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*Tibor ADAM*

## MY SURNAME MEANS HUMAN



**T**ibor Adam was born in Subotica in 1923 to a wealthy family of tradesmen and merchants. His father, Mirko Adam, a watchmaker, was born in 1893 in Kanjiža and killed in 1945. His mother, Margita Adam, née Kon, died in 1936. He was an only child.

When he returned from the war he found none of his closest or distant relatives in Subotica. As a young man, he was immediately engaged in the final operations of the Yugoslav Army. He was demobilised in 1949 and went to work for Radio Novi Sad.

He studied history, geography and law and graduated in political science. In Radio Novi Sad he rose to become editor-in-chief of a five-language news desk.

After his retirement he taught radio journalism at a school for journalism in the Open University in Novi Sad. He is an active member of the Jewish Community. His wife, Olga, née Ungar, is a retired actress whose father was killed in 1941 near Belgrade. Her mother, brother and she managed to save themselves under false names as refugees in Svilajnac. His son Mirko is head of the Television Novi Sad joint production department. He has one grandson, David, a medical student.

Before the war, my generation, almost without exception, were members of the Zionist organisation Tehelet Lavan. We spent all our

free time in the *ken* where there was always plenty of activity. There were lectures and they also organised pacifist, literary and art afternoons. In addition we went camping and on excursions.

After the occupation, Zionist organisations were banned. However, thanks to the head of the Subotica Municipality, Dr Zoltan Lorant, some kind of cultural organisations were allowed to continue operating, though not for long.

While we were still able, we met in the premises of the former *ken* and held lectures with police officers watching. Of course we had to be careful about what we said.

The relatively peaceful life of Subotica Jews came to an end on March 19, 1944, when the Germans occupied Hungary. My father was arrested and interned with the other men in Bačka Topola. After a short time the Hungarians handed him over to the Germans. My friend Đorđe Gros was with him. He later told me that, at the beginning of 1945, when the Germans were withdrawing before the Allied forces, they sent the remaining Auschwitz inmates on a forced march. Exhausted, weak and hungry, many fell. They were killed on the spot. This is how my father perished. A German killed him with a burst of sub-machine gun fire and kicked him into a ditch.

The Jews were ordered to wear yellow armbands. They were forbidden to travel. All their assets were requisitioned. People born in my year were mobilised on April 17, 1944, into what they called the auxiliary labour service. This actually meant labour camps in Hungary. With me were Ivan Herman, Stevan Lederer, Andrija Vajs, Franjo Rozenfeld, Dragutin Rajs and Tibor Gutman. First we built an airport in a provincial town, although I doubt a single aircraft ever took off from there, then we were moved to the outskirts of Budapest, to Drase.

A number of Jewish and Serbian brigades from Vojvodina worked there. We lived in non-operational brick kilns. We moved around freely within the brickworks compound. The compound was enormous. Dozens of kilns, the buildings in which bricks were pressed and an enormous area where they dug clay. The excavations were tens of metres wide and seven or eight metres deep. Real lakes could be found at the bottom of some of these holes. Our job was mainly to unload coal from the wagons. This was hard and filthy work, especially for those of us who were not used to physical labour. But we were lucky to be relatively free and because there were a few extremely

wealthy Budapest Jews with us. There was even a native Hungarian who owned, among other things, one of the biggest hotels in Budapest. He had been on the eastern front with the rank of captain. His wife was Baroness Koner, also a Jew. When the laws on Jews came into force, this captain of ours converted to Judaism. Having done this it was impossible for him to remain in the Hungarian Army, especially as an officer, and they moved him to the labour camp. Because they knew about his wealth and his undoubted influence, the officers and military guards had a great deal of respect for him and even feared him. He and a few other wealthy people paid for our food. So, for a while, we ate very well.



*Tibor's parents, Margita Kon-Adam and Mirko Adam, June 22, 1920*

### FIREWORKS OF DEATH

My cousin Žuža lived in Budapest. She sent me a message to say that I should be at one of the back gates of the brickyard at a certain hour on a Sunday. At that time the city was being bombed by Allied aircraft. The brickyard was in a suburb called Kőbánya. During the bombing we would hide in the disused brick kilns, but to sleep I would go to the stable where I lived. I preferred the stable to the kilns where there were about fifty people accommodated. My fellow-sufferers used to call me a loner. Our guards had a shelter. When the air-raid sirens sounded, they would disappear, and that's how it happened this day.

