russians, being fighting men in combat, had a substantial food supply. A woman who was very hungry would take her fur coat or her husband's watch and ask the first Russian she saw, "What will you give me for this?" He'd offer bread or some other article of food, and the deal would be made.

Pest, in the first two weeks of liberation, was an open city, as far as helping oneself to merchandise was concerned. Anyone could break into a store without fear of punishment. Free-for-all robbery was the norm, and, like everyone else, we did our share.

Our first stop was an abandoned Arrow Cross headquarters. We found a roomful of used clothing the S.S. had confiscated from their Jewish victims.

Having traded my last suit for two kilos of bread, I was in dire need of a wardrobe, as were my companions. Here we found more than enough of a selection. Then, Jacob, Moshe, Mendu and I decided to take our small four-wheel carriage and see what tradeable items we could pick up. The first goods we took were typewriters—five of them. Then we broke into a motor shop and stole motors. Of course, we had no need for any of these, except that everything had a value and we were able to trade off some of them, but not for much.

One day we passed a drugstore that had already been broken into and the drugs taken. But in the basement area we struck "gold"—three demijohns of pure alchohol. One was marked 75-proof, the next 95-proof and the other, 100-proof. It was the equivalent of a successful burglary of the Bank of England. We waited until dusk to put those three demijohns in our carriage. Then we covered them with junk and old clothes, so the Russians wouldn't see them and confiscate our loot. Back at our apartment,

I began using my little bit of knowledge about drug-making and the formulas I had for mixing alcohol to make whiskey and other liquor. Every other morning I would give one bottle of my home-made booze to a fellow who worked with the Russians in their kitchen. In the evening, he would bring back four good Russian white breads. To starving people, this was a fortune.

Within a week of our liberation, I had obtained a job for myself as an interpreter at the Czechoslovakian Embassy. In return for interpreting Hungarian, German, Russian and Slovakish, I received one bowl of soup a day. But there was a significant fringe benefit: protection.

The Russians, in control of our half of Budapest, could not distinguish readily between friend and foe, so whenever they saw a young man walking by, they arrested him. And once two hundred such able-bodied "recruits" had been accumulated in their storefront headquarters, the Russians took them to Siberia. Most of those arrested were Nazis, either Germans or Hungarian, but inevitably there were also several Jewish victims, who could not talk themselves out of their predicament. The Russians did not want to listen to them, so, as I was to learn after the war, many Jewish young men were taken to Siberia and served three or four years before being released. More than once I was headed for the same fate, but I managed to talk myself out of it by showing proof that I worked in the Czech Embassy. Czechoslovakia, I told them, was fighting with the Russians against the Nazis, so we were brothers. But it was not easy convincing them. Fortunately, I had embassy papers, made out in Russian, saying I worked in the Czech Embassy. I also had a white armband with a Czech flag on it, issued by the embassy. These items, combined with my persuasiveness, convinced them to let me go.

I could not rest easy, however. The news from the sector of the city where my parents were living continued to be most troubling. The Russians and the Nazis were engaged in hand-to-hand fighting, and the civilian population continued to experience a virtual famine. I had to get to my parents with food.

When I mentioned my intention, my apartment mates tried to talk me out of venturing into that no-man's land where anything that moved would be shot. My brother Armin, whose neighborhood had fallen to the Russians about February 1st and who had immediately come with his family to live with us,

volunteered to accompany me. Into a big knapsack I loaded half a dozen loaves of bread and some marmalade we had bought from the Russians, along with whiskey that I figured could be bartered for additional foodstuffs. I put as much as I could carry into that knapsack, and at seven the next morning Armin and I started on our journey.

At the edge of the Danube, which was frozen solid, this being February, we were stopped by Russian military guards.

"Where are you going?"

"To visit our parents, because they have no food."

"You're crazy to try," they said. "How are you going to get through to the other side? You'll be killed."

But we persisted, and they shrugged as if to say, "If you want to go, it's your *mishigayas* (your foolishness)." We thanked them and moved on, reaching Margit Island in the middle of the Danube without any problem. Our side of the island was peaceful, but as we crossed it, there was more and more shooting. Russian soldiers were lying on their stomachs, exchanging machine-gun fire with the Germans on the far shore of the Danube. Anytime Armin and I heard a burst of gunfire, we threw ourselves to the ground. When the firing quieted down, we got up and walked again, managing to make it to the other side of the island. There, a Russian soldier stopped us.

