

A HIDDEN CHILD,

A HOLOCAUST STORY.....

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Photo taken in April 1944 of Ján Braun
at age nine in Bratislava, Slovakia.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The house was definitely built in the Victorian style; many angles, little steeples containing round rooms, overhanging verandas, and large enclosed and open porches. It stood on the uphill side of a residential street, running across a hillside in what was called the “villa quarter” of Bratislava, the then capital city of the eastern part (Slovakia) of the not too long ago created Czechoslovakia. Its appearance was majestic,

and it dwarfed its neighbors, particularly the houses on the downhill side of the street.

Bratislava in the mid 1930s was not a large town. One could walk from this house to the very center of the city in no more than ten to fifteen minutes, although the return would have required a strenuous climb. And if one wished to stray even a bit further than the shopping centers, one would be rewarded with arriving at the shores of the Danube, one of Europe's principal rivers, in a few more minutes. More so than any other European river, the Danube, frequently not as blue as celebrated in numerous songs, flowed through and formed the border between many countries in the eastern part of Europe. It had

been the defining line of governmental control for centuries.

At that time, one solitary bridge, an ugly and simplistic steel construction, crossed the Danube at Bratislava. It carried passenger, vehicular, as well as train traffic. The other side, Petržalka, verdant and filled with forests and parks, was a frequent get away for the citizenry, particularly as the crossing was made easier because of several ferries which made frequent trips. There was ship traffic, freight and passenger, linking all the ports between Germany and the Black Sea, where the Danube emptied through a broad delta.

Ján was not born in this house, but his first memories were of its details. There were

three features he most recalled later. First, a small space of open ground at the side of the house, containing a play sandbox, the site of many sand throwing battles with neighborhood children. One young girl, in particular, never failed to get sand in his eyes. Second, what appeared to him when he was a small child as a gigantic living room, with windows on all sides, plants in front of the windows, and thick oriental carpets on the immaculate parquet flooring. And third, a narrow winding staircase, lit by one hissing gas light, between the ground floor and the second floor containing this large living room. (This staircase figured in Ján's dreams for many years, well into his adulthood.....)

He was born several years before these memories were formed, in a maternity hospital a very short distance away from the Victorian house. Ján was to be an only child; his parents had decided that times were too uncertain, the future too filled with potential danger, and the immediate years following too likely to be risky, to try to create a larger family unit. The precise time was nine o'clock in the evening, and the date was November 29, 1934.

CHAPTER TWO

It is appropriate before continuing here to dwell a bit on family history and family background. Let us first have an intimate look

at Ján's father. Alexander, usually called Sándor, the Hungarian version of the classical "Alexander", was born in 1894 during the time of the Empire of Austria-Hungary (hence the use of that version of the name). He was one of six siblings, three boys and three girls. His parents owned a highly successful grocery store in the commercial center of Bratislava. Partly because Ján's grandfather had died long before, and partly because of the nature and character of Ján's paternal grandmother, Karoline, the shop was administered by her with an iron hand. Nevertheless, each of the three brothers played a role in its management, and as she grew older, the brothers took over operations entirely.

The family was Orthodox Jewish. Karoline, herself from a very, very large family named Frankl (there were twenty-eight siblings, all single births), ran a kosher home, and religious festivals were strictly observed. (Karoline's mother, the mother of the twenty-eight, had a small dog which she seemed to prefer over all her children, and which certainly took priority at family gatherings.) She was a somewhat remote woman, instilling respect and a little bit of fear in everyone. Not nearly as much is remembered about Karoline's husband, Jozef Braun, who had had the bad fortune of passing away of a heart attack in the synagogue during Rosh Hashanah services.

Sándor thus grew up under fairly strictly regulated circumstances. Childhood pranks, of course, could not be avoided entirely. The family legends abound, including the one about the brothers stuffing spinach or goulash into their pockets at the luncheon table, in an attempt to avoid having to eat the food, and of Sándor's frequent bullying of his younger brother, Géza. Bratislava at the turn of the century was a multilingual town, a few short kilometers from the German speaking area which later became Austria, and a short distance from the Hungarian speaking region destined to become Hungary after the First World War. This somewhat explains why Sándor was called, in German, "*Der Rote*", (the "red one"), because of his rust colored hair. He lost his hair at a very early age, a

curse affecting all male members in this particular clan.