As soon as I heard the sirens I headed for the gate where I was to meet Žuža. I was halfway there when the aircraft appeared, coming from an unexpected direction. And then all hell broke loose. The brickyard was next to the freight station. We didn't know, although the British did, that there were hundreds of wagons full of war supplies at the station. The aircraft attacked them. They hit the wagons full of ammunition which exploded, destroying everything within a kilometre or so radius. There were wagon wheels flying everywhere. We found one later, two kilometres away. The fireworks of death! It was a sunny day, but within minutes of the attack it was completely dark, the sky obscured by smoke, sand and everything sent flying by the force of tons of explosives I threw myself down and crawled to a hole in the ground. My head was below the surface and my legs in line with it. The blast pushed me out of my tiny shelter. I ran looking for a better place to hide, for the largest hole I could find. I was heading away from the railway station, getting as far from it as possible. My head was buzzing, I was sluggish from the air pressure. I reached a house and rushed to the basement. It was full. Children were crying in horror. The adults were silent with fear. An old lady was praying to God, on her knees although this was difficult for her. It was horrible and painful. After each blast, and there were countless of them, it seemed to us as though the house was shaking. As if it was shrieking. We were choking and coughing. It went on forever. I suppose the planes were already back in England by the time all the wagons in the station exploded into the air one after another, set off by the flames. We heard later that there had been seven hundred of them. It was only late in the afternoon that I returned to my compound. The stable in which I had slept during every air raid had disappeared. It was the very beginning of winter and I was left with just one pair of work overalls. Later my friends gave me trousers, a shirt, a jumper and a short jacket.

## FLIGHT

In mid-October, the Hungarian regent, Miklos Horthy, announced over the radio that Hungary no longer wanted to be at war. The Germans immediately reacted to this proclamation. Horthy was overthrown and the Nyilas came to power under Szalasi. Russian troops had already crossed the Hungarian border. It was at about this time that Belgrade was liberated and my hometown, Subotica, was

already free. I have no idea how news reached us, but we knew everything. They took us from the brickyard and established a number of companies in the very centre of the city. We were accommodated in empty houses. We were to be transported or, as they put it, evacuated to Germany. The six of us from Subotica decided against going to Germany. My fellow-sufferers, Dragutin Rajs, Stevan Lederer, Ivan Herman, Tibor Gutman, Franjo Rozenfeld and I.

We found ourselves in some empty houses, lying on bare parquet floors. The wind of disarray was already blowing through Budapest. Our guards, now panicking, became less strict, hoping that once the Soviets arrived we would be understanding and say they had treated us well. Because there were a lot of Budapest natives among us, they allowed us to receive visits.

A large number of civilians came. So we had a good opportunity to escape. The six of us managed to acquire hats or caps and decent coats. Those who weren't brave enough to escape supported us. Even some of the visitors gave us mufflers and gloves or swapped coats with us. They weren't Jews. The visitors were close friends who weren't afraid of being friendly with Jews. Most of them were Hungarian women who were married to Jews. In the end we looked rather good. At the time we couldn't understand why some of those who we had asked to come with us were reluctant. In fact they didn't dare. Most of these were older men, forty-year-olds who were aware of the danger and didn't dare take the risk. And we were 21. When we went to forced labour we were treated like soldiers. If we had been caught trying to escape they would have treated us as army deserters and we would have ended up in front of a firing squad. We took the risk nevertheless. Finally, if we had gone to Germany we would have ended up in one of the death camps where there wasn't much chance of survival. Franjo Rozenfeld got us false identification papers. His father was a wealthy industrialist and was hiding in a sanatorium under a false name. My identification was issued in the name of Aca Tibor and it read that I worked in the hand-grenade industry.

### AT LONG LAST, A BED

Spruced up like decent working people, we headed for the exit. Each of us was escorted by those who were staying. At the very exit, in front of the guards, we hugged for a long time and said farewell to

each other. The guard allowed us through without a word. He was in the reserves and couldn't wait to get out of uniform. Of course we didn't all go at the same time, but at intervals, mixing with the real visitors. Once I was on the other side of the gate, I turned around a few times and waved. Before our departure we had agreed to go our separate ways, cope on our own as best we could and then meet among some ruins.