"Where the hell are you going? What are you civilians doing here?"

When we told him our story, he said, "No, you can't go there, because as you cross the Danube you'll be killed, either by our men or by the Germans."

Everyone, he explained, was viewed as an enemy, and the fact that we were wearing civilian clothes could not be made out from a distance. "You'll be killed," he said.

This was enough to convince Armin. "We have to go back" he said. "I don't want to be killed *now*. Maybe our parents are not starving."

I told him, "Armin, if you want to go back, go in good health, But I'm not turning back."

"You're crazy. After all, I have a wife and two children, and for their sake I'm not going to let myself get killed at this stage. If I can't keep you back, I'm very sorry. Good-bye, Laizer," and he left.

I went as far as the river on the other side of the island, where once again Russian soldiers demanded to know what I was doing. They suggested, "If you insist on crossing, at least go down about two hundred yards from here, where there isn't much crossfire. You have almost as good a chance of being killed there, because our soldiers are all over, but at least you won't be *directly* in the line of fire."

I thanked them for their advice, and took off. "Good luck," said a Russian officer.

There was a lot of shooting, but I couldn't have cared less. I just walked across the frozen Danube and, after about twenty minutes I reached the other side of the river. Russian soldiers there asked me the same question, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"My parents live about a hundred yards from here, they have nothing to eat, and I'm bringing them food."

They were sympathetic. "If you want to go, go, but you're in crossfire. If you cross a street, run, don't walk. By the time they notice you, you should already be covered by houses on the other side of the street."

I took their advice, running across the streets as fast as I could. When the firing became especially intense, I'd fall to the ground. Then I'd pick up and continue on my way. I made it across two streets successfully and finally came to the street where my parents lived—Keleti Karoly Str. They were at number 18, a few houses away. At number 14 I encountered another group of Russian soldiers, to whom I repeated my story. They told me that number 18 was the last house on the street under Russian control and the situation was in flux. As recently as the previous day, number 18, where my parents were, had been in German hands. In the hand-to-hand fighting going on there, control of each house changed almost by the hour.

These Russians, too, were understanding of my plight. "If you go on the street, you'll surely be shot," they warned. "You might be able to cross from one house to the next through their backyards. But when you make that crossing, jump out and run for your life, because the Germans will be shooting from the roof-top at whatever they see move. *We* move only at night."

Following their instructions, I ran through the backyards of two houses, and I managed to reach the basement of the house where my parents lived. About fifty civilians, some of them who knew

me, were in the basement. I'd been coming to visit my parents all summer.

"What brings you here, Mr. Farkas?" I was asked.

"I came to visit my parents."

"Well, go in the back, and you'll find Mrs. Farkas."

On a broken-down sofa, I located my mother in pitiful condition. Obviously starving, she was semi-conscious and hardly recognized me. I started to pat her face. "Mother, Mother," I said, but she gave no sign of recognition. "I am your son, Leichi, and I brought you food to eat." She stirred slightly, and I opened my knapsack to show her a portion of the bread I had brought. She stared at the bread, *kenyér* in Hungarian. In an eerie, mournful voice that haunts me to this day, she moaned. "*ken...yér, ken...yér.*" She hadn't seen bread in at least four weeks. She'd subsisted on a little black coffee and soup, nothing more solid. I cannot forget her weak, barely audible "*ken...yér.*" I fed her a bit of bread, ever so slowly, and she took it, but she was too weak to speak. So I asked her neighbors where my father was, and they told me that about three days earlier, he and another resident of the apartment house, a judge (who was gentile) decided that they could no longer stand either the increasing hunger or the constant exchange of control between the Germans and the Russians. My father had some familiarity with the nearby Jewish Hospital, the Szeretet House, having been there twice for the treatment of bleeding ulcers. "Listen," he told the judge, "come with me to the hospital. We'll lie down there, and automatically we'll have food and be more protected than we are here."

For about half an hour, I remained in the basement to try to comfort my mother, patting her and telling her over and over, "Don't worry, just a few more days." It had been two months since I had last seen her, and the change in her appearance was drastic.

In the basement, I offered the lady in whose apartment my parents had been living, a half a loaf of bread. She gratefully accepted, as did the nearest neighbors, to whom I distributed a little of the food I had brought.