Sándor, not being very large as a child, would stalk his prey on the street, run after the larger boys, jump on their backs, a few slaps from behind, off, and he would be gone as quickly as he had arrived. This might be viewed as a cowardly tactic, but necessity and size called for the approach. Hungarian nationalism being popular during the first years of the twentieth century, Sándor would train Géza to growl and bare his teeth when asked: “How much do you hate the Austrians?” Géza, if he growled loudly enough, would be rewarded with a candy.....

Legend has also painted Ján's father as quite a ladies' man, and numerous stories have been told of his various amorous adventures. But, in addition to enjoying his youthful years in this particular fashion, he was also an avid horseman and champion jumper. He learned to drive and came in possession of a car at a relatively early age, which gave rise to another story.

Years earlier, when Sándor was a young boy, his father Jozef took him for a buggy ride, and, from the top of a hill pointed to the top of another hill. "*Von dem Bargl, zu dem Bargl, zwanzig Minuten*", he announced. (From this hill to that hill, twenty minutes.)

Sándor, in his new motorcar, took Jozef to the same hill: “*Von dem Bargl, zu dem Bargl, zwei Minuten*”. He had shortened the time from twenty minutes to two, and impressed his father with the progress of technology during those years.

But Sándor really came into his own when he joined the Austro-Hungarian army during World War One. He rapidly became a commissioned officer, something equivalent to a first lieutenant, and was active in the artillery on the Italian front in the Dolomites. This was trench warfare, as it was on the Western front. They had a small dog, a Boston Bull Terrier, who was used as the “canary in the mine” and sent in to check for poison gas. The little hero fortunately

survived the war and died at a ripe old age. On another occasion Sándor found himself in Poland with his platoon. They wanted to go home to Bratislava, since the war was nearly over. To manage this, they commandeered a Polish locomotive and, with the help of one of the soldiers who knew something about it, drove the thing all the way home.

Ján's parents met for the first time after World War One. His mother, Kornelia, was born in Budapest, in the same Austro-Hungarian Empire, twelve years later than Sándor, in 1906. Kornelia (everyone called her "Nelly") was a very pretty, single child and became a gorgeous teenager. In 1918, because Jews were associated with an unsuccessful Communist government in the

newly created post-war Hungary, Nelly's father, Leo Grossman, had the entire family baptized in order to avoid persecution. At about the same time, Leo's businesses in Hungary failed, and he, his wife Therese, and his daughter, Nelly, moved to Bratislava where business prospects were considered better for him. Nelly was about thirteen at the time, and soon began breaking hearts in her new hometown.

The two met when he was twenty-eight and she was sixteen, and Sándor was immediately smitten. Photographs of Nelly from the time, of her "coming out" ball, clearly show why he would have been. And so, there ensued a wild and whirlwind romance with Sándor, who was a very good looking and dashing man, utilizing every little bit of his innate and

acquired charm. They rode and jumped together, and carried out a courtship appropriate for those years.

But it was not to be. Perhaps the twelve year age difference, to a young girl, seemed insurmountable. Perhaps Nelly simply was not ready. In any case, Nelly repeatedly refused Sándor's marriage proposals. He, crushed but melodramatic to the end, commissioned an expensively prepared and extravagantly bound volume of Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment" and had it presented to her as a parting gesture.

CHAPTER THREE

Not much is known about the years between this dramatic parting and the eventual marriage of Nelly and Sándor. Actually, there is more documented about Nelly's life than about Sándor's. It may be that Nelly saw her father's business failures as a role model, as she became attracted to her first cousin, Imre, and a short while later married him. Like Leo, however, Imre tried many things, none of them terribly lucrative or successful. He would begin venture after venture, only to find them failing.

As a consequence of these failures, however, Nelly traveled a good deal throughout Europe, as she accompanied Imre in his quest for fortune.

