



BUDAPEST 1944

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Prologue

This diary of a Jewish family's struggles in fascist Hungary describes the period between March 19, 1944 and January 15, 1945. The first date marks the occupation of Budapest by the German Army, the second one the fall of Pest to the Soviet Red Army. This ten-month period was the time of greatest peril and suffering for the Jewish population of the city.

This prologue serves to sum up the historical background and events that led to this tragic period. Before WW2, Hungary had a large Jewish minority of about 750,000, proportionally the second largest in Europe after Poland. But unlike in Poland, where Jews lived in relative isolation from the rest of the population, Hungarian Jews – especially those in the cities – tended towards assimilation. They regarded themselves as Hungarians whose religion happened to be Jewish.

After centuries of discrimination, Jews gained complete equality before the law in 1867. Anti-Semitism in various forms continued, however, to be a feature of Hungarian social and political life. Still, emancipation opened the doors for Jews to enter professions and areas of activity they were denied before. They were successful to the extent that by the 1940's, despite representing only 5% of the population, 50% of doctors, lawyers, merchants and about 33% of engineers, scientists and writers in the country were Jewish. About half of the country's industry and a fifth of its agricultural land were controlled by Jewish financiers.

Hoping to recover lands lost to neighboring countries as a result of being on the losing side in WW1, Hungary hitched its wagon to the rising military power of Nazi Germany. Historically, Hungary has always picked the losing side. The anti-Jewish campaign already in full force in Germany found a receptive audience. Starting in 1938, more and more discriminatory and abusive laws were passed: first restricting or forbidding participation in professions, then stripping them of their businesses, later their homes and possessions, and finally their lives.

The great majority of Hungarians reacted to this campaign of demonization and vilification of Jews with indifference or outright enthusiasm. The prospect of getting their hands on the accumulated Jewish wealth convinced many to believe the propaganda claim that the Jews were the enemy of decent society and deserved to be purged.

By 1943 the military fortunes of Germany and its Axis allies, so bright at the beginning of the war, began to decline. After the battle of Stalingrad in early 1943 the tide turned and the Axis armies – including the Hungarian one – were in retreat, pursued by the Red Army. The opening of the second front in the West by the Allies was only a matter of time, and all but the blind could see the handwriting on the wall.

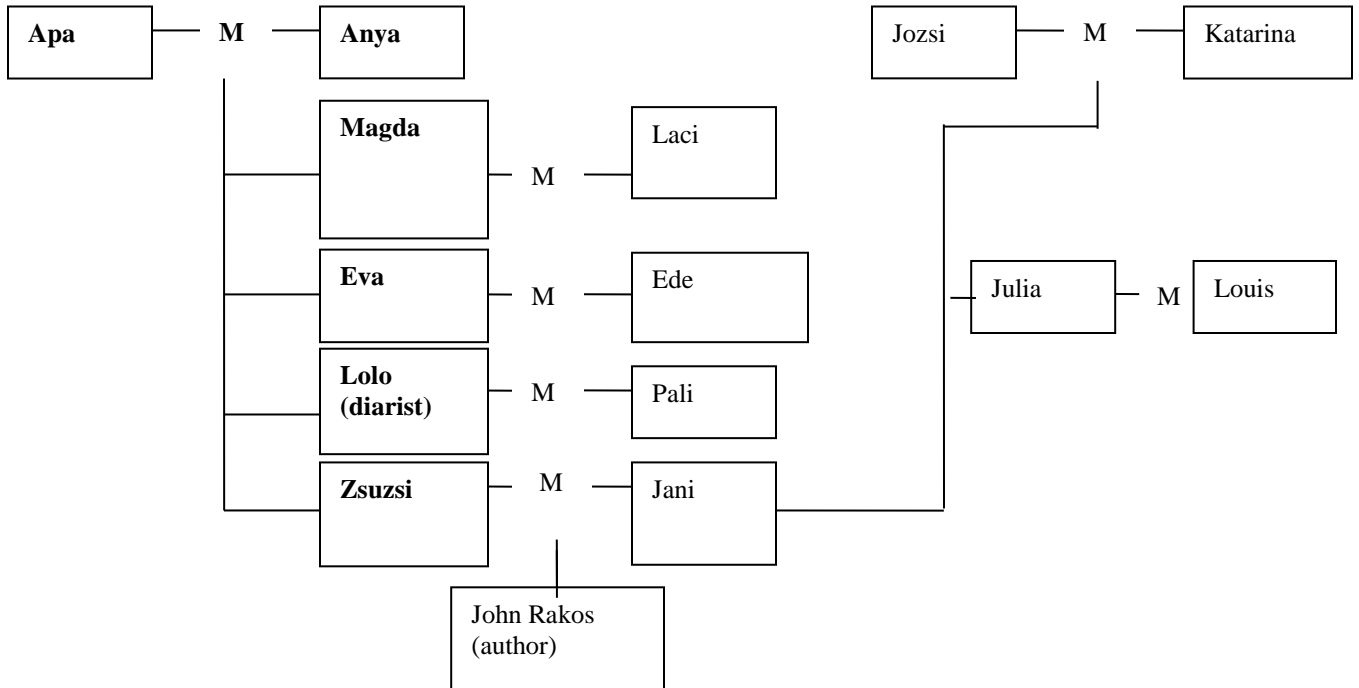
The Hungarian leadership began to have second thoughts about the wisdom of having such close ties with Hitler's Germany. The Prime Minister suggested that Hungary declare itself neutral, but some parliamentarians opposed this, and the issue was unresolved. Hungary's foot-dragging on these and many other issues, including the deportation of Jews, prompted the Germans to act: on March 19, 1944 their army and the SS began to occupy their now unreliable ally, and this is where our story begins.

The arrival of the SS gave new impetus to the campaign of liquidating the Jews of Hungary. A new, more pliant government was formed under Sztojai, and with enthusiastic cooperation of most local Hungarian officials at all levels, they rounded up, stripped of all possessions and deported nearly all Jews who lived outside Budapest to German-run concentration camps. These numbered about 450,000; only 10% of these survived.

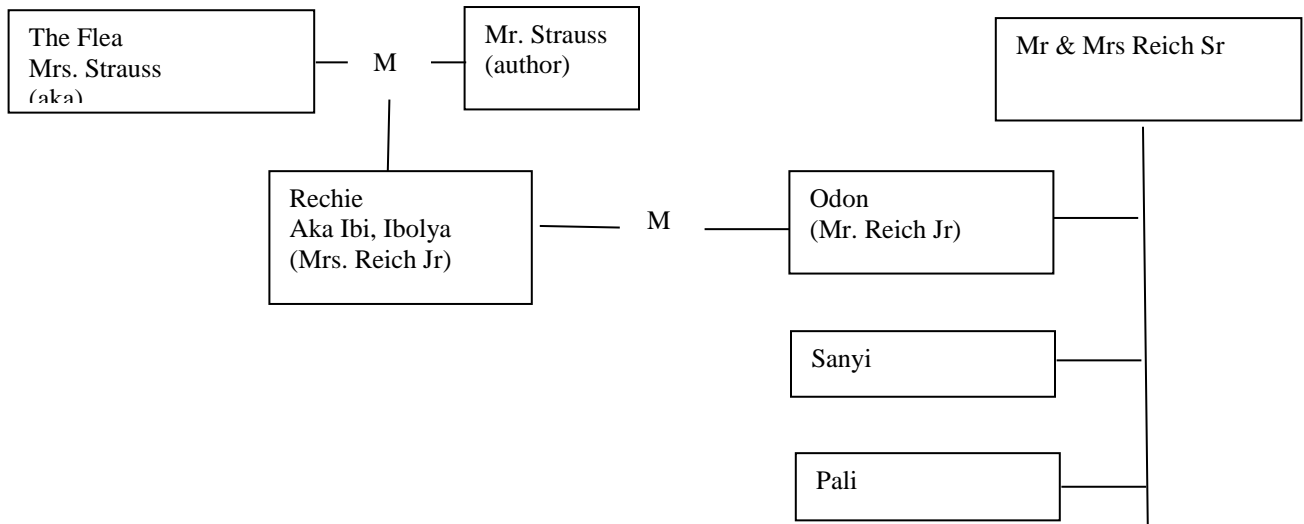
By September '44, the Russian Army occupied Eastern Hungary. The government under Regent Horthy, decided it was time to bail out of the German alliance if they had any hope of keeping the territories given to them earlier by Hitler. The attempt was unsuccessful, mainly because it was too late, too hesitant, and the Germans got wind of it. The Horthy government was thrown out and an outright fascist group headed by Ferenc Szalasi took over. His militia – called the Arrow-Cross, modeled along the lines of the brown-shirts of the Nazi party in Germany – proceeded to institute a reign of terror. It was a race against time to escape annihilation before the arrival of the liberating Red Army.

Characters:

The family:



Other Characters:



Chapter 1.

March 19, 1944.

Lolo looks at her husband Pali, lying there beside her, strong, manly, his shape sensuous under the covers. She revels in the happiness of lovers married only for three years, even if for two of those years Pali was away in Russia, conscripted into forced-labour service as most Jewish men of Hungary were. He just returned from the battle of the Don Bend, one of the fiercest battles on the Russian front. Only he and seven more made it back; the others, two hundred and seven of them, will never return.