I divided the remaining contents of my knapsack in two, leaving half for my mother in care of her landlady, to make sure my mother would not starve. With the other half of my provisions, I planned to set out to find my father.

Others in the basement gathered around to ask, "What's new in Pest?"

"In Pest," I told them, "everything's fine. Life is becoming normalized. The trams are fixed and starting to move, and we're getting back to living again."

They asked me if I would take back messages from them to their relatives in my part of the city, and either deliver them personally, or mail them if the postal service was back in operation. The messages were all essentially the same: "Thank God, we are all right. We are hungry, but we hope to survive and be free in a few days." I took their messages, some thirty in all, and put them in my pants pocket, said good-bye to my mother and the whole gathering there, and left the same way I had come in—through the emergency exit holes of the basement.

With my knapsack on my back, I headed for the hospital, about a mile to the right of my parents' building. Fortunately, that part of the city was all in Russian hands at this stage. There were no Germans in sight and no fighting. The only activity I witnessed on my way to the hospital was that of Russian soldiers coming and going.

It should have been simple, but it wasn't. A Russian officer—high ranking, according to his uniform—approached me.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

"I'm a Czech working for the Czech Embassy," I explained in Russian. "My parents are here and I'm bringing them food. I live in Pest but I came over here to bring food to my parents."

"Well, that's a good story, but what if you're a spy? You could be a German spy."

He was very polite and his tone was gentle, and I was not concerned, except that I feared I might not reach my father that day. I was confident I could prove to the Russians I was not an enemy.

"I'm not a spy," I said. "You can come back with me and see my sick mother, if you don't believe me." But of course he wasn't interested. He was suspicious of me, which was quite normal.

"I'm putting you under arrest and taking you with me," said the Russian. "If you are what you say you are, I'll let you go. But if you are a German spy, then we'll take care of you." It was strangely reminiscent of what the S.S. and the detective had said to me before.

We walked together two or three blocks to a house that the Russians had made into headquarters. In a small room, he ordered me to empty my pockets to make sure I had no hidden weapons. Of course, all I had were my knapsack and the thirty or so messages from my parents' neighbors to their families.

"You see," the officer said, "you *are* a spy."

"Why do you say that?" I replied, alarmed for the first time.

"Well, here are all these secret messages, all this code."

He was referring to the notes from the people in the basement. They were written in Hungarian, a language he could not understand. Over and over, I tried to explain that they were just innocent messages and that I was just a goodwill ambassador, but he refused to believe me.

I told him I was Jewish, hoping that would make him believe I wasn't a spy. "Listen," I said, "I was caught by the Hungarian Nazis just two months ago and then when I told them I was gentile they didn't believe me. They took off my pants and saw that I was Jewish. Why can't you do the same thing?"

I knew that, like the Hungarians, Russian gentiles were not circumcised, except for rare health reasons. Only Jews were. So I pleaded with him, "May I please show you my real identification so you will believe I'm Jewish?"

"We don't care whether you're Jewish or not; we care whether or not you are a spy. We will investigate, and if you're not a Nazi spy you have nothing to worry about. As to proving that you're Jewish, we are civilized people, not barbarians like the Germans or the Hungarian S.S. We have much better ways to find out whether you're innocent or guilty. We don't have to take off anybody's pants."

With that, he went out and locked the door, leaving me to await further investigation. From the window, I could see a guard was posted outside. Perhaps an hour later, the guard came in to take me before the general. "The commander wants to speak with you," he said.

I tried to put my case passionately to the guard. "I don't understand why they don't believe me when I say I'm Jewish. A Jew cannot be a German spy."

"*Du bist a Yid*?" (You're Jewish?), he asked in Yiddish.

"Sure I'm Jewish," I responded in Yiddish, delighted at this latest development.

"Where are you from?"

"I was born near Kassa."

"Really?" he said. "A Czech!"

"Of course."

"So am I. I joined the Russian army a year ago as a Czech partisan, and I'm serving with them. Don't worry. If you are Jewish, don't worry. I'll take care of you."

You can imagine the relief I felt, if only temporarily. The guard escorted me before a fat old Russian general, whose pants had a wide red stripe, signifying he was a high commander. The table in front of him was covered with a beautiful Oriental rug, on which lay a big revolver.

