

Memoirs

By Zoltan Mathe

A Goose Story (1942-44)

My life has been full of luck (miracles?), shaped by events outside my control.

In 1938 we lived in Budapest, where I was born in 1931. That year the Hungarian Parliament passed a law, based on the Nuremberg laws, prohibiting Jews from owning stores or even selling anything in open markets. In our case it meant that my father, who made a living selling socks and handkerchiefs at country fairs, could not set up his booth anymore.

However, there was a temporary exemption for the, so called, “recovered territories”. These were areas “given back” by Hitler when he raped Czechoslovakia. My paternal grandparents lived in a small town, Sátoraljaújhely, (Ihel in Yiddish), next to the former Hungarian-Czechoslovakian border. This was an excellent location with good rail connections, close to the markets that were still open for Jews. We moved there in August 1938.

In 1939, another chunk of Czechoslovakia was absorbed by Hungary. In 1940, Hitler and Mussolini ordered Romania to cede Northern Transylvania to Hungary. This further extended “the temporary exemption”. Until 1942, it was almost business as usual. Then the prohibition against Jewish businesses took effect for the entire country.

At this time, Hungary was at war as an ally of Germany. The first priority for Hungary, a major food producer, was to satisfy the German demand for food. Then, to feed the Hungarian population, the government had to introduce rationing. This was a ripe condition for creating black market. Black market means illegal market, but the Jews who were deprived from all rights, lived anyway outside of the law. They felt free to work on the black market.

Budapest presented the biggest market for foodstuff. Therefore, in 1942 we returned to Budapest where we sub-leased a room in a two-bedroom apartment. Here ten people shared one bathroom. This move back to Budapest, forced by anti-Semitic laws, is an example of how things can have unintended consequences. The laws that made us to go back to Budapest allowed my family to survive. Jews who lived outside of city limits of Budapest, 436,000 were deported to Auschwitz in 1944. 90% of them were killed on the day of their arrival. Budapest Jews were scheduled for deportation in July, 1944 but the successful invasion in Normandy changed the mind of Hungarian authorities. Without local cooperation the Germans couldn't deal with the deportation of another quarter million of Budapest Jews. Local cooperation was always needed if nothing other than for logistic reason. As a result a large portion of Budapest Jews managed to survive.

But I am far ahead.

With the return to Budapest in 1942 a new chapter started for my whole family. In the countryside east of Budapest near the famous tourist destination of Hortobágy, the main cash crop was goose farming. The geese were fattened by force-feeding that yielded big fat goose livers, also known as foie gras. Foie gras was, and still is, a particularly important export item for Hungary. The income from the foie gras justified the inhumane force-feeding. For Jews, however, the poultry was the only available source of kosher meat and fat. The 1938 anti-Jewish law prohibited the ritual slaughtering of cattle on the ground that it was inhumane. The definition of humane was elastic.

We found a niche. There was a readily available market for kosher geese. Buying them in the countryside was a matter of price. The market was huge. The problem was that it was illegal to purchase geese outside the state purchasing authority, illegal to transport, and, of course, to sell. On the acquisition side, the suppliers handled the local authorities by bribing them. The transport was organized, train conductors gave advance warning about police raids, and they got their cuts.

The setup was almost perfect, although my father had occasional encounters with the Hungarian gendarme before boarding the train. At those times he would arrive empty-handed, with bruises on his head and back. Mother would be busy applying the ice packs.

Apart from such incidents, a critical obstacle in the supply chain was getting through the frequent police checkpoints at the Budapest railway station. For this the whole family was mobilized. The geese were packaged individually or by twos. Everybody. my mother, brother Ernie, sister Clara, our boarder, who had to sleep in the pantry, and I waited by the track. Each of us got one or two packages and walked out. With luck, posturing ourselves in the best way, assuming innocent looks, we got out quietly. Only once was I caught and the goose confiscated without much ado. I cried.

Selling was not a problem except for occasional goose that had blemishes on its stomach and was rendered tref. One goose stayed with us and provided the fat and protein a full week. Friday evening, after the service in a small shul nearby, we sat down at the festive table by the candlelight. Father intoned: Baruch ata ... and broke the challah. There were sometimes guests, usually somebody from Mother's large family, and, of course, the boarder.

The appetizer was jellied gefilte fish, followed by goose-noodle soup. The main course was boiled goose meat with sweet tomato sauce and mashed potato topped with cracklings from the rendered fat. Father got an upper leg, as did the guest, if there was one. Mother's was a lower leg with the foot. She said she liked it. Ernie and the boarder always got the wings. I wondered if some day they would sprout wings. Sister had the stomach. I got the neck. There was not but meat to eat on it. The skin from the neck was later filled with stuffing and provided another meal. The breast became meatloaf or stuffed cabbage. The liver became an appetizer on the Shabbos table before the Sholet. We enjoyed the good meal and felt contented in our little "bubble".

