

INTRODUCTION

It was 5:00 a.m. on a rainy Saturday morning. The misty grey clouds were hanging heavily in the air, covering up the magnificent view of the North Shore mountains, the sea, and the evergreen islands of Howe Sound. While gazing out the window from my study, I muttered to myself, “Look at this lousy, lousy weather. I can’t believe it! Is this supposed to be summer? For Christ’s sake!”

Then suddenly I stopped cussing. My age-old remedy for chasing away negative thoughts took over. It was so simple. I asked myself, “What if you had stayed in Hungary, never emigrated to Canada? Think man! Where would you be? What would have become of you? You might not even be alive today. And now you are complaining about a little rain and cloud. If you’d stayed in Hungary—and survived to see this day—you’d sure as hell be worrying about a lot more than the weather! You should call yourself lucky, very lucky indeed to be living here in Vancouver.”

These thoughts brought with them feelings of deep gratitude for the life that my wife and I had enjoyed here in Canada. They also unleashed a flood of memories of the life I had left behind in Hungary so long ago: Sunday outings with my father, who was fond of showing off his son to his cronies in the beergardens; the smells of foods I have not tasted in many years, including the marvelous spicy aroma of the pub foods mixed with the smell of draught beer and cigarette smoke; the clanging of the streetcar as it rolled down the street; the sight of the Citadel rising above the Danube as it wound through the

beautiful heart of Budapest; my first meeting with my future wife, a tiny whisp of a girl sporting a ponytail bound by a red ribbon who smiled at me with her sweet lips and blue eyes; the bittersweet sound of gypsy violins playing Hungarian favorites like "*Csak egy kislány van a világon*" ("There Is But One Little Girl in this Whole Wide World") sung to the melody of "Sarasate's Gypsy Airs."

Such pleasant memories filled me with deep feelings of nostalgia for the country of my birth, but they soon gave way to thoughts of the destructive storm clouds of Nazi Germany and the Second World War, which filled me once again with the hopeless sense of being trapped in a giant meat grinder, of being singled out for execution because I was a Jew and therefore, in the eyes of the Nazis and their collaborators, worse than a cockroach. And then came the "liberation" and the Soviet Occupation. What a cruel joke that was. Only the slogans and the catchwords changed: before we had been a menace to the Aryan race; afterwards we became "class-enemies" of the Socialist State.

It was this flood of memories—good and bad, happy and sorrowful—that initially drove me to write this story. All I wanted to do at first was get the memories off my chest. As I wrote, however, I realized that I also wanted to share my story—mine and my wife's—with others. If I didn't do that, I thought, the story would be lost forever. Being childless, my wife and I had never been able to pass it on to another generation. We were the last brittle branch of our family tree, and our story would have died with us. Yet I wanted to pass it on, share with others our escape from the horrors of Nazism and

Stalinism, and, perhaps even more important, I wanted to express our gratitude to Canada for giving us refuge. Now that my wife is gone, killed tragically through my own mistake, I want more than ever to tell our story, which I have kept hidden in my heart for so many years.

On numerous occasions in the course of this story I refer to my Jewish heritage, yet I am not really a religious man at all. You could call me an agnostic. When I was a young man, I considered myself first and foremost not a Jew but a Hungarian. I studied the country's history, loved its literature, its music and its arts. I felt sorry for its great poets and novelists, who were unknown outside the borders of the country merely because they wrote in a language so removed from other living languages that few ever got translated. Bit by bit, however, I became aware that Hungarians were anti-Semitic. My fellow countrymen, I learned, considered Jews to be despicable usurers, exploiters of decent working men, con artists, Christ killers, bolsheviks, capitalists, cheats, seducers of virtuous Christian virgins. The great Hungarian novelist Mikszath Kalman summed up the Hungarian attitude when he described an anti-Semite as a person who despises Jews more than absolutely necessary.

Eventually, this anti-Semitism produced the Holocaust, which I had the good fortune to survive. Compared to those millions who perished in the Nazi extermination camps, my suffering may seem trivial. Yet to me and the other Hungarian Jews who survived, such suffering was very real, and those of us who did survive have a responsibility to bear witness, especially since there are some who try to deny that the Holocaust ever happened.