Speaking in Russian in somber tones, he told me "*Sadijsa,*" (Sit down). Anything could happen, but I gained some reassurance from the sight of my new-found friend, the Yiddish-speaking guard, addressing the commander in Russian. He had read the letters from my parents' neighbors to their families, and he could assure the commander that there was no secret code involved; the messages were just goodwill notes, as I had said. Also, the guard told the commander, he had found out that I was in fact Jewish and that he knew exactly from which village I came. As a Czech and a Jew, I could be trusted not to be a Nazi spy, the guard said.

After that, the general asked me just a few questions as a matter of formality, and then said, "Okay, you can go."

So once more I'd been spared, and once more I summoned up my nerve to try to push my good fortune further. Knowing that on my journey to my father's hospital, I'd probably meet another hundred Russian soldiers and be arrested another dozen times, I asked the general, "What about giving me a *bumashka* (an identification) testifying that I am not a Nazi?"

"Sorry," he said, "I am not authorized to issue this kind of document. But..."

I leaned forward eagerly to hear what protection he could give me instead.

"Watch out for your life," he said. "Don't get arrested again."

Wonderful, free advice! Of course, I needed protection, not platitudes, but there was nothing further to be done. I thanked the general and the guard, my rescuer, and said good-bye.

Looking for the hospital, I walked on and on, seeing no one on the street except for an occassional Russian soldier. Apparently,

the farther I proceeded in the direction of the hospital, the more accustomed the Russians were to seeing civilians, and no one stopped me. I asked a few of the civilians for the exact location of the hospital, which they gave me. I was astonished to find nothing but rubble on the site of the hospital—it had been burned to the ground. The fact that it had been under Swiss protection was not protection enough.

Though my heart sank at the latest evidence of Nazi brutality, I was at least consoled by the knowledge that my father could not have been among the victims. The massacre and torching of the hospital must have taken place before he got there, because he had left for the hospital only three days earlier, and if the devastation had taken place recently I would have smelled the gasoline, and the burning of the flesh. But the rubble was already under snow.

I wasted no time; mourning for the victims would have to come later. I immediately approached a passerby and asked him for the name and location of the next hospital. Receiving the information I wanted, I headed directly for it. The registry showed a Mister Farkas (my father) had been admitted and listed the room he was in. I located my father without difficulty. He was very thin and very hungry, but not quite as bad off as my mother, since in his three days of hospitalization he had been treated to some food. I explained that I didn't have much time—I had to return across the Danube to my apartment—and told him I'd left half of the food I'd brought with my mother. " This is your share," I said, and after I spent a few minutes feeding and comforting him, we said good-bye to each other. I still had a dangerous crossing to make.

It was quite a distance back to the shore of the Danube, and because it was night-time, there was no shooting in the area, so I made it to the island in the middle of the river without incident. However, by the time I reached the island it was past the curfew time of 9 p.m. in Budapest, and, except for the Russian soldier, no one was allowed on the street after that hour, not even the Hungarian police.

As nervy as I often was during that period, I did not want to push my luck and ask the Russians on the island whether I could spend the night there. After all, I was a civilian in a war zone, and it was difficult to ask favors. Furthermore, I wasn't that fluent in Russian that I could express myself fully. Anyway, it was good-will enough on their part to let me go without arresting me.

When I told them that I wanted to cross the Pest side of the Danube, they warned me that parts of the river had thawed and there was danger of falling into the water through the cracks in the melted ice. I walked cautiously on the ice and, as I got close to the shore, I noticed more and more cracks. The ice indeed was melting, so I returned to the island to ask the Russians for three planks of wood, which they were kind enough to give me. As I got within ten or fifteen feet of the shore, I laid down one of the planks to bridge the melting ice and, holding the remaining planks, walked across the portable bridge I just had made. I repeated this process. laying down the remaining planks on the floating ice blocks until I reached the shore. I think I took the last step in the water, but the water at that point was shallow and safety was in sight.

Now there was still another good half-hour's walk to reach our apartment. I had to proceed very carefully in order to avoid meeting another Russian patrol. It was 11 o'clock, two hours after curfew, when I finally reached home.

At the apartment, my friends and my brother were all in tears, convinced that this time Leichi was really gone. But my name is Wieder, as in *auf wieder sehn* (I'll see you again), and we were once again reunited. Our tears were now of joy.

The senseless fighting and killing went on in Buda for fifteen more days. At last, that part of the city fell to the Russians, and our nightmare appeared to be over. We were numbed by our experiences of the last eleven months, but grateful and joyful as at no other time in our lives.