I liked the middle school in Budapest. I was not beaten up every day as I had been in my previous school in Sátoraljaújhely. Budapest was for me, an 11 year old boy an island of tranquility. My brother Ernie (1924-2017) took me to opera for the first time. We saw Tosca. So began my lifelong enjoyment of opera. With Clara, I saw Gone with the Wind - lucky, because it was blacklisted by both the Nazis and communists until the 70s. The Allies were not close enough to bomb, yet. The killing of Jews did not directly affect us. This happened in “far away” countries like Poland or Ukraine. We did not hear the name Auschwitz because of the “great distance” of 150 miles that separated Budapest from this city.

Wasn't an “idyllic” time?

It certainly was, compared with what followed after March 19, 1944 in countries like Poland and Ukraine. We did not hear about Auschwitz, because a “great distance” of 150 miles separated us from it.

Toward the Precipice

On March 19, 1944, a sunny, warm, spring Sunday, Germany occupied her ally, Hungary. Not a single shot was fired. On the contrary, the military and most of the politicians welcomed the Germans. The Gestapo set up office in Budapest. Admiral Horthy, the ruler of the Kingdom of Hungary with the title of Governor, capitulated, but remained as a figure head. He assured the Germans of his continued full cooperation.

The more enlightened politicians, who knew that the war was lost and were looking for the way out of the Axis alliance, were arrested.

Within two weeks, all Jewish men from 18 to 50 were conscripted in “labor battalions” for slave work under the supervision of the Hungarian Army. My father and brother Ernie had to report to those.

I was left home with my mother and sister. Of course, the movement of Jews was strictly limited, so the “goose business” came to an abrupt end.

On April 11, I had my bar mitzvah. I hardly remember the few elderly people who witnessed and said l’chaim when drinking some slivovitz after the ceremony. Frankly, I wasn’t concerned with becoming a grown up. Events made it happen much faster than any bar mitzvah could have done.

A few days later we had to sew yellow stars to the breast pocket. It had the strictly specified canary yellow color and size of 6” from point to point.

By the end of April, the Jews living outside of Budapest were crowded in ghettos after they were herded into ubiquitous brick factories at the outskirts of every significant settlement. In Budapest there was no ghetto, at this point, only designated houses with yellow stars on the gate. Curfew was instituted.

By July the countryside was cleared of Jews. The Hungarians, especially the gendarmerie and local authorities did a “good job” shipping 435,000 people to Auschwitz. Among them my grandparents, 5 uncles and aunts, about 40 cousins and their children were deported and killed. My father’s only sister who married a non-citizen (Hungary born) man was deported to Ukraine in 1941 and killed there by Hungarian soldiers. Eichmann the chief organizer of deportation had only 200 people under his command. He would have been unable to carry out this enormous task without the cooperation of Hungarians.

By that time we knew the destination: Auschwitz, but couldn’t locate it on the prewar maps. Of course it was Poland and its unpronounceable name is: Oswiecim. I, the 13 year old, made a resolution to myself: no matter what is going to happen, I will not be a sheep led to a slaughter house. I certainly had opportunity to remember this resolution.

We knew that the Allies did not bomb the rail lines to Auschwitz. But they started bombing industrial targets in Budapest. Occasionally a bomb hit an apartment building. By July, the

bombing raids intensified from the Italian airfields. We spent a considerable amount of time in the bomb shelters.

It was also the time when we ran out of money and the few pieces of saleable jewelry were gone. I was the “man” of the family and had to do something. First, I worked at clearing the rubble left after the bombing. When a damaged wall toppled over me, I quit. Anyway, the money was lousy. Searching for an income source I became an entrepreneur. After ripping off the yellow star, I went out to buy “ersatz” chocolate candy that was sometimes available. Then I sold the candies in the bomb shelter where several hundred people were sitting. This sustained the three of us.

Of course the rumors were flying; there was always somebody who got information from “reliable sources” that the deportations from Budapest would start on such and such day. The dates passed and nothing happened. After the successful invasion in Normandy we started hoping. In August, Paris was liberated, the Romanians switched sides giving the Red Army a free 500 mile ride up to the borders of Hungary. We knew that further north the Red Army was fighting on Polish territory and we were ebullient.

By early September, 1944 the Red Army crossed the Hungarian border. After the defection of Italy, Finland, Romania and Bulgaria, Hungary remained the only ally to Hitler other than two puppet states: Slovakia and Croatia.

Admiral Horthy was scared. He sent two of his generals to Moscow to negotiate an armistice. He thought he still had control of his army and could outfox the Germans. When he made his radio announcement about the ceasefire on October 15, the Germans had already abducted his only surviving son and forced him to abdicate. In his place the Germans installed the far-right rabid fascist, anti-Jewish government of the Arrow Cross party. This party was a collection of misfits, the dregs of society, and what was even worse, misguided youths 15-18 years old, totally intoxicated with power.

