

Surviving World War II and its aftermath

Near the end of the 2nd World War, we lived in western Hungary where the fighting between the red army and German soldiers was from house to house. While the front moved back and forth, we were hiding in an underground bunker. When Germans were in control of our village, a couple of the soldiers came into our house to warm up in the evening. I was 6 years old and remember sitting on the knee of one of the soldiers called Hans while he was singing for me in German a song that he really wanted to sing for his son who was the same age as I. Hans spoke a little bit of Hungarian and was telling my parents that he was away from his family for a long time and was hoping to see his son and wife soon. But, after one of the door to door fighting between German and Russian soldiers, when we came up from the bunker and as we walked by our house, I saw Hans lying there not moving and covered with blood. Grandfather said with anger: “damn Hitler, damn Stalin, damn the war”.

Before the war came to our village we were a happy family. My parents had a small farm that produced rye, wheat, potatoes, cabbage, corn and a couple of parcels of pasture. At the back of the house we had fruit trees and in the summer time we had lots of apples, apricots, prunes, cherries, walnut and pears. Our house was big enough to have a separate bedroom where all 5 of us slept, a kitchen with a wooden stove and large table, a storage room for food and at the back of the house was a stable for the cows and horses, and a barn to keep the food for the animals.

My parents worked on the farm long hours after the snow melted, planting the crops, hoeing the potato and corn fields, and harvesting at the end of the summer. They didn't have much time to spend with me so I became very close to my grandfather (Nagypapa) who was always there for me. We spent a lot of time minding the cows as they were grazing on the pastures and grandfather always had new stories to tell me about the world beyond our little village. He was very popular in the village as a story teller and on Sunday afternoons, some of my friends used to come to our house to listen to his many exciting stories. I enjoyed his stories so much that I wanted to see the “big world” for myself. One day I set out to explore the big world, I packed some food in a basket and left home. I was two and a half years old and ready for the adventure. I didn't get too far from our house when I met Father Lenarsics, the village priest and

amateur photographer, who led me back home. My parents were very upset that I wanted to run away from home. My mother cried a little and gave me a big hug. She asked me: "are you not happy at home?" I answered: "yes I am very happy, but I just wanted to see the big world what I learned from grandfather." My parents then told grandfather to stop telling me stupid stories about the world he never saw. Grandfather agreed as I jumped up in his arm and gave him a big hug. He was my best friend and I loved him very much.

After this, my mother started to spend more time with me and often came out from the kitchen to the porch where grandfather had a special chair and I used to sit on his knee while he was telling the stories. My mother seemed to like the stories because she often asked him "what happened next?"

As I was growing up, an important job in the village was grazing cows in the meadows and in the nearby forest. Grandfather and I were given this job and we enjoyed it very much. He used to hide a piece of bread in one of his pockets, which he saved for me because he knew that I would get hungry after a few hours being out in the fresh air. He enjoyed watching me as I was trying to find the bread without being too obvious that I was looking for it. We sat for hours under the trees as he told me fascinating stories, always about the "big world" (nagyvilág). When he saw pictures in a magazine of the nobility in Vienna, he made up so many stories for me about how they lived, the type of horse carriage they traveled in and the delicious food that they would eat. The stories took us over the ocean (the "big water") to lands that had large fields for the cows to graze on. He called that land: America. When I asked grandfather if we could go together to see the big world, he would smile under his bushy moustache, and say: "only in our dreams"

...As former Chairman of the Youth Revolutionary Council, I found myself facing the possibility of going to jail or even be shot. The news spread quickly that the police has started to round up students who were youth leaders in the revolution. Some of them were shot on the spot, while others were imprisoned. So, I went into hiding in the village, sleeping in barns and hay stacks, changing my location frequently.

On Sunday evening, November 18th my grandfather brought me food to my hiding place and told me that he overheard in the smoke shop that a police captain, called Pallosi, who was originally from the village but now was a senior police officer in a nearby town, was looking for me. He was telling people that he was looking for that Hegyi kid, he will be shot like the rest of the teenage terrorists.

For the last time, I sat on the knee of grandfather as I gave him a big hug, and then asked him what should I do? Should I come out of hiding or should I try to make it to Austria? Grandfather looked at me with tearful eyes and said: "Remember what they did to your uncle István, I don't want that to happen to you". We then stood and grandfather looked at me with a far away look in his eyes and said: "Go to the big world, live our dream". We both agreed that we shouldn't tell my parents about this plan because they would be too emotional to understand the danger that I was in. We then talked about how I could send a message back from Austria to let them know that I was safe without putting the family in harms way with the police. We agreed on a coded message through Radio Free Europe: "Golden lamb has arrived safely". My grandfather said that he will be glued to the radio and when he hears this message, he will then talk to my parents. Knowing that this was the last time that I would see my grandfather was a deeply emotional moment for me. The tears blurred my vision as I watched his tall figure disappear in the darkness.