But this marriage was not to last. It is not known who took the initiative, but after only a few short years Nelly found herself on her own, in her early twenties, in Western Europe. She did manage to support herself through several manual skills (sewing), and she did some modeling as well. There was a period when she lived in England, and then she returned to Germany. This turned out to be of significance in her life, and in the lives of her future family, because she witnessed the beginnings of the rise to power of the Nazi party.

History shows that chaos ensued in Germany after the defeat by the Allies in 1918. The Weimar Republic was a failure, the standard of living kept falling, hyper-inflation was

taking place. Some of this was due to the harsh surrender terms imposed by the Allies, but.....In this kind of atmosphere a population wants change, and is ready to latch onto anything or anyone promising an improvement in status. Several political movements, including the Communists, tried to become established in the early twenties. The Nazi party failed at its first attempts, and many of its leaders were jailed, including the young upstart, Adolf Hitler. In the mid twenties, while in jail, Hitler wrote "*Mein Kampf*" ("My Struggle"), his political philosophy. This book has been shown to indeed being his "roadmap" in following years. (But, although there were two editions published, neither edition was taken sufficiently seriously at the beginning). When

the Nazi leaders were released from prison toward the end of the decade, public opinion began to rally behind them, and, partly legally, and partly through subterfuge, they gained power in 1932.

Nelly was in Germany at the time, and although full persecution of the Jews was still some distance in the future, there was already sufficient propaganda and public opinion against the Jews to allow the probable course of coming events to be foretold.

Like any dictator on his way to power, Hitler needed a scapegoat, and his earlier writings clearly indicated that he blamed “international Jewry” for much of Germany’s ills. And so Nelly returned to what had

become, after World War One, Czechoslovakia, and took it upon herself to become an “alarmist” and to present what she had seen and what she believed the future would bring. And, very importantly, she renewed her relationship with Sándor, this time successfully. They took spectacular trips together, skiing, to Spain, to Italy.....They were married on Sándor’s thirty-ninth birthday, September 29, 1933.

CHAPTER FOUR

The family was outraged. A divorcee, fresh from Germany, a scandal.....And they were not even informed at that time that Nelly had actually been baptized as a child. But, Sándor

took Nelly to the beautiful Victorian house. It was an aristocratic home, befitting someone of their upper middle class standing. There was a maid, and Nelly did not work. Under such circumstances it was not very long before Ján was conceived, and born at the nearby maternity clinic. Further help was engaged; Nelly did not have milk, or chose not to provide it. Hence, a so called “wet nurse” was hired, a farm woman from the north who had recently given birth and who had milk to spare.

During his initial years Ján was raised according to Jewish law, with all of the religious ceremonies that befall on a young Jewish male. No recollections at all remain of this period.

“The Sergeant”, a nanny, became another member of the household. Sándor took Nelly’s warning comments seriously, and therefore they considered it useful to introduce a German into the household; as a matter of fact, “the Sergeant” was a card-carrying Nazi. Her name is lost to history, but she took her job very seriously and defended Ján like a tigress. No one was allowed to touch the child, and kissing or other forms of potential bacterial exposure were most strenuously forbidden. “*Nicht ins Gesicht*” (Not in the face) Ján was taught to say. The woman, of course, knew that she was employed by a Jewish family, even though Nelly had been baptized decades earlier. Her association to Nazism was similar to that of

many Germans; they simply believed that the party could improve their lot, and they believed this without being necessarily anti-Semitic. “The Sergeant’s” job was to be with Ján during the entire day; he was turned over to his parents only in the evening.

Sándor was determined to make Ján into an animal lover, and brought home all sorts of domestic animals that he was able to acquire at the local markets. Nelly put her foot down when, one day, there appeared in the large living room a pair of storks, their wings tied down, each standing on one leg, looking confused. Sándor, however, continued this practice, and after the family later moved brought home rabbits, crayfish, and other

things. Some of these became pets, some became dinner.