The jangle of the telephone shatters the silence. Idiots! Who would have the nerve to call so early on a Sunday? Friends, relatives, everyone knows that this is like their second honeymoon. No one would disturb them. Probably a wrong number. She jumps out of bed, runs barefoot to the phone in the adjoining room. The pillow and the bed retain the impression of the curves of her head, her body, her legs; as if the bed continues to sleep without her. Pali seems to sense it and turns in his sleep to embrace the empty pillow, dreaming of the woman there.

"Who's this?" she growls impatiently, her voice a hoarse morning baritone protesting the smoke of countless cigarettes.

"Lolo? It's Eva." Eva, her older sister, always the boss, always the know-it-all whom she fears but loves and respects for her wisdom. "Berta is here," Eva says.

Lolo doesn't believe what she just heard. She listens for a moment and realizes that she is hearing the rumble of tanks, caterpillar treads on cobblestones. "How do you know?" she asks, her voice is desperate denial.

"The whole city knows. Come over."

"Now?"

"Yes," Eva says imperiously.

'Berta is here.' The secret language is known only to friends and family. It is part of the code they use on public phones and letters. Berta is here. Berta of '44 meant the Germans.

Pali is waking up slowly. "Who was that jerk?" he asks groggily.

“Eva. The Germans have occupied the city. She could not talk over the phone. I said we would go over.” The smile fades from their faces. The happiness of newly married life – interrupted for two years but then renewed for the last three weeks – withers away. Berta is here.

They dress quickly and rush over to Eva and her husband Ede’s luxurious apartment on Backs Street. Eva is smoking, Ede is trying to tune the radio to a news station, but only static is heard. They all stand by the window, straining to see the tanks rolling down Andrásy Street, silently listening to the roar of the engines. The radio finally comes to life. The news is that Germany has occupied Budapest, for now only militarily, without taking over the civilian authority.

“Not a moment should be wasted,” Lolo says. We must start packing immediately. I hope you know what this means for us? Even if nobody else is hurt, we will certainly be annihilated.”

Ede is not as pessimistic. “The British will annihilate them first. Mark my words, if the occupation continues, the Allies will bomb the city into rubble, along with the rest of the country.” He lies down on the bed and with impressively cool logic, continues to analyze the situation. “To say we haven’t any time at all is hasty. In any case, we should hide everything of value. No doubt, they will start looting soon. But I don’t think we need to pack immediately. Let’s wait and see what happens today. Most likely we have many more days.”

Eva leaps to her feet and runs to the dining room. “Articles from the leftist ‘People’s Voice’ newspaper. I have been collecting them for years; I’ll thrash them. The Shakespeare volumes too. The last thing we need is to have them search the house and find English books!”

“You can rip up the articles,” Ede says, “but leave the Shakespeare’s alone; I got them as a graduation gift from my father. It is unthinkable that they would sink that low.”

“Why not?” Lolo sees things more darkly. “You think the SS won’t do the same things they did everywhere else in Europe? Like in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the other countries?”

“Out of the question,” Edward says. “When they did that in Poland and the other countries, the Russians hadn’t yet smelled blood, but now they are at the Carpathian Mountains. All they need to do is send a few planes here to straighten things out!”

Eva is gnawing at her cigarette and searches feverishly among the boxes and drawers in case some notes, receipts, books or documents turn up that could get them into trouble. Her thoughts keep returning to her mother. What will happen to our mother, Anya? She is crippled, weak and old. She cannot take any stress. "Should I phone Anya?"

"I wouldn't advise it," says Ede. "Your mother would be frightened and panic."

"I know she will be frightened and panic. Why should it be me who always gives her the worst news? Anyway, father, Apa, will find out everything in his cafe and tell Anya about it. I am not phoning. Perhaps I'll phone Zsuzsi. She is the youngest sister, always babied. She can tell her"

Zsuzsi sits at the huge mahogany dining table, the bottom buttons of her dress undone to reveal long, shapely, flawless legs. This woman – with the appearance and mannerisms of a child – calmly and coolly leans back in the enormous armchair, handling her husband Jani's family with an air of confidence. His family, known widely for their wealth, built a fortune in the construction business, and owned many properties in Budapest. Jani, their only son, married this stunning, pale-blond, poor girl within weeks of returning from the horrific battles of Brjansk Forest, where he was stationed in a forced-labour service company. Jewish men were not trusted to bear arms, so they were gathered into special battalions and forced to perform the most perilous duties. Jani's camp was responsible for clearing minefields. It was a miracle that he returned alive at all.

The gossip of the town was how the fabulously wealthy owner of a mansion in Pansare – the ritziest part of Budapest – took this penniless waif as his princess to his dream palace. At first the family resented her slightly, but they were forced to yield, as they looked on the return of their son as God's greatest gift. They would have accepted much less than Zsuzsi, so grateful were they that he was alive. Within days the charming girl had the whole family wrapped around her little finger.

Chapter 2.

"I am cold," Lolo tells herself as she steps off the streetcar and hurries along Hunyadi János Street towards her client's house. Lolo is her nickname, her given name is Klara but her three sisters, Magda, Eva, and Zsuzsi nicknamed her Lolo as a joke when she was five, and the name stuck. She has been teaching English privately for years, her clients usually upper class businessmen or their children. She is late again, and these are such decent people. They never make her feel inferior, even though the man is a Captain in the army, and she comes from a lower town Jewish family. At the entrance to their house there are two soldiers on guard. Her thoughts run wild, trying to find an explanation: the Captain placed them there, or they were stationed there because he embezzled something and fled and...

"Show your identification!" says one of the soldiers.

"Will my food ration tickets do?" she asks flirtatiously. She always has her way with soldiers, policemen, mail men. Perhaps because of her simple mannerism and straight talk.

"Don't you have a photo-identity?"

"Yes I do," she tries a little humour, "but I look very bad on it."

All three of them laugh. She runs up the stairs, actually glad that she was stopped; she can use it as an excuse for being late, but no need for that. Through the opaque glass on the door she can see the Captain and his wife pacing the floor. He greets her, his tone worried.

"You fool!" the Captain exclaims. "Are you not afraid to leave your home?"

"Why?" Lolo asks, "For God's sake, what happened?"

"You don't know? Lolo, you must know that the Germans have occupied the city?"

"I know, but why shouldn't I go out on the street?"

"Because..." they fall silent. The Captain twists his gray soldier's head uncomfortably. He looks at her, then looks away.

"Well... I know, but even among Christians you can find many with faces much darker, more 'eastern' looking than mine."

He sighs with some relief and says with sincerity, "Go home, my dear, that is all I can tell you, and don't go out, you can get into trouble. Telephone us later or something but go quickly now."

They urge her out. She is afraid to approach the entrance now. Deep down she is timid, despite her strong, athletic exterior. She flashes her identity card, but the guards don't even look. At the bridge she sees two German soldiers heading toward the tunnel under Gellért hill. She slows down and only after the tunnel swallows the two Fritzes does she pick up her pace.

"My dear Laci, what's this pessimism?" Magda asks her husband. "You have never lost your head before!" Magda is eternally optimistic, never admits to trouble, can always find the bright side of the most dire situation.

"But Magda, the Germans have never occupied Hungary before!" Laci explains. "Unfortunately, you will find out what the German boot means, and then you too will lose your sunny outlook!"

"For the time being, we have no reason to worry." Magda says calmly. "We stay home, comfortable, we don't budge. The situation will evolve somehow. Can't reach Anya on the phone, it is constantly busy. Come, have some pancakes."

"Lolo is probably out on the street." Laci says.

"Unfortunately she teaches on Sundays too," Magda says. "In fact, across on the Buda side I think, but don't talk nonsense. What could happen to her on the street?"

"What could happen?" Laci exclaims. "Haven't you heard that as soon as they occupy a city they immediately get to work? Round up people and no one sees or hear of them again."

"But it is not written all over her..."

"Well, in fact it is. Besides, with that big mouth of hers, she will probably say something on the tram or on the street. She can easily get herself in trouble."

Apa looks at Anya, his wife of over thirty years. Her small, round, handsome face is framed by wispy white hair, like a halo. She contracted polio in her twenties, which completely paralyzed her left leg and a brace forces her to walk with the aid of a wooden cane. Her warm brown eyes

are frightened, worried mirrors. In those two mirrors dance four names, the names of her four daughters, her wonderful, healthy children. What if a name is no longer reflected? At last, one of them arrives.

“What’s the word on the street?” Anya asks Lolo.

Lolo looks at her mother. Oh God, what will happen to Anya? The heartrending question nags at her. The sisters are young, healthy, they can survive; but Anya? Rumours were spreading of Jews being deported because they were useless.

“Did you see anything on the streets?” Anya asks.

“Only two German soldiers, peacefully strolling through the tunnel. Quiet everywhere. Maybe they are only passing through the country, heading down towards the Balkans.”

“Apa heard the same thing in the Abbazia coffee house.” Anya says.