*Youth movement members in the ken, 1941. Tibor Adam first on right*

I was all alone in the streets of demolished Budapest with very little money and a few packets of cigarettes. I remember that it was very cold. Because there was a curfew, I couldn't spend the night out in the street. I crawled into a ruined building and slept there. I woke up at dawn, stiff from the cold. That afternoon I went to a fast-food restaurant and ate pancakes with raspberry sauce. Then I wandered around the city, not stopping anywhere, hurrying as though I was on my way to work. The city was crawling with soldiers and police. At noon we met at the place we had agreed on. We cleared the rubble while we talked. We all told one another about what we had done and where we had slept. I got an address for a boarding house where they weren't fussy about documents. And that's where I went in the evening. My identification document served its purpose. I slept in a bed after who knows how long! And I was dreadfully tired because I

had been walking all day. The days passed. I no longer know how many, two or three, when we again met in the ruins and decided that we couldn't continue this way. We were all at the end of our tether. We had to keep moving all day and at night we had terrible dreams. Not to mention the fact that the Russians were dropping bombs every morning at nine. The British or the Americans would come in the evenings, with heavy bombs, destroying areas of the city one by one. I spent the daytime air raid alerts in one of the shelters and at night I spent the first one under the staircase of a demolished building and the other three in the boarding house shelter. They asked for my papers there once, but everything went smoothly.

I wanted to take a bath. The city was huge so I decided to take a tram to the bathhouse. I was standing at the tram stop and waiting. Someone seized me by the shoulder. I turned: an officer and two soldiers. A patrol, not an ordinary one a military patrol. This was a detachment, one of the many nationalist, Fascist "patriotic units".

"Why aren't you wearing a yellow armband?" the officer screamed.

"Why should I wear one? I'm not a Jew. I'm a worker at the hand grenade factory. I'm working the night shift today so I was on my way to the Hungaria Bath House. I said this calmly and, I thought, convincingly. I showed them my identification. They pored over it for a long time. They thought I was suspicious.

"You're coming with us and we'll check. If you're telling the truth you'll have time to take a bath and get to work."

I set off with my "guard of honour". I did some thinking and realised that they were taking me to the Party building. That was the headquarters of the Fascist Arrow Cross Party, a notorious place for torture. All they needed was one phone call and I'd be exposed. If they searched me they were certain to find the identification in my pocket, a booklet with a large "Z" on the front. That was for "*Zsido*", the Hungarian word for Jew. All of us in forced labour had these booklets. I should have thrown away this incriminating evidence of my origin. Under the regulations then in force I could have been shot as a deserter. I decided to run. We got into the tram and stood on the platform. At the big square in front of the Western Railway Station, the tram slowed down on a curve. I pushed the soldier standing closest to me and jumped. I ran as fast as I could but, unfortunately, my boots had steel hobs and I slipped and fell. They caught me. I had

actually given myself away with this attempted escape. We continued on foot. We had nearly arrived at the notorious Party building when, in total despair I ran again, hoping that they would shoot me and spare me the misery awaiting me. When I turned to see where they were, a passer-by hit me over the head with a walking-stick. I fell. I was totally dazed, but the two of them carried me, holding me firmly.

## SECOND-CLASS PERSON

I don't know how long I stood or how many agents hit me on the back of the head in the basement of the Party building in Andrasi Street, one of the nicest streets in this lovely city, but it was no longer of any importance. Finally they took me to an office. There were some officers there. I had to hold my cap under my nose so as not to soil the carpet with blood. They asked me about things, about people, about an organisation, about some resistance movement I had never heard of. They weren't rough, or loud, like most people from the semi-feudal military horde. But with every sentence they let me know that I was a second-class person and that I should be happy just to have the opportunity to appear before them and listen to their advice.

“What was your former name.”

“This was always my name.”

“All right, what was your name before your father or your grandfather changed your surname?”