As time progressed, toward Ján's third or fourth year, Ján's parents began to take several measures to establish distance between the child and Sándor's extended Jewish family. (This was by far the larger family unit, compared to Nelly's, in Bratislava at the time). Partly because Karoline, from a large family and having six children of her own, did not much appreciate visits from small children, but primarily in order to distance Ján from Jewish influence, there was dramatically little contact between Ján, "The Sergeant", and the rest of his father's family. The family at this point included two brothers, one (Dezső) with two

sons, the other (Géza) still childless, and three sisters, each with two daughters.

And there was more. The family applied for immigration permission and entry to the United States. This was not an easy thing in the mid-thirties. Firstly, everyone who could was fleeing. Secondly, the United States had a strict quota system in place, based on existing population figures within the country, that severely limited the number of immigrants allowed from Central and Eastern European nations. And thirdly, one needed a sponsor on the other side to provide a so-called affidavit, guaranteeing that the new immigrant would not become a financial burden to the administrations. Only the third of these presented no problem to Ján's family,

as Sándor actually had relatives in the New York area, members of his very large extended family, who were willing to provide such documentation. (One of the many siblings, fourteen having reached adulthood, Karoline's sister Paula, had gone to the United States much earlier and established the "American branch".)

Amazingly, after several intense trips to Prague, permission was obtained. But, as Nelly and Sándor began to make preparations to leave, Nelly contracted pneumonia, at that time a potentially fatal disease. "It was on a trip back from Prague, as I left the train on an icy night, that I contracted the disease", Nelly used to say. The direct outcome of this turn of events was that Nelly became bedridden for

two years, and that the family moved from the Victorian house and settled in with Nelly's parents. Nelly needed constant care, and the nurturing environment of the grandparents' home was thought to be better able to provide this. And, of course, plans to emigrate were cancelled, or, at the least, postponed.

Ján's maternal grandparents lived on the top floor of a three story villa, in the same neighborhood. This was a magnificent house, designed and constructed by a relative on Nelly's side, in a very modern "Bauhaus" style, much ahead of its time. It was surrounded by gardens, flanked by huge walnut trees, and featured terraces and a very large flat roof area that was particularly

suitable for a growing young boy. And it had a living room encircled with windows and plants which rivaled the one in the Victorian house they had just left. Nelly struggled to stay alive, and was on several occasions given up for dead. After two years a homeopath was consulted and her condition improved, although no one knows whether this was a coincidence or due to the skill of the homeopath.

By this time “The Sergeant” was gone; she had received orders that she could no longer be employed by Jews. She was replaced by a young Slovak girl, who is best remembered for riding on a snow sled with Ján and, wanting to make a right turn, putting down her left foot. This incident, which resulted in

a collision with an iron fence, put a permanent scar over Ján's left eye. Now Ján's grandmother, Therese, became his primary caretaker.

CHAPTER FIVE

In 1938 Sándor took a dramatic step: he had himself and Ján baptized. A friend, a minister in the local Hungarian Reformed Church, performed the ceremony. One can only imagine the stress this decision caused Sándor, given his upbringing, background and family. His co-religionists spat at him in the street, called him names, and severely ostracized him. It must have been a matter of great personal sacrifice, and caused untold

humiliation. However, not very long thereafter, the other brothers followed suit. Karoline would have none of it; on subsequent Jewish holidays she threw them out of the house and would not let the “*the goyim*” participate in the ceremonies.

By 1938 the Nazis had “come out of the closet” in Germany; their intentions were clearly known. Even before “*Kristallnacht*”, (the night of broken glass) when German Jews were attacked and their businesses ransacked, the party had, since 1936 or earlier, passed a series of racial laws discriminating against the Jewish population. Jews were not allowed into certain professions, intermarriage was strictly forbidden, certain areas were closed to them,

and on and on. These laws started the German Jewish exodus of the late thirties from the country. For the rest of the world, they showed the pattern that was to be followed by the Nazis in the years to come. (Nelly's predictions were beginning to come true.....)