“Is he home?” Lolo asks, looking around. The apartment has only two rooms and a small kitchen.

“Does it look like he’s home?” Anya asks sarcastically.

“Why did you let him leave?”

“As if I could keep him home when he wants to go.”

The telephone rings. Lolo answers it. “Eva here. Is that you, Lolo?”

“Yes, I just arrived.”

“Stay with Anya.”

“Out of the question. My apartment...”

“To hell with the apartment, this is a much more serious matter. You probably haven’t cleaned the carpets, that’s why you want to go home. Don’t budge from Anya’s, you hear?”

“What if I get a message from Pali? They called him out on forced-labour duty again. I don’t even know where he is.”

“Just stay calm, that’s what he would want you to do. The three of us are in a different situation, our husbands are home, but you are alone; you can’t sleep by yourself in the apartment.”

“You are a pessimist,” Lolo says meekly. “I don’t see things that way.”

“That is because you are dumb and can’t reason. We’ve been discussing this with Ede since this morning. Do as I say. Bye.”

Lolo puts down the receiver. She already knows she is definitely going home, in case Pali sends word or comes home. Even though he is here in Budapest on forced-labour duty, he might as well be on the other side of the country – weeks pass between brief furloughs when they can see each other. The last time she saw him she had to spy him out on the street, acting like a stranger, inconspicuously observing the men marching to work. Their gazes met, smiles exchanged, then more of those cold, drab weeks passed.

“I am going home.” Lolo says.

“Don’t go, my little Lolo,” Anya pleads. “Everybody says...”

“Who is everybody? Eva? You know what a pessimist she is. I just came in from the streets, it is quiet and orderly everywhere. My apartment is in shambles. I didn’t have time to clean up this morning. I will just rush over, fix things up quickly, grab my nighty and toothbrush and come right back. I promise.”

She hurries off, but she is worried. Her eyes scan the streets, but it is peaceful everywhere, no sign of unrest. The Germans are probably not interested in anything out here, the far edge of the seventh district, nicknamed ‘Chidi’. Chigi was short for Chicago, whose reputation as a workers’ city spread throughout the world.

Chapter 3.

Everyone called them the beautiful sisters, but they were not all beautiful. Eva, the third, was perhaps the most attractive. She was not only the most stunning but also the cleverest, and both of these aspects seemed to radiate from her. Eva was so self-assured and independent that she stood out in everything. So confident was she in all of her affairs that she solved her crosswords with a fountain pen. She could not make a mistake, and even if she did, she would not acknowledge it, refusing all criticism with carefree arrogance.

In contrast the other three were somewhat self-conscious, uncertain, indecisive; far from the self-assured Eva! The other three would most likely solve their crosswords with a soft Faber Castell pencil and an eraser, and even after those precautions would fill the squares in ever so lightly. But Eva! She achieved all accomplishments quickly, decisively, brooking no opposition, solving all puzzles in life with a pen.

Magda, the oldest, thin, tall, shaped like a snake, slouching, was slow to the point of laziness. Magda's slanted eyes, slightly flat nose and wide cheekbones made her appear Asian. When she laughed, only her strong, regular teeth were showing because her eyes squinted into the broad, flat cheekbones.

Zsuzsi, the youngest, was also thin, but her girlish, graceful thinness held the promise that she will never grow old; or at least not for a long time. Her little round child-like face had two apple cheeks of innocent charm. Her odd little laughing eyes and radiant blond hair made one forget that her face lacked symmetry or even prettiness but had instead youthfulness and allure.

The two middle ones, Lolo and Eva were the same build. Their beautiful legs, like sturdy columns, supported their womanly hips confidently. They had small breasts but broad shoulders, strong backs, and muscular arms that evoked the image of *real women*. In men, such a physique would be called 'good soldier material'. Eva was much more attractive to men than Lolo. So much so, that men would look at her with deep longing and wistful sighs. When they looked at Lolo they would not even take a second glance. Good Lord, why were you so generous, why did you put so much beauty in one place, when you could have spread it among so many others? Eva's small nose, finely drawn mouth and wavy reddish-brown hair complemented each other, and her

astonishing brown eyes suited perfectly her small oval-shaped face. Lolo bore a resemblance to Eva but was somewhat plain. Lolo's nose, mouth and large jaw linked her head to her strong, muscular body. In contrast her eyes, intelligent, soft brown eyes revealed the depth of five thousand years.

Chapter 4.

It is a cold, windy, early spring Sunday afternoon. Apa comes home with news from the Abbazia cafe: Prime Minister Kallay resigned, the coffee houses were ordered closed, an entertainment ban was declared, and movie houses were closed down. They do not actually comprehend the seriousness of the situation and the foreshadowing of dire things to come.

“Can we have supper?” Anya asks. “My little Lolo, set the table, I’ll warm up the meal.”

The doorbell rings. Lolo opens the door to two strangers. A couple, both tall, blond, equally handsome, resembling each other somewhat. Anya greets them as acquaintances. The formalities of introduction are quickly gotten out of the way. “My daughter, Lolo; our dear neighbors from upstairs, Mr. and Mrs. Reich.” Lolo takes a closer look at the newcomers. How handsome, especially the woman. Broad-shouldered, dark blond, she is like a Corinthian column. Her perfect figure tapers to a reassuringly beautiful face, her hair is carefully arranged, cold blue eyes, finely drawn features, like February sunshine – icy cold, meager warmth, but everyone is happy to receive some.

The man, almost the same height as she, has a calm, kindly manner. “What did you hear?” he turns to Apa.

“People talk a lot of nonsense. The only fact is that the Germans have occupied the city, but my good man, I am much more interested in the fresh coffee my wife just prepared. Smell the aroma?”

The couple laugh, evidently pleased that they find themselves in a cheerful place. The woman unbuttons her expensive fur coat, showing a glimpse of her exquisitely tailored suit, evidently from the boutiques on Váci Street. Long, delicate hands are loosening the turban shaped hat on her head.

“Dear Madam,” Apa helps with her coat, “allow me. But why are you here?”

Lolo finds the question odd, but Mrs. Reich answers with good humour. “My family insisted on it, that’s all; I personally don’t find the situation especially grave.” She shifts so she can observe herself in the mirror across from the table.

"You don't find it grave?" Apa asks. "Have you been out on the street at all today? It looks like general mobilization out there. The people have gone completely crazy."

"You're right," Mr. Reich says, warming up to the conversation. "Completely crazy and because of that, they blow things out of proportion. One must sleep on it. There is no strength left in the Germans to do serious damage here. The Russians are at the border!"

Aha! Lolo recognizes the signs. These are selfish people. They are afraid of something they do not understand and would like to be relieved of their fear. They care for no one, trying to save only themselves.

"No doubt," Lolo taunts her, "all sorts of horrible things are possible." Not so fast, my dear, I don't run a comfort station. Do your own thinking and don't expect any consolation from me. "Perhaps by some miracle Hungarian politicians will see the writing on the wall and won't go to bed with the Germans so willingly at this point." Lolo says.

"At this point," the man is much nicer, friendlier, "when all is lost anyway..."

"Aha! Here comes supper!" Apa interrupts. "Please take a seat, have a bite with us."

Anya glances at him furiously as she looks desperately at the supper which is not nearly adequate for five people. But her fear is unnecessary – the Reichs decline the invitation. After all, they have everything bourgeois life affords, except serenity, which they were hoping to receive here. They are on their way out.

"Anya," Lolo asks, "who are these people?"

"The orthodontists from upstairs. The man is very ill, he only has one lung left."

"A handsome couple."

"They are very rich. The woman doesn't do a thing, just preens herself all day."

"She looks it, too."

Chapter 5.

A cart kicked at the top of the hill will rush down faster and faster, it is unstoppable. The small inconveniences against the Jews grows into overt persecution. They are forbidden from performing. Klari Tolnay – a prominent Jewish actress on screen and stage – is first to announce that she is going on sick leave, that is the reason why she will not go on stage. Katalin Karady – famous actress and singer in many movies – cancels her appearances after all of her work is forbidden but is rumoured to have saved a group of children from execution later on. Other actors intervene, Manyi Kiss hides Istvan Somlo, as Maria Mezey does Lajos Basti. Maria Gyurkovics and her husband align themselves with the regime and actively participate in the aryanization of the Opera. Piri Vaszary and Lili Murányi are in the forefront of the wave of fascism. Sisters-in-law, they work hand in hand.

Viesenmayer is the new German ambassador. Previously in charge of the deportation of Croatian Jewry, he is now responsible for enforcing German policy in Hungary. On March 22, Parliament holds a brief, formal sitting, then adjourns for an 'indefinite' period of time. On March 23, the first bloodhounds appear – Sztojai becomes Prime Minister and appoints Jaross as Minister of the Interior, in charge of the 'Jewish question'. Both of them are subservient to Viesenmayer and encourage deportations. Jaross forms a new government; first law tabled: 'Jews must move into specially designated houses. All possessions must be left behind for more deserving Aryan tenants. They must vacate in three days.'