My dear parents were so weak they couldn't walk, so we brought them to our apartment in the four-wheel carriage we had used earlier for our contraband. It took us a day to get our precious cargo, my mother and father, back to our headquarters.

By now we had a supply of decent food, and I wanted to give my father a treat, so I fed him meat and *shmaltz* (chicken fat) and other good things. Unfortunately, we didn't realize how harmful these rich foods were on a starving stomach; he developed dysentery, and we feared he had typhus, a disease that was rampant in Budapest after the war, killing quite a lot of people. Sure enough, his ailment was diagnosed as typhus.

Someone suggested that I take him to a hospital—a Jewish improvised care center, where there were doctors who would take

better care of him than we could at home. So we took our carriage, outfitted it with pillows, and gingerly placed him on it for a trip to the hospital, located in the ghetto. As you can imagine, the place was in a high state of disorder, and I had to search all over to find a doctor. I knew time was of the essence if my father was to survive.

On my search for a doctor, I opened an unmarked door and saw, to my horror, that it was an improvised morgue, filled with the bodies of twenty or more men and women who had died from the disease. I rushed out, urgently telling my friends, "Let's go before my father dies here. If he stays, he definitely won't survive."

Back at our apartment, I isolated my father in a small room, and assigned Suzi to take care of him. "Suzi," I said, "you don't have to do anything else but stay with him all the time and take care of him. Whenever he's conscious, feed him a little bit of tea." For six weeks, my father remained critically ill, but, with Suzi nursing him along, he gradually recovered. She definitely brought him back to life. She felt she owed her life to me, and this was the wonderful way in which she repaid me.

So, yes, except for the images branded on our souls forever, our nightmare was over.

It was the beginning of April, 1945, and we all began to think about picking up the threads of our lives which had been so devastatingly interrupted.

With my father well on the road to recovery, Suzi went to her uncle's home to await the return of her husband who was still somewhere in a labor camp.

Margit, Lily and their brother Mendu also left our cramped quarters, and set up their own households.

My cousin Jacob went home to Torna, looking for his family.

The Asboth apartment was now home for what we thought remained of the Wieder family. But we always live on hope, and so my mother paced the apartment daily, praying for her other children and their families and all the others she loved so dearly.

I quit my job at the Czech Embassy, and Armin and I opened a general store in the lieutenant's shop where we made enough to support the family. However, our store was looted on May 1st, and we were forced to close up.

By mid May the part of the country where the Asboths lived was

freed by the Russians, and the Asboths returned to Budapest with their large "family," Anna and her two daughters, as well as little Judith.

The Asboths were as heartbroken at returning Judith to her natural parents, as my brother and sister-in-law were overjoyed at getting her back. Armin took his family back to their home in Nitra, Czechoslovakia, and I returned with my parents to my hometown of Torna to try to start again.

I began courting Lucie, who remembered that, as a young teenager she had seen—and admired—me when I appeared in her town in a *Purimshpiel* (a traditional, farcical costume-play in celebration of the festival of Purim). We were married in June of 1946.

Since both of us were born and bred in the textile business, we applied for a license and opened a textile business of our own in 1946 in Lucie's home town, Moldava, Czechoslovakia. We developed quite a flourishing business, but in March of 1948, after the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, we decided to leave for Italy, where we were able to wait until our emigration quota number arrived from Washington. In 1949, Lucie and I set out for New York.

My dear parents came to America in 1947 on a preferential visa, which was given to them because their daughter, Jolan, and her family had lived here for many years.

Lucie and I have raised two fine sons, put them through *yeshiva* and college, and delight in them and their families. We are blessed with good health and freedom in a country where opportunities are unlimited for everyone, and where one can be openly proud of being Jewish. Our U.S. citizenship is our most prized possession.

What continues to thrill and astound me is that, as I conduct my business, raise our children, go about my day-to-day life, say my prayers, and travel four thousand miles away from home, no one asks to see my papers.

Epilogue

You may be interested in learning the fate of my dear ones and others who appeared in the account:

My mother enjoyed the blessings of liberty in this country only until 1952, when she died, much too soon, at the age of 64. She succumbed to an illness brought on, I am sure, by the grief she bore constantly over the loss of her nine grandchildren; her daughter Margit and her son-in-law, Margit's husband; a daughter-in-law, all her sisters, brothers and most of their families, and ninety-five percent of her friends—all victims of the Nazis. From the vivacious lover of life she had been when I was growing up, in the post-war years she was reduced to a mournful, mortally wounded creature, who bore in tearful silence her horrifying loss. She was as much a victim of the Holocaust as if she had perished in one of the camps.