It was highly likely that I would end up in front of a firing squad. Maybe precisely because of this I replied insolently: “None of my ancestors changed their names. They didn't have any reason to. Adam isn't a Hungarian surname, it's Jewish and it means 'Man'!”

There was no reply. They simply looked at me and gave orders for me to be taken away.

They took me to a room with no windows. In the middle stood a writing desk with a chair and a bench. If I remember rightly I was interrogated by two civilians and there was also a gendarme present. They put photographs in front of me on the desk. I was to identify people from these. I didn't know any of them. I knew nothing about the resistance movement. They beat me brutally. I had to remove my shoes for them to beat me on the soles of my feet. They struck me on the palms, again and again until my hands were a bloody mess. And



then came the "telephone". This looked like a field telephone, but was actually a generator. When the handle was turned, electricity was produced. They put the two poles on my ears. I collapsed. When I came to, I was lying on the floor. The gendarme had stepped on my finger. They carried me to the cell, bloody and exhausted. I couldn't stand on my feet.

### LIFE-SAVING DOCUMENT

There were about ten people in the cell. I lay on the straw, recovering. Bloody, bruised all over, almost unconscious. The people around me tried to comfort me. Prisoners like me. Among them was a university professor, Gyula Kockas. I don't remember the names of the others. But there's one of them I'll always remember. He told me that he had a Spanish passport, a letter guaranteeing protection. I don't know the name for this life-saving document with which the Spanish Embassy in Budapest confirmed that someone was a Spanish citizen and that their relatives in Spain had asked the Spanish Government to issue a Spanish passport to the bearer. It confirmed that they had citizenship and that the procedure was under way and asked that the Hungarian authorities kindly take consideration of this.

My fellow-sufferer had one of these documents. He told me that one of his relatives had also had one but that it would no longer be of any use to him because he had died in the meantime. I remembered this story. I spent about ten days in the Margit Korut prison. One day they put an elderly man into our cell. He had also been tortured. When Dr Kockas saw him he recognised him and jumped to his feet, standing at attention. He clicked his heels and introduced himself, addressing the newcomer as "Most Honoured Sir". It was General Janos Kis, the military leader of the resistance movement then being organised. They had arrested the entire leadership even before they had managed to do anything.

The general was a kind and courteous man. He knew what was waiting for him. "I shall be shot," he said. "The Germans have lost the war and the tragic thing is that we are falling into the abyss with them." He received cigarettes which he shared with us. But the investigators didn't spare him for a minute. For breakfast we used to be given some black liquid they called coffee. For lunch and dinner we were "served"

turnip and cabbage soup. It was rotten and full of worms, but we ate this swill because there was nothing else. We also used to get a tiny slice of dry black bread each day.

Every afternoon we would hear commands, gunfire and the sound of bodies being loaded into trucks. They shot people almost every day. And we wondered whether we could endure all this without going insane. It was dreadful to sit in the cell and listen to them firing, killing innocent people. Probably the same fate awaited me. My only hope was for a bomb to hit the prison so that I would disappear in an instant. I watched the faces around me: pale, bloodless, tight-lipped. No one said a word. Only later, when it was all over and the sound of the truck driving the bodies off had faded away, would you hear someone talk. "Have I gone grey?" we asked one another.

Still, life goes on. Conversations would be struck up and would continue. We mostly spoke about food. We were hungry, terribly hungry. There were other topics. That's how I heard the story of the relative who had died and whose Spanish Government document could no longer help him. But it helped me. I was young, hungry for life. My brain was working feverishly, trying to find a way out.

## UNLOADED AND ABANDONED

One day the cell door opened. They called the man with the Spanish document and me: "Get your things!" This meant we would not be returning to the same cell. Either they were going to shoot us or we were being moved somewhere else. Release wasn't an option! We passed through endless corridors. Complete silence, except for the pounding of our feet on the stone floor. One after another iron doors swung open and swung closed behind us. We were on the ground floor in a smallish room with a counter. The gendarme put a bag in front of me with my name on it. He took from the bag the things they had taken from me when I had been brought here. Two packets of cigarettes. Oh God, what joy to see those wonderful packets of cigarettes! A lighter, bootlaces, great leather laces, thick and greasy. I also had a toothbrush, toothpaste and soap. And it was real soap! They returned my things to me. I signed the receipt, confirmed that they had returned all my belongings in full. The bureaucracy was still functioning, while everything around us was falling apart.