They are helping Eva move out. Feverish packing: crates, suitcases, baskets, whatever can hold things is filled. At the beginning they make a careful inventory of what went into which crate; later they just stuff things wherever they fit. Eva is the most organized. In each box she places some of the winter and summer clothes, hers as well as Ede's things: towels, bedding, tableware, furs. Finally, she stuffs coats into two large bags, hiding dollar bills and napoleon coins in the shoulder pads.

Magda, slow and calm, leaves the packing decisions to Eva. She constantly asks questions such as, what did we do with the crystals? Oh yes, Apartment 3, second floor; those nice Christian people who offered to help without being asked.

Zsuzsi is already working on the sixteenth crate; her knees are swollen from kneeling to pack. At first she is well organized, in the end she throws articles in helter-skelter; heating pad next to a smoking jacket, a portable typewriter next to crystals, not caring anymore whether all these valuables end up in a damp cellar, an attic exposed to bombing raids or in the hands of completely untrustworthy people. The important thing is that they are packed.

Eva carefully fills three crates with her cobalt blue china set, crystals and silver, all individually wrapped in newspaper. Late evening, when the house has darkened, she tiptoes over to the neighbour, a retired Colonel. She asks him to store most of her books and a framed reproduction of the Mona Lisa. In the back panel they hid Lolo's lentil sized, and Eva's and Zsuzsi's pea sized diamond engagement rings. The rooms are growing bare, floors without carpets, windows drab with the curtains gone. The walls are showing light coloured shapes where the pictures used to hang, empty book-cases stand around sleepily.

They don't step outside, they eat whatever leftovers they find. Lolo no longer goes out to teach, Ede does not open up his meat-packing factory. They try to reassure themselves – this is only an initial scare tactic, things will ease up, everything will be all right. They now find common ground with the other Jewish residents of the building. People who were not on greeting terms before, or even detested each other openly, now ring one another's doorbells with an air of familiarity, driving each other mad. What have you heard? I got this from a completely reliable source: they would rather intern ten thousand Jews than execute a single one. Very reassuring. I am not at all comfortable, I heard about gas chambers. Come now! Where do you find gas chambers in Hungary? They will build some. Or they will deport us somewhere where there are some, or...

Lolo is also horrified. A few Polish Jews escaped to Hungary and talked about the 'Polnische Aktion', the elimination of Polish non Aryans as well as intellectuals and upper classes. They related hair-raising horror stories of killings and mass disappearances from multiple cities and towns. She tries to suppress these awful thoughts. Oh, if only Pali would come home. He sent

word twice, but there is no prospect of being able to talk, even though there is much to say. Everybody is busy with themselves, she is so alone.

Lolo lives in an apartment building on Bethlen Street. As most large buildings in the city, it was square in shape with an inner courtyard. On each floor there was an open, rectangular corridor around the courtyard, which also acted as the entrance to the flats. Until now the courtyard had a life of its own. Here was where children played, gossip was spread, cutting remarks whispered about each other's dresses; generally where they spied into each other's lives. All the news was exchanged here. The courtyard was a separate world, yet an integral part of the six-story apartment building in the seventh district. The courtyard was deserted at the start of the invasion but beginning to slowly wake from its coma. They were starting to bring out their carpets to be beaten over the railing, shake out their dust-mops, converse as if nothing had happened. However, they swept, dusted, cleaned and chatted differently now. Somehow, they knew who was to be feared and who could be trusted.

Among the residents of the fourth story were the Viennese colonel and his wife. They hated Hitler because according to one of his rulings after the Anschluss – the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938 – the ex-officers of the Monarchy could only receive their pension where their military units were stationed. Since the colonel used to serve in the Hungarian army, they had to leave behind their comfortable Viennese life and move here, 'with the gypsies'.

Another resident was a retired high-ranking official from a high salary category, strongly right-wing, an admirer of Hitler, taking him completely into his heart after the Hitlerian proclamation demanding the return of all territories taken by the victorious Allies at the end of WW1 from the defeated countries, including Hungary. His wife reached the status of 'Your Excellency', and despite the fancy title, remained a practical, calculating peasant woman, fiercely protective of her two children. She foresaw the coming events, and if she had her way she would have taken her two sons far from this unfortunate continent, which she knew would one day be totally taken over by Germany. Her husband is impressed by the German parade, the Fuhrer pomp as it struts across the newsreels, the boot heels striking in unison, the robot-like pumping

of the white gloves. And who the hell cares if they exterminate the Jews, or stripped the Serbs, Czechs and Poles of everything, if only they would have stayed out of here. She knows that the British, supported by American armaments, will not leave one brick standing upright here. They said so a long time ago, even publicized the message on the radio.

The fourth group of residents was an inscrutable wife and family that migrated here from Kassa – now called Kosice a town in Slovakia, but part of ‘Greater Hungary’ before WW1. “Well, yes,” the woman acknowledged the occupation with icy calm, “the boys are here; we have been waiting for a long time, and now they are finally here.”

On March 19 the Russians were already at Munkács, on the Hungary-Ukraine border, and the Allied landing in the West was only weeks away. Obviously, after the Don River fiasco in Russia where the Hungarian army was decimated, the mobs at home had to be placated with something. That something was the opportunity for pillage and slaughter.

If the Russians have driven the Germans all the way from Don Bend to Munkács without giving them time to even change their underwear, is it going to be here, of all places, where the Axis will halt the advance? Headlines: “Axis armies triumphantly burst through Russian surrounding ring. Total success in fending off attack. Strategic rescue. Futile enemy attempt at encirclement, supply depots regained successfully.” There were some idiots who actually believed all this.

The cart rolling down the hill continues to gather speed: László Baki is the new Interior Secretary, in charge of the ‘Jewish question’. You could not find a more anti-Semitic moron. March 29, the third bloodhound, László Endre appears. He states that the government's anti-Jewish laws are not harsh enough and imposes further restrictions such as banning Jews from beaches, spas and fairs. He has a reputation for extreme cruelty, rumoured to be caused by syphilis. Perhaps there is eternal justice there. Jarosz disbands the Social Democratic and Small Landholders Party. They list the telephones of all the Jewish residences, which is ironic since they had to surrender their phones. On March 30 the school year is terminated, and they begin the suffocation of cultural life.

Headline: “Carefully planned disengagement in progress on the southern section of the eastern front.” The Cabinet discusses the ‘Jewish Question’. They have to decree *something*, so they come up with, ‘Jews are no longer allowed to employ domestic help. Jewish lawyers, journalists and actors are not permitted to be members of professional associations.’

March 31: Monte Cassino has fallen. It took four costly battles – 55,000 allied lives lost – to capture a small monastery. Victory may not be that close. The newspaper Magyar Word prints an image of a yellow star of David, prescribing the size and material from which it is to be made; after April 5 any Jew will be obligated to wear one outdoors on the left side above the heart. All state, judicial, municipal and utility employees of Jewish faith are fired.

Marton Ratkai, Jewish actor, begs and pleads before Ferenc Kiss, chairman of the aryanized Actor’s Guild, to not expel him – he only knows acting. “What can I do, sell shoelaces on the street?” He is kicked out of course. In the Vigszinház theater, before the start of the show, Antal Pager stands in front of the curtain and announces that the theater is now aryanized and he hopes there are no Jews in the audience. Lolo wonders how many pupils will remain with her if they see their teacher wearing a yellow star?

The major worry is deportations to the concentration camps. Maybe something will happen beforehand. Hopefully the Jews of Hungary will not have to follow the fate of those in the rest of Europe. Perhaps the Germans will have a change of heart, or postpone it, or Britain will intervene at the last minute...Britain? Why should they? Let’s face it, Britain is not waging war because of the Jews. The Allies just happen to have a common enemy for the time being.

Lolo gets off the streetcar on Pozsonyi Street, and turns her face toward the gentle, cold rays of the sun. She should rejoice at the early spring, at everything that is beautiful; what a pity that some people declare wars, that others must defend themselves, that there have to be battles. One should be able to enjoy their youth, to stretch out every hour of every day of young life and not think about a terrifying future. For if one looks ahead and lives tomorrow today, one ages prematurely. A pity to waste one’s thoughts on such things.

She is teaching a twelve year old. They barely begin the lesson when the air-raid siren sounds. They are alone in the apartment, so she grabs her pupil’s hand and they run down to the

bomb shelter in the cellar. She is thinking that if a bomb hits her building on Bethlen Street, she will have nothing left except the clothes on her back. Whatever happens, happens.

“Aunt Lolo, aren’t you afraid?” asks her young student.

“Of course I am,” she answers. “But there is nothing we can do about it. Anyway, be calm, we are in the shelter, no harm can come to us.”

“But my Mom...”

“I am sure your Mom went down to a shelter somewhere and she knows I am here with you. You just stay calm.”

The buildings are pounded by the attack, as if each one was assigned its own bomb. A voice inside her hopes that the government will think that the bombing is punishment for the yellow stars edicts. If they have any sense, they will recall the directives and realize that they are rushing headlong towards disaster. Insanity, that’s what it is.