* * *

My father lived in New York until 1954, when he decided to emigrate to Israel, which was his dream from the time he survived the Holocaust. He remarried there, and lived to the age of eighty-one. Although he never forgot the horrors of the war years, he took great pride in the fact that he was part of the rebirth of Israel.

* * *

My eldest brother, Armin, with his wife and children (who once again could use their real names, Judith and Erwin) settled in New York. I have the pleasure of having long weekly conversations with him.

* * *

My brother Joseph was deported to Auschwitz, where his wife Rachel and their four lovely children were gassed and burned. He survived the war, and later remarried a lovely young lady, and together they raised a second family.

* * *

My oldest sister, Margit, and her five beautiful children were lost in Auschwitz; her husband Adolf was lost on the Russian front, where he was used as a human mine detector by the retreating Hungarian army.

The circumstances surrounding his death give a better idea of the character of some of the Hungarian army officers, under whom I had served for more than three years.

My brother-in-law was in a working battalion for two years that had been sent to the Russian front to help build defense lines for the Hungarian army. One day, the Hungarians wanted to attack, but were afraid to advance because of the mines they knew the Russians had laid in no-man's land. So they sent a group of laborers, including my brother-in-law, to pick up the mines. None of the "volunteers" had any previous training in this dangerous precision task, and they were given no equipment. My brother-in-law stepped on a mine, which exploded and cost him a leg and a hand. He was taken to an improvised hospital for the sick and injured Jewish labor campers in Sereda Buda, a Ukrainian village.

A few days later, when the Hungarians were forced to retreat, they poured gasoline over the entire hospital and set fire to it, burning to death all the Jewish injured who were in the hospital for treatment.

I learned the sad account from a Mr. Willinger, one of the few survivors of my brother-in-law's ill-fated battalion and one of his buddies, who lived in New York City, until his death a few years ago.

* * *

My sister, Jolan, came to the United States in 1938 with her family, and they have made their home here since.

* * *

When the war ended, Lieutenant Asboth and his wife returned my niece Judith (Marika) to her parents, heartbroken at having to give up the child they had come to think of as their own. They loved her so much.

I corresponded with Lieutenant Asboth every three or four weeks, enclosing money or a gift parcel with every letter to him. Now along in years, he was badly in need of financial aid. The gift parcel obtained through the U.S. Relief Parcel Service, contained such luxury items as chocolate and coffee, which could be sold in Budapest for about fifty dollars.

As the years went by, I thought that the story of how courageously he had acted to save me, my niece, Anna, and her children, among others, deserved to be heard by other Jews. After all, in a sense it was every Jew's obligation to repay such a wonderful soul, and it would be fitting, I felt, for Jews everywhere to write him, telling him of their feelings and of their gratitude. So I went to *The Jewish Press*, an English-language newspaper published in Brooklyn, New York, and told them the story. The resulting article, by Dr. Morris Mandel, led to responses from perhaps fifty people, most of whom sent the lieutenant a one-time contribution of between ten and twenty dollars. A few continued to correspond with him and send him small amounts of money. I also contacted the Joint Distribution Committee, which continued to send him twenty dollars a month until he died at the age of eighty-seven.

* * *

Suzi, the brave girl who escaped the Nazis and later nursed my father back to health, lives with her family in Israel.

* * *

My good friends, Gita and Lily, with their brother Mendu, emigrated to Canada, where they live with their respective families. (Unfortunately, Gita died three years ago.)

* * *

Vera and her family survived the war—Vera in the convent, and her parents with her little sister in the Budapest ghetto. After the war, I became a welcome visitor at their house, and as many times as I returned to Budapest for a visit, they insisted I stay with them. Later, Vera married an engineer, and, as far as I know, they still live in Budapest.

* * *

My cousin Jacob, the only one of the four of us retained by the Hungarian police after we were caught by the Nazis at the post office, was liberated by the Russians on January 17, 1945, from the Budapest ghetto. From a family of ten, only he and three sisters who survived Auschwitz, remained. The four of them live in Israel with their families today.

* * *

My cousin Archie, who wound up in the Kassa ghetto because his father would not let him return to Budapest with the aryan documents, perished with most of his family in Auschwitz. Two of his sisters survived the concentration camp and live in Israel with their families.