Every day there was greater and greater destruction, more and more dead. The Russians were advancing. This was no longer Horthy's Hungary, because the Germans had interned Admiral Horthy. Power in Hungary was now in the hands of the German Army, which allowed the Nyilas and their leader, Szalasi, to do the dirty work. Hordes of the mindless lumpenproletariat, young men armed to the teeth, were roaming the ruined metropolis. Jews were the primary target of their robbery and murder. In these circumstances, the inertia of the organised state had its effect. Order must be maintained, even when there is no order. There was order in prison. There the state functioned. If they were returning our belongings to us, they weren't going to shoot us! And they didn't. There were about another ten people who were released. They crammed us into a truck and drove us to a barracks.

An enormous building with a big yard, a high fence built of stone. The gendarmes unloaded us and left. There were almost a thousand people there! Some in uniforms, some in civilian clothes, all of them outlaws: army deserters, fugitives, Jews, criminals. Later, much later, I heard that all who stayed there had been killed.

The days passed. I don't remember what we ate, whether we ate at all. I don't even know how many days I spent in those barracks. One day both gates swung open wide to admit several black limousines. Looking at the flags that fluttered on them I came to the conclusion that these were diplomatic vehicles. From them emerged the kind of people I hadn't seen for quite some time: elegant, well dressed. Several Hungarian officers accompanied them.

They sounded the roll-call. We lined up in about ten ranks. The non-commissioned officers and our guards were neither as rough nor as loud as usual. One of the officers stood on a chair and, shouting so that everyone could hear him, called for everyone who had *vedlevi*, letters of protection, or passports from Sweden, Spain, Switzerland or the Vatican to step forward. Twelve men stepped forward. In despair I remembered the story told by my fellow-sufferer from the cell. He was in that line, in front of the full assembly, standing last in line. I stepped forward too. I was the thirteenth. People say this is an unlucky number, but it brought me good luck.

"What was the name of your relative who had a letter of protection?" I asked my cellmate.

"Taler Todor," he replied.

“Where was he born, and when?”

“In 1907, in Budapest.”

I broke out in a cold sweat. The dead Todor was sixteen years older than me. By then the police officer had reached me.

“What’s your name?”

“Taler Todor!”

“Citizenship?”

“Spanish.”

He turned to one of the gentlemen. This man was opening a book.

“What did you say your name was?” the officer asked again.

I repeated it, afraid that he would sense that I was saying someone else’s name, not my own. But who in a besieged, bombed city, a city devastated by war, cared about nuances? Who would notice them at all?

The gentleman, well dressed and well fed, probably one of the embassy staff, leafed through his book and found the name he sought.

“Born?”

It was now or never, I thought to myself as I felt the beads of sweat squeezing from under my cap.

“1907.”

He swallowed it. My face was covered in stubble, I was exhausted, emaciated, badly in need of sleep. I looked much older than my years.

“In Budapest.”

“Mother’s name?” I heard the question to which I didn’t have an answer. What in God’s name was I going to do now. I suppose that at times like this, when your life is at stake your brain works fastest. I had to say something and I had to say it immediately. It was my only chance. I knew that there was no possibility of guessing the name, but perhaps a miracle would happen. And it did.

“Koranyi Margit!” I said loudly, looking the gentleman straight in the eye.

“All right,” he said, and closed the book.

Either he wasn’t looking at what was written there or, and this is more likely, he was well-intentioned, he wanted to help. And help he did. He saved my life.

“Stand over there!”

## HUMAN AGAIN

Thirteen of us were separated from the others. They put us in a cell in the barracks prison. Of the thirteen, three of us were "Spanish". Late in the afternoon a van with two police officers came for us and they began separating us. We "Spanish" were the last.

"It won't be much longer, children," one of the policemen said. "Do you hear the artillery? The Russians are very close, they'll take care of these vermin."