When she gets home in the evening a surprise is waiting for her. The light is on in the kitchen – perhaps Pali was allowed to come home. Oh, how wonderful! She bursts through the door and rushes to embrace him, but Pali waves her away. She stops in her tracks. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t come close.” Pali says. “We were working in the St. Lászlo Hospital clearing the rubble. I am heating up water to wash up. I brought some Lysoform home.”

“From where?” Lolo asks.

“They gave it to us in the hospital; we were picking up body parts of patients who had contagious diseases.”

“Oh, good Lord!”

“Don’t over-react. There is some good in every disaster. At least they let us come home so we can clean ourselves properly.”

“Are you going to sleep here?”

“Of course not.” Pali says. “I have to be back by eight. My dear, these Americans, they sure can bomb us to smithereens!”

She looks at him, his fine, flawless shape, his straight bearing. Cool, steadfast man, as if he was born somewhere on the other side of the Channel. His dirty-blond hair and his growing stubble are like dark-yellow cotton. She opens her arms to embrace him.

“My Pali!” she says affectionately, putting her arms around his neck.

“Not now, pet. After I wash up. Have a look, is the water warm yet?”

“Tell me more!” Lolo intones.

Pali tries to tell her. The experiences are fresh but so horrific that he has trouble remembering, but he has to tell somebody. No one has seen what he saw today, not even in the newsreels.

“It was horrible. Imagine, the first thing I see on the branch of a tree is an arm, bent at the elbow, still clutching the hospital sheet.” Pali says.

“And his body?” Lolo asks.

“Who knows? Only his arm. Elsewhere, two legs. One of the doctors’ rooms – you know they stay in these small houses – well, it just sank by a whole story. In another house nothing was left standing, and amidst all the rubble, a birdcage, intact, with a little canary in it beautifully singing the Radetzky March.”

“How did they treat you?” she asks him tenderly.

“Unusually nicely. When we got there, army engineers were working already over the whole hospital area. Their captain came to greet us with open arms, saying, thank God you came, we need you boys badly.”

“You weren’t afraid?”

“I was thinking of you. Where were you?”

“On Pozsonyi Street, in the bomb shelter. This will be a regular thing now.

They shut down two newspapers that were critical of the regime. They publicize Lajos Marschalko’s book ‘Tiszaeszlár’, fomenting hatred by reworking that tired old story by Eszter Solymossy which alleges that the unsolved murder of a couple of children were committed by Jews. And while Goebbels talks of a quick dispatch of ‘panic-stricken’ Russian forces, the

government's evacuation authority posts a notice in which the population is requested to prepare to leave Budapest. It begins, 'There is a slight chance that...'

It is difficult to procure any yellow stars. The merchants are shaking their heads: unfortunately there is a shortage of yellow fabric, they are hardly manufacturing any, why don't you just make them on your own from some leftover yellow material. It is risky to make one's own, because the papers emphatically stress that anyone found with a star that does not meet the specified size and colour risks immediate internment with life-threatening consequences. One must scour the town to procure even one single star. There is a stampede to obey the directive by the deadline. They manage to scrape up one yellow star, sew it on one of their coats. Maybe more will become available later on to be put on other garments, but nobody has a desire to dress up.

Chapter 6.

On April 5, the first day that the yellow star regulation came into effect, Magda put on her star-marked coat without a second thought, as if she wore a *Signum Laudis*. Her house on Alsoerdösor Street did not get designated as a 'starred house', even though several Jews lived there. The single-story house next to hers was a brothel wherein the prostitutes took their guests to the tiny rooms. Each had her own 'boy', and most of the boys were Jewish. During the day, the girls would walk around dressed plainly, without makeup, carrying little baskets for shopping. Never a loud word, nothing that would draw attention. The first day Magda went out wearing her star, one of the girls walked up to her with tears in her eyes. "It's all right," she said, "my boy became a sheriff too."

In the same Alsoerdösor Street building there was a loud-mouthed truck driver who lived in a small, dingy flat facing the courtyard. He could hardly wait for the Jews to be booted out so he could grab a better apartment. Apparently he became impatient, because one day he went out and came back at noontime with a militiaman. Brandishing a small American flag, the kind children used to play with, he roared with indignation and demanded that all Jews be taken away. He saw, with his own eyes, that they were using similar small flags to signal American pilots where to drop their bombs! The Jewish tenants were frozen with fear.

"Look, Sir," Magda tries to fend off the accusation, "a tiny flag like this is impossible to see from such a great height. You must be mistaken!"

"Let's go!" Naturally, the militiaman remained adamant, "I am taking you all to the hospital grounds where they are interning traitors." Turning to the truck driver, the militiaman asks, "Is that all right?" and begins to herd the tenants to the hospital which is across the street, having recently been hastily converted from a poorhouse to a hospital plus internment center. The building tenants protest, plead, but the truck driver shouts angrily, "Filthy Jews, giving signals, eh? That's all you're good for, all of you can croak!"

The militiaman leads the group, with the truck driver bringing up the rear. They stand in the hospital corridor and wait for the internment of traitors. A doctor walks by, somewhat unsteady in his steps and gaze, looks at them, but makes no comment.

Among the yellow-starred tenants there is a doctor – a urologist – who previously always gave the impression of being a timid and cowardly individual, rarely engaging in friendly conversation. Perhaps because here he was in familiar territory, he took charge of the situation.

“Who are you calling ‘filthy?’” he says quietly facing the truck driver. Being called ‘filthy’ distressed him even more than the prospect of being dragged away to a probable death.

“What did you say?” asks an elderly tenant, “Please say it louder, I can’t hear well!”

“For God’s sake, be quiet!” another tenant admonishes, “No need to hear anything or ask any questions.”

The truck driver’s face flushes with anger. Stiff with fear and waiting for the end, the small group stands there, waiting for a blow. Two ambulance medics, who have been coming and going nearby carrying in some of the injured from the streets, realize that the last thing they need here is more violence.

“What are you all doing here?” one of them asks, contemptuously,

“Gentlemen, believe me, we are innocent.” The urologist makes an attempt at civilized discourse. “They accuse us with something we didn’t do, couldn’t have done.”

“And what is that?” asks the medic.

“That we signaled to the pilots with small American flags. Is it conceivable that they could see a four-inch flag from way up there? I am a surgeon, I have saved hundreds of lives with my scalpel. Please believe us...”

“Well, as far as that goes, they could have magnifying glasses, they could have seen.” After a few seconds of heavy silence, the medic continues, “The interning office is somewhere upstairs. You two can go find it to arrange things,” he says to the militia man and the truck driver, who disappear up the stairs.

The ambulance man points to a doorway at the end of the corridor. “Don’t close that door, that’s where we bring in the casualties.” He stops at the door and adds, with emphasis, “It stays open!” and then he is gone.

“He meant that for us,” Magda whispers to the doctor. “Let’s slip away. We only need to get across the street – but not everybody at once; two or three at a time, no more. First the deaf woman, then us. Five minutes, that’s all it’ll take.”

Indeed, that was all it took – in five minutes they are back in the building across the street. Magda, with her incorrigible optimism, still believes ‘everything will be all right’ and tells everyone so.

On the same April 5th, Lolo goes to visit two of her pupils on the Buda side. She reasoned that wearing the yellow star had not diminished her knowledge, had not made her a poorer teacher, so why not continue to teach? At the first pupil’s home, she rings the bell in vain; no one answers. At the second, a maid – wearing the traditional black uniform with white apron and cap – opens the door a crack. “My lady said not to let you in.”

“Please,” Lolo pleads, I would like to talk to your lady. Could you tell her?” Why did she have to be so insistent? She didn’t know yet what humiliation was. After a few minutes, the maid reappears, the monthly fee in hand, and stone-faced she announces, “They thank you and request that you don’t come again.”

She gets home early, only to find unusual activity at the front of the house. One of the Jewish tenants from the third floor comes toward her, crying, another with hastily gathered pots and pans hurries down the stairs. What’s going on? In the courtyard she looks up only to see Apa leaning on the railing in front of her apartment. On the left side of his Captain’s uniform jacket, where in the sunnier days of the Monarchy he wore many military decorations, there is now a garishly bright yellow star. Why is Apa here in my apartment house? Lolo hurries upstairs; a notice is posted on her door: ‘According to orders by the Hungarian and German authorities, the tenant must vacate the apartment.’

Apa just looks at Lolo, “You poor child, you...” he murmurs.

Lolo is already inside the apartment. Unbelievable. To hand over the apartment? She continues reading the eviction notice: ‘On behalf of the bombing victims we are taking possession of this unit. You must leave behind all furniture, appliances, and all that is necessary to maintain a household, etc.,etc.’ For a moment, she can’t believe it. Leave all this behind? She and Pali have put all this together over such a long time, with such great difficulty and hard work, and now, leave it behind?

The corridor is filled with people. They are solicitous, perhaps they can help. She must be strong now; start rolling up the carpets, taking down the curtains. Must not cry. She who cries is weak, the weak can't take revenge, and whoever doesn't take revenge deserves to perish. Someday...Quickly, change the tablecloths, bed-sheets on the bed, the rest she ties up in a bundle. The dirty clothes hamper is emptied, its contents bundled up.