Re-building a Shattered Life as a Refugee

After crossing the border, the Austrian police escorted us to a school where all refugees were registered. While waiting to be interviewed, I was reflecting on what happened. I was 18 years old, did not speak German or English, just lost my country and parents and the future which appeared to be so bright just a few month ago was full of uncertainties.

We stayed in a refugee camp near Graz, Austria for about 10 days. We were told that we could not stay in Austria much longer. The Red Cross brought in delegations who talked about what they offered for the refugees in their country. United States, Canada and Australia were popular choices by the older refugees, especially couples with children. Singles and students were generally given rather limited choices. So when the delegation from England asked who was interested in going to London, Imre and I stood up quickly and were lucky enough to be selected for an interview by English immigration officers with the help of Hungarian-English interpreters. We went through a series of interviews, questioned at length about why we left Hungary and what were our views about Britain and the political system there. I was honest and told them that I knew very little about Britain, except what the communists were telling us which were different from what we learned from listening to Radio Free Europe. As a student I read some of Shakespeare's works in Hungarian and that was the extent of my knowledge. After the interviews, we waited for about 24 hours before being called back by an English immigration officer who gave us the good news that we were offered political refugee status by the British Government. The next day those of us who were scheduled to go to Britain were transported by buses to the railway station in Graz then escorted into the passenger cars by the police, locking all doors firmly once we were inside. The long journey then began through the snow covered mountains to Salzburg where a British Airways plane was waiting for us. There was no food on the train so we were getting very hungry long before reaching Salzburg. Fortunately, the train stopped a few times in small villages and people were giving us some bread and cheese through the windows...

...My first night in the Salvation Army hostel was a bad experience. Many of the local guests were heavily intoxicated and were walking around in an apparent daze. I made a mistake of choosing the lower bunk bed without checking out who was in the upper bunk. Well, the guy who occupied the upper bunk was drunk and wet the bed and some drops were coming down to where I was lying. I went to the bathroom to clean up and when I came back I found that someone stole from my jacket the 10 shillings that the Red Cross gave me. At that time I had no idea of the value of 10 shillings, I didn't think it would buy a lot of things, but I was looking forward to going out of the hostel the next day to look around and buy some bread and salami (the type of food that I was used to in Hungary).

I sat up all night on the side of the bed and went through a wide range of emotions. It was December and near Christmas, I thought of my parents wondering where I was. Perhaps it would have been better if I hit a land mine when I was crawling across the border. Why did I have to recite that poem anyway? If I didn't, I would be back in high school and getting ready for law school. Now, here I am among the drunks, no money, no job, and no one to turn to. Then, my desperation turned into anger and said to myself that nobody will ever piss on me again!

I remember Christmas Eve, 1956. I felt extremely sad and alone. My thoughts were with my parents and the home I left behind. I remembered the previous Christmas as we decorated the tree, my sister and I were hanging the decorations and the home made candy wrapped in fancy paper. We drank hot chocolate and were singing Christmas carols. Now, I was alone, very much alone. I went outside and sat on the stone fence and cried my heart out. Why this had to happen to me? What am I going to do from now on? I don't speak a word of English, I have no family and I never lived on my own before. My parents were always there to look after me. It was the saddest Christmas that I ever spent. At the same time, it was the beginning of the process of rebuilding a shattered life.

...In March 1957, I was offered lodgings by a group of middle aged Hungarian miners who were making good money and rented a house. I could live there without paying for rent or food as long as I cleaned the house and cooked for them. I accepted the offer eagerly. I knew how to clean, but cooking was new to me. They were kind enough to teach me, although at times when the meal was not to their liking, they would throw it on the floor, and then I had to clean it up while they went out to eat in a restaurant. It was a very effective way of teaching me how to cook. After all, I was only 18 years old and was determined to master the art of cooking even though at that time I had to start with learning how to boil water.

Since I was learning English faster than the miners, they asked for my help in buying condoms. I used my Salvation Army dictionary to make the translation. So, we went to Boots to buy this commodity. They gave me money and I went inside, feeling very shy and nervous, waited until the Pharmacist (a man) was alone and asked him for a box of rubbers. He said "OK", I bought the package, went outside and gave it to the miners. They opened it and it was a box of rubber bands. We all wondered how the English were practicing birth control, one of the guys commented: "this must be painful"...

Mrs. Gillespie took me to meet the Principal of the high school, who agreed to take me in, provided that I passed an entrance exam. They thought it would be fair if the exam was in mathematics, given the fact that my English was still limited. I was very nervous as I went to take the written exam. The Principal was a very kind man and offered me different sets of problems that I was to solve. In Hungary I was studying Calculus, so I went for that set of questions. In a few days after the exam, Mrs. Gillespie met me and said that the Principal was impressed with my exam results. I passed a set of exams which were at the level of first year University. So, I was ecstatic that I could go to night school to finish that part of my education. This was in June and the night school would start in September. Unknown to me, Mrs. Gillespie used her many contacts and at a luncheon after mass, she told me the most incredible news. She got me accepted at the University of Edinburgh as a foreign student, with a World University Services scholarship which paid the fees to the University and gave me 9 pounds per week which was about the same as I was making in the factory.