* * *

Rose, whose husband never returned from the concentration camp, remarried and lives with her two children and grandchildren in the U.S.

* * *

Moshe, who helped me save Rose's children, survived the war and lives with his family in Jersualem.

* * *

It was not until after the war that I learned the fate of Bubi, my dear friend and business partner, who had been arrested, and his whereabouts unkown. It turned out that after his arrest he had been taken to Buchenwald, but managed to survive. He came back to Budapest about three months after we were liberated, married a lovely girl and moved to Vienna, where he was a very prosperous businessman for twelve years.

Bubi then decided to come to America, where his mother and his sisters who had survived in Budapest with gentile papers, had moved some years earlier. His father and younger brother did not survive the Holocaust. Shortly after arriving in the United States, Bubi suddenly took sick. He had surgery, which was partially successful, but he needed additional treatment. Either because he had been told that Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem would give him better care, or because he wanted to fulfill a lifelong dream and end his days in Israel, he moved there with his wife and children. Within a month he succumbed to his illness.

* * *

Anna survived the war in the countryside with the Asboths. After liberation she and her children left the Asboths and went home, not knowing whether or not her husband was alive. Some six weeks later he arrived and, shortly after his return, they moved to Jerusalem. I have visited them serveral times in Israel. Their two daughters have both married.

* * *

Tibi, the eighteen-year-old son of the man from my village, whom I met in the Kassa ghetto, was never able to keep his promise to leave the labor camp battalion and join me. When the alert came that his battalion was due to be transported out of Budapest, Tibi did try to escape but was caught and badly beaten up. The battalion was en route to Germany through Vienna when he tried again to escape, and this time he was successful. Using the gentile papers I had left with him, he was able to obtain employment with an Austrian gardener, until liberated by the Russians. He, too, now lives in Israel with his family.

* * *

Neuman, who escaped the execution squad in Szeretet Hospital by identifying himself as an aryan, with the only paper I gave him, a birth certificate, survived the war and lives in Israel. However, his two beautiful sisters who worked at the same hospital as nurses were shot and burned with the rest of the patients and staff.

* * *

Some ten years after the war, I was at services in the synagogue that I attend daily, when a stranger came in. He looked vaguely familiar to me, and then as I came closer to him the realization dawned. I was amazed.

"Isn't your name Leon?"

"Lajos," he yelled. "You are Jewish! I can't believe it; you are Jewish, and you survived."

"And Leon, you are Jewish too!"

My old apartment mate, (when I had slept in the kitchen in Budapest) who had gone to such lengths—with the snapshots of the family around the Christmas tree, among other "evidence"—to prove to me that he was gentile, was after all, a fellow Jew.

He told me his story: He actually had been living much safer than I in Budapest, because he had identification certifying that he was a Polish refugee. The ID came from the Polish government in exile in Budapest, where the government had taken refuge after Poland was overrun by the Germans. Thousands of Polish soldiers fled to Budapest, and all that one of these Polish refugees had to do was to go to the Polish exile government and report, "I'd just come from Poland," and he'd be issued the Polish documents without having to show any ID. Polish refugees who were Jews concealed that fact, of course, and Leon was among them.

He merely gave a name and the city from where he had come, and stated that he was a regular army man. "I am here because I am a Polish refugee." Like anyone else who gave such testimony and *could speak Polish fluently*, Leon was issued a very good Polish identification card, which he could take to the Hungarian police. The Hungarians would then issue Hungarian ID papers, including a permit allowing the applicant to reside safely in Budapest as a Polish refugee. This was how Leon was able to rent part of the apartment where I was living. He even received some financial aid from the Polish government in exile, so he didn't have to work

during that terrible period.

In the apartment, Leon spoke Polish and I spoke Czechoslovak, and while we understood each other fairly well, we could not have struck up a very detailed conversation because we were afraid of each other.

* * *

Soon after my marriage, I went into the city to locate Maria, that wonderful peasant woman who had saved my life in Kassa.

"Do you remember me?" I asked.

"Sure, I remember you."

"Well, I've come to pay my debt to you."

I explained that I was in the textile distribution business, under a license issued to my wife. In each part of the country, there was just one exclusive distributor authorized to get the rationed textiles. In those days, people had to use ration cards to obtain textiles, which were as valuable as gold or today's oil.