"Apa, please clear out the bookshelves!"

"The notice says the apartment must be left fully furnished!" Apa is cautious and afraid.

"I don't think the bombing victims necessarily need books. I'll leave behind what is essential and save whatever I can."

Suitcase, stuff things in. She forces herself to not feel utterly depressed, think of something positive. She praises herself for her foresight in placing her more valuable items in the Major's basement locker a few weeks ago. Still, losing what's here is painful. She runs out to the corridor, asking for some help. Most don't realize what is going on.

"Die lampe, Frau Lolo, die lampe!" the Major's wife exclaims as she snatches the small table lamp and rolls the cord to take it. The lamp. The antique Herend lamp that used to stand on the table where she explained the irregular verbs, wrote on the typewriter, did translations, embroidery. It was part of her life. "Don't lose heart," the Major's wife gives her a tearful hug. "All will be well again. Don't cry."

The two beloved little rooms are bare, ugly. Cabinets, tables are dragged up the stairs from all the exiled tenants to Gentile households ready to 'guard' them. Must do everything quickly, the eviction notice says all must be vacated by 6pm, and it is nearly that time now. There are some kind souls who offer to help, but most of the apartments remain locked as if no one lived there.

Lolo stands in the darkened flat and does not notice Pali who appears at the door. He is frightened by the pandemonium, the desperate rush, people weeping; he fears the worst. He searches for her with mounting fear, but then feels Lolo's strong arms around his neck, her head buried in his shoulder, sobbing.

"Pali!" she can let herself cry now, spilling the pent up emotions. "We have to give up the apartment! Our home! Pali, our home!"

“And this is why you are crying? The apartment, that’s all?” He loosens her grip, his anxiousness easing. After all, she is here, safe, they did not take her away. “To hell with it, as long as we live to see the end of this circus. And who is it we turn it over to?”

“Here is the notice – it has to be given to the bombing victims. We have to move to Anya’s tonight, everything has already been moved there.”

“And all this? You are leaving all the rest?” Pali asks.

Yes, she is leaving it. She could bash in the walls, rip the whole building from its foundations, put to the torch the whole stinking city, the whole country, for having to leave it. The sweet, cozy corners, happy evenings’ memories, the comfy chair by the fireplace. She is leaving all that behind. She cries out and heavy sobs wrack her.

“Never mind, sweetie, crying won’t change anything. We must leave, so we leave. That’s all.”

The sad-faced Major walks in. “I have my opinion about all this,” he says with soldierly simplicity, “but I am not permitted to express them to you. Good luck and good night.”

It is well past six now, and the ‘bombing victim’ is still not here. They turn the key in the lock and walk away from the home of eleven happy years and countless memories. As they reach the street, they realize, without even saying it, that their peaceful, happy existence is irrevocably gone. For the first time they comprehend fully what the German occupation means – like marionettes, their entire existence is controlled by them. Their autonomy is a thing of the past, from now on, they have to live with their authority, their oversight. Their physical and spiritual independence is shattered forever.

“Oh, just to live through this first night,” Anya cries, “I don’t know how I can stand it, my dear Lolo!”

“Don’t worry, Anya; it hurts, but we must carry on,” Lolo says and actually feels that way. She says so on the phone to Eva and Magda. Perhaps the others will be spared the loss she suffered. Perhaps the regulations will be altered so that only one person per family is forced to give up their home; perhaps there is some humanity left in them...who knows? Lolo is already staging in her mind the play centered around her tragedy. She is the heroine, the unfortunate,

the one suffering for the sake of her family, doing everything for the others. And the play goes on.

The following day, Lolo walks over to Sip Street, to the offices of the hastily formed Jewish Council. It was the office where enquiries could be made about edicts. A huge crowd is milling around in front, all these souls share her fate. Somehow, after all the jostling, shouting and crying, she makes it inside and gets a hearing.

“Which street are you talking about?”

“Bethlen Gábor Street.” Lolo answers

“I don’t understand,” says the official, “there was no further need for apartments on that street. We had to provide one thousand apartments in the district, and by noon yesterday we handed over all of them. When did you get the notice?”

“Yesterday. We had to leave by six in the evening.”

“By six? Something doesn’t add up here. Did you say Bethlen Street?” he rummages among documents, pulls out a letter, “Thirty-three?”

“Yes, 33 Bethlen Street”

“Oooh, well, that’s a completely different story. There are only a few Jewish residents there, while most of the others are civil servants, officials and functionaries. They expressly petitioned the authorities to have the Jews evicted from the building. There was only one address on Bethlen Street where we had to evict – that was No.33.”

“They expressly petitioned it?” She can’t believe her ears. “Is that possible?”

“Everything is possible.” The official is getting impatient. “Anything else?”

She is stunned. She tries to gather her wits and goes on. “First of all, I would like to know who made the petition! What is the name?”

“That is a private matter, I cannot reveal it.”

She is not angry with the official, he is a miserable victim just as she is; it could just as well be his turn tomorrow.

“Let’s not play games, please, just show me the petition!”

“I can’t and I won’t. Stop wasting my time. Are you finished?”

Lolo's head is swimming; in her mind she recounts the favors she did for many in that building, and in return they put her out on the street.

"Just one more thing, um..." Lolo stammers, "bear with me please for a moment, what I would like... that is, I left a lot of furniture behind, could I take it?"

"Of course not, you are expected to leave behind a completely furnished apartment!"

"Yes, of course, but that's a loose term. In my stupid haste I hardly brought anything. Can I do it now? Suppose I were to go back? I could get a hand-truck now. Please, I beg you."

"Look, this could get me into trouble," says the official. "If you can get away with it, fine; if not, you want to provoke the German authorities? I can give you some official paper with a stamp, but I won't sign my name. Try it!"

Paper in hand, heart racing, she enters the Bethlen Street building. Still no trace of the bombing victim and Mrs. Hoffman from the third floor is back in her apartment, scavenging. Well, she did tend to wounded Hungarian soldiers at Nuremberg in World War I, and received a decoration for her bravery.

There is a truck on hand, and with a bit of loose interpretation of what is and is not needed for a 'completely furnished apartment' she carts off nearly everything, even if it is somewhat illegal. Although cluttered, Anya's apartment manages to absorb the stuff. Everybody is sad, sympathizing with her. Eva comes over to Anya's, sorrow in her eyes.

"Someday you'll get a high-class place in the Castle district," Eva says, "or on Andrassy Avenue or wherever you want! After this is over, those who were victimized most will be rehabilitated first. To tell you the truth, I thought Zsuzsi would be among the first, because it's usually the best villas and largest apartments that they start with. Are these people idiots, taking away a two-room flat?"

"Don't you understand the issue here?" Lolo says dramatically, "The residents in the building didn't want to live with the Jews, that's why they specifically asked to have them evicted from No.33 Bethlen Street."

"Including you?"

"Why would I be an exception?"

“You had it coming, you idiot, you dummy.” Eva says derisively. “You had to play friends with that grand lady, the Major’s wife...”

“Leave her out of it; she was very decent. She let me hide all my valuables in their basement safe.”

“She may actually return them someday.” Eva says sarcastically.

Lolo laughs at the sarcasm. She feels that a touch of irony adds to the role of the heroine in her drama. “I am quite sure she will return them.”

Eva radiates self-confidence. “I rented out two of my rooms – in one, a single older woman, in the other, an air-force captain and his wife.”

Anya is startled: “You took in a military man?”

“That is the safest thing! If there is any trouble, he steps out in his captain’s uniform and everybody shuts up.”

“And what are they like?” Anya asks.

“The old woman is not ‘all there,’” Eva says. “She got bombed out of her flat. For two whole days after she moved in she was washing and cleaning a collection of seashells she got in Abbasia, then placing them all over the room. Some fifteen thousand of them. The place looks like the Adriatic! On the other hand, she bakes excellent butter-cookies.”

“And the pilot?” Anya asks.

“A young man, newly married, without a penny; the first evening he borrowed a twenty from Ede. The wife is Austrian, not a word of Hungarian, very pretty.”

“At least they are saving the apartment for you!” Anya says.

“Look, Mom, frankly, I don’t believe they will be satisfied with this; they will find something new, some other things to torment us with.”

Magda is the optimist as always. “Again, you imagine the worst. They can’t be that bold, not with the Russians so close.”

Eva takes a deep drag on her cigarette; with a slight ironic smile, she nods her stylishly coiffed head. “Just wait. Someday, I will remind you.”

No.33 Bethlen Street fades from Lolo’s mind, fear of their ultimate fate is more pressing. “As long as we aren’t deported. That would be impossible!” she says quietly.

Eva looks up: "You are that certain? Just wait..."

The Hungarian language has three forms for addressing one another. The informal 'you', the more formal 'thou', and the most formal third person, used for royalty mostly, 'Your Majesty is...'. The manner in which the six members of the family addressed each other was incomprehensible to outsiders, as was so many other things about them. For instance, Anya used the formal address with Apa, Eva and Zsuzsi, as did Lolo and Eva with Apa. "Thou can do this," for example. Everyone used the formal with Zsuzsi, except Apa, but Zsuzsi used the familiar form with everybody, including Apa. "You must do that." There was never any confusion about who was to be addressed in what fashion.