We drove for quite some time. Eventually we arrived in a smarter part of town, the Fifth District, to the *Védett ha'z*, the protected house, at 48 Pannonia Street. A modern, five-storey building, if I remember correctly. The building was packed with people. There were about ten of us in the two-room apartment where they put me. Oddly enough there was water and electricity. I walked into the bathroom and sat in a real bath, in clean, hot water. What a delight! I hadn't washed for months. The other members of the household gave me some underwear, even a jacket, a nice one made of tweed. I shaved and again I looked like a human.

Budapest was surrounded. It was December. The snow was deep and it was still snowing, which was a good thing because the city's power and water supplies were breaking down. The snow saved us. In the yard we burnt pieces of furniture, melted the ice and drank. We were coping surprisingly well. It was a modern building, the central heating wasn't working of course, neither were the electric water-heaters or the electric stoves, there was nothing for fuel. We fed the fire with furniture. The situation was getting worse every day. At the beginning the Spanish Embassy was giving us some food, mostly honey, not real but soy honey or something like that. The important thing was that it was sweet. Later we didn't even get this. No one came to see us any more. How could they when the bombs were falling? We would also hear bursts of machine-gun fire. Constant hunger. But we were young and wouldn't give in. There were about five or six of us young people in the house. There also happened to be a writer there. At the time I considered him old, but I don't think he was much over forty. Together with the writer we organised literary evenings. We found some books in the house and some of us also remembered a poem or two. There were shells raining down outside, everything was cracking, everything collapsing but we huddled in a freezing room

reciting poems, holding heated debates. We quoted Marx and Engels, Freud and Adler, Zweig and Gorky, Kant and Schopenhauer and God knows who else.

### THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING

At the end of December, 1944, Russian aircraft dropped leaflets over the city. They were telling the citizens and the army defending the city that Budapest was surrounded and that the Red Army had pushed through to Vienna. Any further resistance was pointless because it would result only in unnecessary victims and destruction. They urged the Germans to surrender and said that they would treat them according to the provisions of the Geneva agreement. They promised that any Hungarian soldiers who surrendered would be released to their homes immediately. The ultimatum expired on December 25. On that day, Catholic Christmas, there were new leaflets. The Germans had killed Russian parliamentarians. There would be no more mercy, the attack would begin. The leaflet was signed by the celebrated Soviet marshals, Tolbuhin and Malinovsky.

And so it began. Thousands of cannons and mortars spitting fire. The aircraft never stopped bombing. Because of the dust and smoke it was dark even during the day. And we, in our house, spent more time in the basement than in the rooms, hungry and freezing, still in fear of the explosions and the Nyilas. Most of us had good reason to be afraid. Some were refugees, some military deserters. We were outlawed, hunted, persecuted. We were living under false names, with false documents. We were aware of the fact that with each passing day these documents provided us with less and less security. It was the end of the road for the Kingdom of Hungary, which had no king and whose governor was an admiral without a sea. The streets were full of armed, drunken hooligans, Szalasi's storm troopers. In order to protect ourselves we organised a guard. If Szalasi's men broke into the house, the guard would alert us and the men would flee into the neighbour's basement. We'd torn down part of the neighbour's wall, made a passage and camouflaged it well. It was often my turn to keep guard. I would sit under the staircase, from where I could see the street, reading Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, a shattering novel about the suffering of the Armenians.

Budapest was still under siege. Everything was cracking and breaking, everything was shaking and creaking. There were battles being fought close by us. The deep snow had blanketed the city and, to some extent, silenced the sounds of death, covered the thousands of bodies and saved people from thirst. Nothing in the city was working any more, the water mains, the power station, the heating pipes, let alone the city transport. Everything was dead. Deep underground, in the basements, the city lived. Was that a life? Yes, and what a life! We even celebrated the New Year. We gathered in a hallway no larger than two metres square. We put some rags on the parquet and sat on the floor huddled against one another. Then one of the girls said "Hold out your hands. I have a wonderful surprise for you." Feeling her way she went round on her knees and placed something in each of our hands. Two beans. Two uncooked beans. She had found a few beans in a pantry somewhere. What a delight! We chewed them long and slowly. And afterwards we sang and told jokes. We'd stop talking for a minute when some explosion nearby shook our building. Here, on the floor, hugging and huddled close to one another we fell asleep. January 1, 1945, was grey.