Of course, the Jews were first to feel their power. On October 17 a gang of heavily armed youth with an armband of their movement burst into our yellow starred building and ordered all “dirty-stinky Jews” to get down to the courtyard. We came as we were in light overcoats. I remembered my resolution to not be a sheep. But down there in the courtyard facing the wall with raised hands, I expected the gunfire to start any moment, the resolution was useless. We just stood there and waited.

After an interminable waiting which could have been minutes or hours – we had lost sense of time – we heard the command: “Jews, line up four abreast and march”. We walked in the middle of street and our Hungarian neighbors and other onlookers lined up on the sidewalks.

Most of them were cheering and leering. The owner of newsstand nearby was spitting on her customers and tried to hit somebody with her cane. After a long walk across the Danube to the Old-Buda brick factory, about 5 miles away, we arrived in the darkness totally exhausted. We sat down and used our light overcoats as cover.

Some of the bricks fresh out of the kiln provided some heat. The Arrow Cross guard taunted us but otherwise left us alone. There were a few thousand Jews there.

There was no food whatsoever. In the morning we woke still tired, cold and hungry. There was no accommodation at all. Not even a latrine. Everybody was looking for a quiet corner, without success.

Around 10 am there was some commotion and then came an announcement. Jews, who live at 59 Acacia Street come forward. This was our address, but what kind of trick was it? But what can we lose? We moved forward together with our neighbors.

(to be continued)

On the Brink (1944–45)

My mother, Klara, and I stepped slowly forward to the gate in the company of our equally puzzled neighbors. A small group of uniformed Hungarian soldiers was showing papers to the Arrow Cross guys, who had probably difficulty reading them. Something wasn't right. These soldiers looked familiar. Coming closer, yes, something was out of place. One of these soldiers looked like the brother of my friend who lived in the same building. He started shouting: "Jews, I have some work for you, let's get started". Four abreast, about a hundred of us, formed a column and marched through the gate. It soon became clear that the "soldiers" were Jews in stolen uniforms.

After we rounded a few corners, they told us: "get rid of your yellow stars and go wherever you can, just not back to your home". Slowly, people dispersed. The three of us were left, in an unfamiliar part of Budapest, hungry, dirty, without money and most importantly without any documents. We were afraid to get into a streetcar. The "soldiers" warned us: they check ID's on streetcars.

"I am so tired; it is so hopeless. We will die." said my mother.

"I don't want to die, I want to live, grow up," I answered.

"OK, it's granted, we all want to live, but how? You heard that we cannot return to Acacia Street. This would be certain death" she replied.

"This city is full of refugees from the East, let us be like them" was my retort.

"The Russians are near the suburbs, it cannot take too long before this nightmare ends" said Klara.

So this is it; "we will be like those who escaped ahead of Russians and arrived in Budapest, penniless", our mother decided.

Taking time, rounding out our stories we approached the city center.

Exhausted, miserable looking, we sat on a bench in a park when a woman approached. "Oh, dear you look so unhappy, what is wrong with you?" My mother, who was born in Eastern-Hungary, and could still speak the local dialect, told our prepared story. We were refugees from the East (at that time firmly under Russian control). We had lost all our belonging including money and documents in a bombing raid on our train and have just arrived in Budapest with no idea what to do.

"What church do you belong to?" asked the lady. It was easy. In the part of Hungary that went with my mother's accent everybody belonged to the Dutch Reformed (Calvinist) Church. She

had gone to a church managed school and remembered some key phrases. Our lady responded: “Go to your church, they will help” and explained how to get to Calvin Square.

Mother quickly taught us a few simple prayers in plain Hungarian, no Latin phrases, and fortunately no sign of cross, or holy water was needed. And so we went to the Reformed Church building on the Calvin Square. Mother and Klara, who was 18 at this time, went together. I had a different story. I was an orphan who escaped ahead the Russians with my grandparents, and got separated from them during an air raid. It was farfetched given my 100% Budapest accent. Nevertheless the separation was smart; the circumcised boy would expose the women to additional danger. Was my story believable? I don't know.

Today, I believe, it wouldn't be. The ladies at the Calvinist Women's Club had a policy of not asking. The Chairwoman, Klara Tudos-Zsindely was a well-known fashion and stage costume designer, the wife of a notorious anti-Semitic minister of commerce in a former Hungarian government, Ferenc Zsindely. She was a tall legant lady with a nice smile, about my mother's age, in her mid 40's. I trusted her immediately. It calmed me down and I was able to tell my story coherently with some degree of confidence. Klara Tudos listened to me with visible empathy.