At Pasarét, everyone is always on the ready, prepared for the worst; they have no illusions. Their villa has been repeatedly inspected, even though vast sums of money has been paid to several politicians to leave the family in the estate.

"Doesn't mean a thing,' Zsuzsi says. "Without a doubt, ours is the most beautiful home in the whole of Pasarét, so unfortunately it gets noticed. In a way I wish..."

"You wish what, my dear Zsuzsi?" asks her husband Jani, "That it wouldn't be so beautiful? That's silly. If we must go, well, we move out. What matters is that we stay together, and they don't send me to the front again. In any case, money-wise we can last a bit longer."

Suddenly, engines rumble, loud voices, raucous laughter. Somebody kicks in the garden gate and a shrill German order penetrates every brick of the villa, "*Achtung!* Attention! Let's go, let's go! Take your belongings and clear out of here, on the double!"

They stare at each other in disbelief, then run out to the balcony. The sobering April wind clears their heads. Why, they just paid off the Minister of Justice, getting a promise that no harm will come to them. Jozsef makes an attempt to explain all this, hoping it will hold them off; they need a few more days to hide at least some of the valuables.

"Please, gentlemen..." Jozsef pleads.

"*Beeile dich. Ich habe keine Zeit für eine Diskussion.* Hurry up, I have no time for discussions!"

There were some ethnic Germans living in Hungary, derogatorily referred to as Schwabs. A young Schwab lout in an SS uniform is among them, speaking flawless Hungarian, supposedly acting as translator, but in reality leading the group. “*Gyerünk*. Move it, pal, while we are still nice, because if you tick us off, you won’t leave at all. You stay and we nail you like a bat to the garden gate!” He roars in laughter, pushing his face close to Jozsef’s, enjoying the ashen look of fear there.

Zsuzsi, in hysterics, tugs at Jozsef’s sleeve, “Come on, let’s hurry!”

“That’s right, sister, better hurry!” adds another Schwab SS, looking over Zsuzsi’s blond face and handsome body.

They used to see such scenes in Chaplin burlesque movies. Big Jim would toss his hapless victims around. Except there they could laugh till their sides hurt. Here men in uniforms swarm all over the house, ransacking the closets, throwing papers on the floors, running up and down the stairs, swinging open the great windows and patio doors, throwing the half-packed suitcases into the garden, the contents flying all over. They lose interest in this after a while and turn on the owners, shoving them down the stairs and out the doors. Gloating and laughing they finally install themselves in the big arm chairs and sofas, taking final possession of the dream-palace.

The family members are standing in the garden, stunned, terrified. The men pale, hardly able to breathe, the women trembling, their heads wrapped only in a kerchief or shawl. Eventually a pull-cart is rounded up from somewhere and together they begin the task of dragging away the handful of belongings salvaged from one of Pasarét’s most beautiful villas. Away to who knows where?

Chapter 7

It started out like any other Spring day. There was a light breeze in the morning, but by 9:00 the heat became almost unbearable. Zsuzsi got a job in an ammunition factory. Apparently those working in a war related job were the least likely to be harassed. Her job is to fill artillery shells with gunpowder for the Panzer tank cannons. Yes, this will work out all right, she is working out here on Soroksari Street, and she will find a room to rent somewhere in the area. She will survive, she is still young, married for a mere six months, she wants to stay alive. She must.

A decent person by the name of Maca was assigned to her as partner.

“Come back around ten,” they were told, “there is nothing for you to do before then.”

Maca got some blankets from the shop and they lie down to rest. They can use it, because nobody slept last night in the city. Excellent. Yes, she will move out to Soroksari Road, live a regular life, clean, change the linen. She will only take the essentials with her. She must write Jani that they are saved!

The foreman's voice suddenly disrupts the silence. They sit up, sleepy eyes squinting in the bright sunlight. Zsuzsi shades her eyes with her hand, but she can see the foreman waving. “What is it, Uncle Nyari?”

“Come inside, girls. Bacska-Baja, the early warning town sent the alert. They are flying in so fast, they are sure the planes are heading for Budapest.”

As they run towards their lockers, the warnings issuing from the radio sound more and more alarming: “Aerial attack warning! Aerial attack! They’re already over Gyor! Aerial attack!”

“They missed us,” gasps Zsuzsi. She slows down, and in the tense silence of the next few minutes they stand outside by the door of the locker room.

A worker in a green shirt rushes by, bucket in hand. He shouts crudely, “Of course the starry ones are the first to turn chicken. That way they can avoid work, right?”

They don't respond, don't look at each other. In the first days, at each provocation Zsuzsi sought out a starry pair of eyes for support, but by now she doesn't care anymore. At any rate, she is very afraid. The other day a worker vividly described an air-raid where more than a dozen workers were killed. No, no, nothing will happen.

“Incoming flight, incoming flight, heading Budapest, Budapest aerial attack!” blares the radio.

Women from all over the plant rush towards the lockers. The two of them step out of the way. Zsuzsi is calculating how many barrels of gunpowder she will have to dodge to get to the shelter. Let's see: go by the little toolshed, then cut across the tar depot.... all right. Good thing she got dressed already. From the first siren to the third they have about six minutes. She can make it out in four at the most. No problem. On the other hand, if she were to go around the building, then...

“Air raid alarm, air raid alarm, Budapest, Budapest, air raid alarm!” followed by the wail of sirens.

“Zsuzsi,” Maca screams, “give me your hand, let's run!”

“Not that way, Maca, here, by the toolshed!”

“No, that can explode...”

“Don't argue; they are almost here!”

They run. They go around the small workshop. The sound of the sirens rises again.

“This is the second warning!” whispers Maca. Everybody is rushing frantically. Zsuzsi lets go of Maca's hand and runs towards the large shelter where she found protection the last time during a brief raid. Her knees are trembling, she can hardly breathe. Finally, she reaches it. The door is locked. She knocks. The door opens a crack, and a rough voice growls. “We don't let Starry ones in here. Go to another shelter!”

The siren sounds once more. Maca screams, “Zsuzsi, come on, this is already the third!”

Behind them a couple of men and about a dozen women run frantically. They reach the other shelter. Others must have got there ahead of them, the door is shut in their face. They bang on it desperately. Someone finally opens it from inside.

“Quick, quick!” They fall in, head first, slide down the stairs. Behind them the steel door clangs shut. They feel their way, there is no light, no electricity. A long corridor with five cells opening from it, fifteen people can squeeze into each one at most. Overhead, the game is under way. The fearful whistling sound....then the loud bhamm! and then, tak,tak,tak. The shelter rumbles as if in an earthquake. They fall off the benches. Somebody prays aloud. A couple lies on

the ground and stick their heads under the bench. Seeing this, the others follow suit. Silly, but they all do it. Outside, the terrible roar continues unabated. Bhamm...bhamm! as if they were directly overhead. After each 'bhamm', a fearsome thud. Zsuzsi feels the building swaying and creaking. She is trembling all over, hands and feet are ice-cold.

"All right, Jesus Christ, all right." a woman's voice rises, shrill, crazed with fear. "We deserve this, for what we did to the Jews. Why did we do it? What did they do to us? Help, Jesus, help us, Lord of the Heavens! I won't do it again, ever; I will help them from now on!"

"Stop it!" somebody barks at her; "Be quiet!"

"I can do whatever I want – you shut your face!"

"Quarreling even here?" says a male voice. "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

Zsuzsi looks over in the direction of the voice. She doesn't recall seeing a man enter the cell, only women. And now, a sound even more fearsome, a sharp explosion from somewhere quite close, followed by more at approximately half-minute intervals. Nearer and nearer. It is finally here. This is the biggest one. No, not yet, a still bigger one goes off over their heads. The munitions, the gunpowder is blowing up all over the factory. They all shriek.

"Jesus! Father! Good God! Help us! I want to live!"

"Mother! Juliska, where are you, Juliska?!"

Somebody gags, starts vomiting. Panic spreads, they bang on the walls, crazed, throw themselves on the ground. Zsuzsi reaches out with her hand, touches someone's hair. She recoils from the unpleasant sensation of warm liquid, possibly blood or vomit. Another wave? Yes, here it comes, the roar, the explosions, bricks flying, pieces of the wall falling. They are choking in the dust, half-buried in the debris.

Our Father, please help me out of here, Zsuzsi prays silently. In Berlin, millions perished like this, buried alive in the rubble of their shelters. Good God, are they coming back? Bhamm! Carpet-bombing, they call it, I read about it. Have pity, Father. I have lived so little yet, only twenty-five years. I love Jani so much, and if you brought him home, if you gave him back to me, why would you tear me away from him now? Take pity! Why would you let me die here? How beautiful was our wedding; my blond hair down to my shoulders, our honeymoon at the resort in the *Kékes* mountains. Jani is so good to me. Bhamm! Tat...tat...tat...I won't make it out of here.