I saw the first Russian soldier on January 17. But this was not the end of our suffering. The Russians began pouring in like an avalanche. They freed me, they saved my life, and I would have loved to hug each one of them. But this Red Army was a great disappointment for me. The soldiers were poorly dressed, dirty and uncared for, they had almost no equipment. They carried small bags tied at the end with ordinary rope: these were their rucksacks. Each of them had a sub-machine gun and a few petrol canisters here and there. It turned out they had alcohol in these containers. But they were brave and daring. They looked nothing like the people that we idealists had imagined to be living in the Socialist world. They looked nothing like people living in a system which, at that time, I believed to be an ideal society.

## GOING HOME

In the middle of January, 1945, Pest was liberated, while battles still raged in Buda. I wanted to go home as soon as possible, but how could I set off with no documents, with the roads teeming with Red Army troops, how could I cross the front line? I decided to go to the Swiss Embassy, which represented the Yugoslav Royal Government.

But first I needed to reach it. It was located near the Parliament, almost on the bank of the Danube. I had to negotiate a few crossroads, run across streets which were exposed to Buda. The Germans were there, across the Danube. As soon as they saw anything move they opened fire. Horses lay shot on the crossroads, people beside them. Starving people were cutting the horse meat with pocket knives. It was a real accomplishment to get your hands on some food. It was a harsh winter: the dead horses were frozen. Many people lost their lives trying to get some food for their families. I worked my way through, crawling on the frozen, lumpy snow. Bullets whizzed above my head. I was careful. I reached the Embassy, the charge d'affaires. In fact I didn't know what his function was, but I was overjoyed when I realised that I knew the man. In a smallish office, sitting at a desk beneath a picture of King Petar II and Queen Marija, the Queen Mother, was Captain Lingulov. He had lived across the road from us in Subotica, in Jelačićeva Street. Of course he did not necessarily know me. I had been a kid and he was a gentleman captain in the Royal Army. He must at least have seen me and he must have known about my father who was a well-known and prominent merchant. The captain was not keen to issue me with documents. He asked me for my passport. I kept explaining that I hadn't come to Hungary as a tourist but that I had been brought there to forced labour. But he was persistent.



*Adam after the liberation, 1945*

In the Embassy I met a number of acquaintances who confirmed in writing that I had been born in Subotica and confirmed my identity. I still have this document to this day. But Captain Lingulov stuck to his guns. I was young and youth does not imply levity, it means courage and determination. I was going to go home, I had decided! I certainly wouldn't make the same decision now. This was a risky



undertaking, even if I had had legal documents. For a young man unable to prove that he was a victim of Nazism rather than, for example, a fugitive war criminal or a Hungarian or German soldier, going through the Russian lines, crossing the front line would have meant at the very best ending up in some prison camp.

In Pest I found some old friends, my former girlfriend Iboljka-Buba Štern, with her mother and her stepfather, Dr Rudolf Hok. He was a pre-war Communist who had spent considerable time in prison and had excellent documents which had also been confirmed by the Russian command. They were also preparing to return home. I set off with them. I had no luggage. In my pocket were a toothbrush and toothpaste, a piece of soap and a safety razor. I also had a razor strop which was very useful because at that time razor blades were very hard to come by. I had got this from a girl. The Hoks didn't have much. Their belongings all fitted on a children's sled which I pulled. That's where I also put my strop.

It took us quite a while to get to the outskirts of the city. And what should we find there but a Russian guard. "Women go on, men stop!" Because Rudi had a doctorate there was "Dr" in front of his name in the document that he showed them, but no mention of him being a lawyer. The Russians thought he was a physician. They needed doctors, so they let him through. I remained behind. The soldiers rather roughly sent me away to a large courtyard in which there were a lot of men, young and old. I checked the yard and all around it very thoroughly. I saw that a soldier was standing at the gate and not letting anyone pass. Those who were in the yard were going into the house through a glass door, one by one. The room they went into was empty. It was some kind of an entrance hall. From there you went into another room where there was probably some commission checking people's identities. I was in no hurry to go in. For quite a while I stood and watched what was going on. Ten or fifteen people went in and only one returned. They were leaving through some other door, into some other courtyard. So I came to the conclusion that this meant that only a very small percentage of people were passing the inspection. The one man who had returned was allowed to leave the yard; the guard standing in front of the glass door let him through and shouted to the one standing at the gate to allow the man who had been checked to pass. The people around me, some of whom were experienced, older people, said that everyone without documents was going to a camp.