"I haven't got money," I told her, "but I can give you as much yard goods as you can take with you."

We settled on a mutally convenient date when she would come by train to our place in Moldava, about twenty miles from Kassa. The day we picked was Sunday, when our store was closed. She arrived there with the type of big white tablecloth, that peasant women of the area used to carry on their back. Into that tablecloth and into her hands I loaded all she could carry—about five hundred yards of textiles. Because every yard had to be accounted for to the authorities with a matching amount of ration points, I later had to go to the black market to replace that yardage. It was a small price to pay for my life.

* * *

Part of my work at the Czechoslovakian Embassy, where I was employed when the war ended, was making out passports for anyone who wanted to return to Czechoslovakia.

One day I looked up from my desk, and in front of me was the grinning face of that colorful scoundrel who had been a lifesaver before he turned to blackmail.

"Bela," I said, "what are you doing here?"

"I was born in Komarno, Czechoslovakia, and I want to go home."

"Whatever you want," I said. I made out the necessary certificate and bade him farewell. Although he had blackmailed my parents in Budapest, I still could not forget that he took a great chance to help us when we needed him.

* * *

When I think back at how many from my village perished, including our rabbi, who was 92 when he was deported, and my uncles Joseph and David, I am saddened beyond words. Uncle David was such a Talmudic scholar that he was the toast of the town. People wrote him from all over the area to pose religious questions to him, and learn from his wisdom. He and so many other wonderful, kind souls were snuffed out.

Will there ever be anybody, anywhere, to explain and justify these terrible mass murders of countless innocent victims? Today, the whole world lives under the constant shadow of the danger of nuclear war, and perhaps that is part of the price humanity has to pay for the murder of all those poor innocent children for no reason other than that they were born Jewish.

Still, life must go on, responsibilites must be met, and one has to be thankful for each day.

We cannot dwell on those terrible events, but we dare not forget them.

Note from the Author

It would not have been easy to go through life with the memories and experiences of my younger years without the patience, strength, and understanding of my dear wife, Lucy, and I want to thank her here for her help and encouragement in the writing of this book.

My wife's survival is a story in itself. For nine harrowing months, with eight other people, she hid in a hole dug out under a large haystack on the grounds of a poor farmer. They existed like this throughout the deportation until being freed by the Russians.

Unfortunately, part of her story had a much sadder ending than mine, because at war's end, she found that, of her immediate family of six, she was the only one to survive. To the horrors of the Holocaust, she lost not only her mother and father, but her two brothers and a sister, as well as their families.

Thank God she did survive and we married in 1946. We came to the United States three years later, and we have built a lovely life for ourselves and our two wonderful sons, Joseph and Jack, who have given us much pleasure including three grandchildren, Chana, Miriam and Baruch.

Special thanks in the preparation of this book are due to Judith Friedman, who is the daughter-in-law of Rose in this account, and to Arthur Woodstone.

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THE JEW IN EXILE

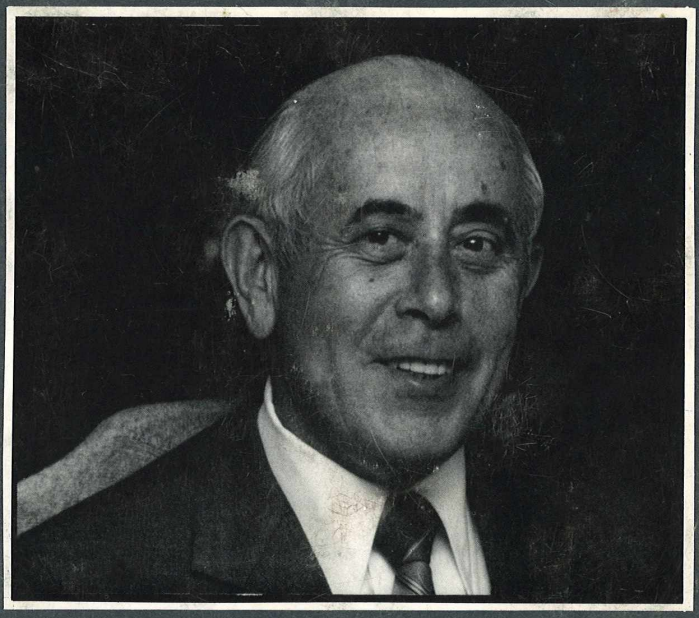
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