It's awful how this woman next to me keeps throwing up. When she stops for a moment, she apologizes, she is pregnant. Mercy, Father! Is it because I converted? Jani wanted me to. I knelt in front of the priest in the Bakáts Square church, and kissed his hand. Bhamm! I am close to passing out. Jani lived through four hundred and twenty air-raids in Russia. You must lie on your belly, on the ground. But they were out in the open and I am shut inside here. Five stories over my head, impossible to escape. The other one was a much better shelter, but they wouldn't let me in with my star. Bhamm! Tat...tat...tat...They are back again! Nearer, nearer! How can it get any worse than this?"

Then silence. Deadly silence. For a few minutes they remain lying on the ground, then somebody sits up. Zsuzsi hears Maca's voice. What is she saying? Even the silence is ominous.

"Could it be over?" somebody ventures. "Be quiet!" says the male voice. He is right. In the hush they suddenly hear rapping on the wall, then a muffled voice.

"Are you alive?"

"Yes!" they scream in unison.

"Listen to me! This could be a pause between waves. We must start digging ourselves out. On the right of the bench is the emergency passageway door. Next to it, a pickax and a hammer, break your way through the north walls of two more cells and you should be out in the courtyard."

They all want to do it themselves right away. Fortunately, the strong baritone voice of a man insists on doing it. By the faint light of a flashlight they locate the markings of the emergency door, the pickax and the hammer. They bash at the door which collapses in an instant. Debris is kicked aside; Zsuzsi goes first, then Maca, clawing their way out. Zsuzsi feels her fingernails breaking off; pain, her hands are bloodied by the mortar and bricks, but she is seized by a heady feeling of hope, a will to live, so she doesn't feel the pain. They hobble out into the next cell, muffled cries, moaning. They are already smashing the outside wall, a couple of swings and the masonry crumbles. They crawl through on their bellies. Zsuzsi lost her shoes, she is barefoot; something sharp cuts into her big toe. Go on, just go on! At last, this is the third passage. She loses her coat, but who cares, what matters is the handbag that has her papers, and most importantly, her war-industry identity paper. Pickax, hammer, bang, falling bricks, crawling,

ignoring the pain in her hands. Something catches her skirt, she rips it off. And then: yes, it's true! She can see light through the hole! She turns to help Maca, but her hand is being yanked from the outside.

"Come on," a male voice shouts, "save your own life, don't worry about others now!" She would say something, but can't – thick smoke fills her nose and mouth. It is dark outside. It seemed they spent only a short time in the shelter, and yet it is evening already. She realizes that dark smoke completely blocks out the sun. She has no time to think.

She looks around trembling. She has never seen such devastation. She recognizes the plant courtyard, but tubs, barrels, rubble cover everything. Popping sounds from bullets exploding, from time to time the huge explosion of a barrel of gunpowder. Burning oil is flowing down into a shelter, flashes of explosions like sparklers along its path., sending burning embers into the air. Somebody gives her a swipe on the back of her head, sending her sprawling on the ground.

"Your hair was on fire," gasps a man next to her: "If the burning oil splashes into your face, you go blind!"

Scalding heat, screams from below, nobody will come out of that shelter alive. In small clusters they already tend to the injured. In front of her stands a woman, half naked, ripping off what is left of her burning underwear, her pendulous breasts a bizarre picture of this theater of horrors. Something rips into Zsuzsi stubs her toes again, she ignores the pain, tumbles into a bomb crater.

"Come on, come on!" As she climbs out, the worker who helped her before gives her a hand. They run together, determined to reach the fence of the building some thirty meters away, a street on the other side of it. The stench of entrails hits her; she looks to her right and sees a horse lying there with its belly ripped open. The innards are twisting and snaking like garlands at a carnival. People are calling for help, but they don't stop, not even for a second. Abruptly, an officer blocks their way.

"Back to the shelters!" he shouts. "Another air raid signal is on for Budapest!" But Zsuzsi and the worker keep running, without talking or looking at each other, aiming for that fence. Seems like an eternity to reach it. Arms, legs, hands, heads. Here there is a human torso, black

like a chimney sweep. There, the head of a child, bloody teeth protruding. Oh God, help me get past that fence!

They finally reach it. They climb on top, the man drops down on the other side and helps her down, grasping her torso as best he can, a sharp pain as his arms squeeze her breast. Then they take off and run their own way, with no thought of what will come next. Behind them, the building collapses, its wreckage falling into the shelter. Soroksari Street looks like an anthill that has been trampled; the trams flattened, the rails ripped up, curling around in spirals.

The siren now sounds to signal the end of the air raid. Within minutes, soldiers and firemen draw cordons and get to work. The buildings along the road are in complete rubble, some of them ablaze, the scene surreal as in a disaster movie.

Her strength deserts her, she can't go on anymore. She pinches her arm. Is this real, is she alive? How about Maca? Did the others escape from the shelter? That poor pregnant woman, how could she squeeze through that narrow passage down there? Anya, Jani, I am alive! Her hands and legs are trembling; she is practically naked, except for a blouse and panties, but she still has the handbag with her factory identity papers in it. With her hands she feels along her body. Good Lord, where is my hair? The knot at the back of her head burnt away. She looks around – everybody is running around, screaming. She can barely stand up on her shivering legs. A car is coming, tooting its horn. She steps in front of the car, identity document raised. The driver steps on the brake.

"Please, I am a war-plant worker," she is surprised at her own voice. Must truly be alive if she can speak. "I work in the Helvey factory. The shelter collapsed on us, I lived through horrors; please..." A soldier emerges from the car, frantic, but seemingly a decent sort.

"Say no more, just get in. Where should we take you?"

"Please, let's go back to the shelter. There is a pregnant woman there; she couldn't get through the gap, if she is stuck there, that's the end of her..."

"Come and get in. There is no woman, no shelter, not even a building there anymore."

She has no strength to respond; she just hands the officer her identity paper that shows the address she wants to be taken to.

Chapter 8.

One can see quite far from Eva's balcony, all the way to Soroksari Road. It's a fine June 14, a warm Hungarian day. Eva and Lolo are standing on the balcony, getting some fresh air after being down in the shelter most of the day. They see clouds of smoke rising from the direction of Soroksari Road.

"God, it's coming from where the Helvey factory is." says Eva.

"How do you know?"

"I know the factory is there and that's where the smoke is pouring from. I don't want to think about it. Zsuzsi can't be hurt. But this billowing smoke is disastrous and it goes on and on..." The air-force lieutenant comes out as well. This time he is sober and serious.

"Dezsi, that's where the Helvey factory is, right?"

He knows it is there and he also knows why Eva is asking the question.

"How would I know? Am I a map or a soldier?" he says evasively.

The pilot stays around for support. Panic begins to overcome them, but then a key turns in the lock and Zsuzsi falls in through the door.

"I am alive!" she wails, half-insane. Her face is singed red, she can't speak, they have to hold her up. Even Dezsi is kissing her with tears in his eyes.

"Thank God you are here!"

Eva regains her composure, lays her down, washes her. Zsuzsi passes out.

"Nobody should talk, she will recover by herself."

But will those who are watching all this, will they ever recover by themselves?

Lolo sobs openly on her way home on the No.6 tram. No one takes notice, they accept it as natural after a horrific attack like this. Out of the tram window she sees a scene on Ferenc Ringroad. They are slapping around a yellow-starred man, yelling, "Take that, it was because of you!" Well, they have to take their anger out on somebody.

Zsuzsi is slow to come around. For the second day she lies in a virtual coma. The strong hands of Eva and Ede soothe her and keep her still in the back bedroom. Just as well, because a man arrives

from the Helvey factory, showing a war-plant identity. He obviously has something to say but is hesitant. They offer him a chair in the hall.

“Well,” he begins in a well-meaning, but roundabout way. “You know about the carpet bombing of the Helvey factory...more than two hundred dead. They are laid out there in the courtyard. Unfortunately your sister too. Young, blond woman, face missing, but we recognized her. Please, if you could come to the plant to identify her...”

“Sir, I can’t go.” says Eva. “I am devastated by this. I couldn’t recognize the faceless body of my sister. I accept what you told us as fact.

She stands with her back to the man, so he won’t see her mopping her dry eyes.

“We recognized her, we, who collected them,” the man is touched, struggles with his emotions to continue. “Her work-coat with the star on it – still, an identification ought to be made.”

“What do we have to do?” Eva already knows what she is going to do.

“Just identify her. But you should come with me now, because they are going to put them in a mass grave, most of them are in pieces; others suffocated in collapsed shelters.”

Silence, shock, well-timed sympathy.

“We appreciate the mass burial. And we thank you for coming all the way here.”

This was Zsuzsi’s escape. Good bye, yellow star. In a few days, an official notice arrives, declaring her one of the ‘heroic fallen’. She sets out to organize her new life. In surprisingly short order she gets back on her feet. With the help of an old friend from Pasarét she obtains false papers – a birth certificate in the name of Rozalia Istok Katalin and refugee identity papers from Transylvania. Officially, she checks out of a nonexistent apartment on Stahly Street, and checks into an also non-existent apartment on Baross Street. Official stamps on everything, all legal and proper, traceable documents. As they say, ‘Dogs bark, money talks’.

End of Preview