After thoroughly appraising the situation I summoned up my courage and walked into the empty room. I stood behind the door so as not to be seen by the guard. A few minutes later, walking with determination, I walked out from where I had walked in. I smiled at the guard and said "*Zdravstvuy!*"

He returned the greeting and shouted to the one at the gate: "*Pushchay!*" I walked out into the street.

Later, much later, I heard that those who were checked and didn't pass the "test" ended up in Siberia. I had no documents and, if our officer over at the Embassy hadn't believed me, why would a Russian? I walked fast. The snow was deep but well-trodden. Trucks, tanks and who knows what else roared along the roads. I walked for hours until two soldiers stopped me. I greeted them warmly, said that I was a "Yugoslavian" and that I had come from a camp. I thanked them for liberating me and, remembering that I had a lighter in my pocket, I gave it to them. They looked at it delighted and I went on my way. They were so taken by this beautiful object that they completely forgot about me. I arrived in a rather larger village.

It was already getting dark. I could go no further. The village was called Kiszkunhalasz. I stopped in front of a house and knocked on the door. A woman opened it. I asked her politely to allow me to spend the night there and gave her some money. She took me in, saying that she hoped the Russian soldiers staying there wouldn't have anything against it. I slept like a log. I had walked about thirty kilometres that day. In the morning the Russians gave me two baked potatoes. I don't think anything ever tasted as good as those potatoes. I also learnt from the Russians that the trains were already running from this village. "Well, now," I thought to myself, "I'm not going to stop until I get to Subotica!" That was all very well, but I still had to somehow get to a train. At the station I ran into the Hoks. They were astounded, looking at me as if I were a ghost. They hadn't expected to see me again, they admitted. We waited for the train. A long train of freight wagons arrived at the station and everyone rushed for them. But the guards again blocked the way. With sub-machine guns at the ready. They stopped the men, but the women were allowed to pass.

A winter morning, still half dark. The snow weighing down on the plain, the cold cutting to the bones. Dr Hok put a blanket over his head and, what do you have?" A woman in a veil! He passed between his wife and daughter-in-law. Again I remained behind. I was thinking

feverishly. No, I couldn't stay here. I had to get on that train. I had to go home. Home? Did I really have a home? The chances were that my parents hadn't survived. I had no apartment. There were now other people living in it. Nonetheless my home was calling to me.

The waiting room was spacious. There were Russian soldiers standing at the door. Without thinking about it much I opened a window and jumped. I hurried to get to the train and got there before the Hoks. We climbed into a cattle wagon. Rudi and I lay on the floor. They threw a blanket over us and sat on us as though they were sitting on packages. I saw that many people had jumped through the window and got into the wagon, which filled up in no time. I knew the Russians would notice this. And they did. Shouting and threatening, they took all the men off the train. The two of us remained. The train moved off. There were also women from Subotica in this wagon, the Klajn sisters, close friends of my Aunt Šarika who unfortunately lost her life in a death camp.

The train sped south. Sped? Of course I'm exaggerating. Freight trains don't speed, even in peacetime, let alone in those dreadful war days. It stopped at station after station. People got on and got off, most of them soldiers.

It was cold in the wagon. And why wouldn't it be? This was an ordinary wooden wagon, an old rattler with countless small and larger holes through which the wind blew. Outside it was five or six degrees below zero. Along with the cold we were also suffering from hunger. I dreamt about a *sholet*, wonderful, hot, red *sholets* with lots of smoked meat.

When the train passed under what they call the Majšanski Bridge, in fact an underpass at the entrance to Subotica, my eyes filled with tears. My father's estate was on the Majšanski Bridge, in Istočni Vinograd, and I had crossed innumerable times over this underpass, which for me represented my hometown, reminded me of my home and my childhood, of the past, of a whole era which had been blown away by the wind. We pulled into Subotica station. And there were guards again. People had to go into quarantine. Typhus was raging. Thanks to Rudika Hok and his documents I passed through with no difficulties. I was home, but without a home, without parents or relatives, without most of my friends.