She had organized orphanages in her own mansion up on the Buda hills. Maria who was in charge of running the orphanages was also present and supportive. I have never learned Maria's last name. I got placed in their orphanage.

My mother and Klara got jobs as maids. Mother in Pest, Klara in Buda. The Danube divided us. Poor mother, kosher all her life, now, had to cook good country meals. The scarcity of ingredients was very helpful to her. Klara, who admitted to 16 years of age, could make excuses. I was happy in the orphanage, although showering in a common bathroom was always tricky. Fortunately, we had hot water only once-a-week. At the end of November, two middle age women came to the orphanage with the idea to adopt an orphan. They decided to adopt me. I was crying, “I don't want to go, I have my grandparents” to no avail. I had to go. It turned out that the women lived in the same 7th district of Budapest where I used to live, very close to the ghetto that was by that time well sealed. What if somebody recognized me on the street or in a shelter? When the women turned away I sneaked out of the apartment and ran. I ran back to the orphanage. Klara Tudos and Maria took me back, but this time, I am now sure, they guessed the situation.

It required maturity and an ability to look back, much later, to objectively assess the story. I was only 13 years old when all these happened. After liberation and for many years, I was jubilant, congratulating myself, extremely proud of how smart I was outfoxing everybody. This feeling has slowly changed to horror when I have realized how close I was to being exposed, and how much I depended for my survival on other people's goodwill.

My regret is that I never thanked Ms. Tudos. She was expelled by the communists from Budapest, than she immigrated to Australia, to be with her daughter from her first marriage. When I was ready to talk with her, she was back in Budapest (unbeknownst to me) and I was already a U.S. citizen and persona-non grata in Hungary. She died in 1973. Her kindness and willingness to risk her own life for me was a great gift. She gave me back my trust in humanity.

Unfortunately, I had to leave the orphanage because a boy, Edmund Kali (I will never forget his name), discovered that something was wrong with my anatomy and started blackmailing me and after that, talking.

Two days before Christmas, I went to visit my “luckily discovered cousin” Klara at her place where she had worked in Old-Buda. Her employer gave me permission to stay there for the holidays. On Christmas day the Red Army encircled Budapest and the 7 week long siege of the city began. The Russians advanced to 200 yards from the building in which we lived and the fighting went on until January 28. Even if I had wanted to, I couldn’t have left. All this time we lived in the cellar. It was the coldest winter in my memory; we had plenty of snow for drinking water and dead horses for meat. Somehow we managed. Actually, I enjoyed it; the end of this macabre nightmare was in sight. I happily endured the living in the dark cellar, sleeping on a pile of fire wood and ferociously reading by the candle light. Never in my life had I read so many good books in such a short time.

Before we were cut off from the world we had bad news: our brother Ernie was arrested after being AWOL from his unit and the Germans had a breakthrough in the Ardennes. Both pieces of news were devastating, as we pictured Ernie dead and the Germans victorious back at the English Channel.

The building was a typical upper middle-class apartment house. Everybody was a supporter of fascism and of course an anti-Semite. Klara’s employer was a mediocre violinist at the Budapest Radio Orchestra. All his life he had to fight for his place against Jewish violinists. He was openly a Jew-baiter. It was difficult not to disagree with him. If not for the tragic circumstances, the irony of situation would have been a perfect compensation.

On January 28, the Russians, actually two Russian soldiers, arrived. When they came into the basement, everybody was shouting: “Magyarski, Magyarski” hoping that they would understand the Hungarian word with a Slavic suffix. But the Russians had different things on their mind. They said: “Dah-vah-y chah- see (my first Russian lesson), meaning give me your watch, and started taking them off the held up arms.

And they were looking for “Germans” in every drawer.

We then saw more Russians, most of them behaving in similar way. No matter what, they were kind to me and gave me their thick hot cabbage soup.

They were my heroes, my liberators; they gave me back my joy of life.

I made myself useful. Searching through the bombed out grocery stores I always managed to find something edible and provided food for our employer's family. Yet, we still could not admit to being Jews. The Germans were still fighting in the neighborhood. It went on until February 13, the day when the last of the

German garrison surrendered. All bridges across the Danube were destroyed by Germans but Danube was frozen. Klara went first home to 59 Acacia Street. There she found mother and Ernie, who had managed to escape from arrest. She came back to fetch me. She crossed the frozen river three times.

Father was liberated earlier in December in the Eastern part of the country after he went into hiding from his slave labor camp. He was kind of "liberated", because he was taken POW by the Romanian troops who were fighting alongside the Russians. By that time he had become an "expert" in escaping. He had found a hole in a fence. By the end of February, he made it back to Budapest to complete his lucky family.

We were lucky because we found so many people who believed in humanity and therefore were able to avoid the killers. It was said: a 100 good people was needed to save a Jew but only one to kill him.