An "onion" was created, and the skins of the onion represented just "how Jewish" anyone was, and what level of persecution could be expected. For example, if a person had four Jewish grandparents, no Gentile spouse, no last minute baptism, and Jewish religious practices, one was at the outer layer of the onion, and most susceptible. A Gentile spouse, a Gentile grandparent, or a baptism (very much depending on when it had taken place, of course) enabled a person to get

further into the onion's skin layers, away from the outer skins, and "burrow away" from immediate Nazi attention, be more sheltered. And thus European Jewry, at least those who had no means or wish to leave, and those who were willing to sacrifice principle for survival, were busy finding ways of getting deeper into the onion. For being on the outside skins of the onion would lead to discrimination, deportation, and eventually even worse.....

In 1938 the Germans were given and occupied Czechoslovakia, and divided it into the "Protectorate" which consisted of the two Western provinces of the country (Bohemia and Moravia, today's Czech Republic), and Slovakia. Slovakia, in turn, became a puppet

regime, subservient to the Germans, and governed by a Catholic priest named Dr. Jozef Tiso.

Ján began school in September of 1940, directly entering first grade, without nursery or kindergarten. Having spoken only German for the first several years of his life, as a result of living with the nanny, he had somewhere along the way begun to pick up Slovak. (At this point Nelly and Sándor began to speak Hungarian, to stay one step ahead. But it was not long before Ján had also mastered that language.) The school was a large, modernistic red brick building, no more than a five minute walk distant. In first and second grade his homeroom teacher was a woman named Nóra Palášthyová, whose

family plays a major role in this narrative. He was a good student, and a well behaved child. And he was also a little “apple polisher”, running to the teacher’s podium in the middle of class with little penned notes: “*Pani učiteľka, Vy ste moje slniečko*” (Teacher, you are my sunshine). What an unusual thing for a six year old child to do.....

Just as the Germans had the Hitler Youth, the Slovaks had the Hlinková Mládež. (Hlinka was a major Slovak national hero.) Everyone joined the Hlinková Mládež, even baptized small Jewish boys. With colorful neckerchiefs, the troops marched around and acted like little soldiers.

And, there is the story of the “bully”. There was a large boy who waited for Ján, lurking behind a wall, as he had to turn the corner between his grandparents’ house and the school. Ján knew this, but nevertheless frequently fell into the trap, and would then be chased home back up the hill crying and, on occasion, soiling himself with fear. We do not know whether this was a “Jewish” issue; Slovaks were virulent anti-Semites, and so nothing is impossible. But perhaps this was just a nasty kid.....

CHAPTER SIX

Like a good puppet state, the new Slovakia, or Slovak Republic, also began to pass

legislation discriminating against its Jewish population. Ján continued to go to school, for a time untouched by any of this. He continued to do well, he got excellent grades, and he caused no problems either at home or at school. In the center of town, however, the very successful grocery business, now operated by Sándor, Géza, and Dezső, became a target for “aryanization”. This was a simple process: Jews were not allowed to own businesses. These were expropriated with no compensation and given to a Gentile to own or manage. How this particular Gentile was selected is of no importance; it was probably a matter of bribery or personal connection. In this case a certain Mr. Lapin drew the lucky straw.

Sándor and Ján's uncles were without work, and therefore without a source of income. Being of no practical use, and having no visible livelihood, was not a good thing in the eyes of those who decided the fate of the Jews in Bratislava. Much of the Nazi philosophy was based on the concept of "useless eaters". Sándor had a stroke of good fortune and became the manager of a "soup kitchen" catering to the needs of Bratislava's overcrowded families who had trouble providing the proper cooking and eating facilities for themselves. It was called the "*Mittelstandsküche*" (middle class kitchen). Although at first glance this might not appear like much of a position, happening as it did to a member of the city's upper middle class, it turned out to be a blessing. Do you

remember the “onion”? Well, this position carried with it the stamp of government approval, even more so, the stamp of governmental need. Sándor was issued a certificate stating that his work was of vital importance to the welfare of the Slovak state, and he and the family snuck deeper into the onion.

Much of the family ate there. The food was good and inexpensive. The actual location was in the shadow of the ancient Bratislava castle, in a tiny side street, in the center of the old town. But more difficulties were to follow.

In keeping with Nazi policies in other lands, in 1942 Jewish families were asked to move

and to concentrate in a sort of ghetto at the southern edge of town. The location was not objectionable, and the situation was not terribly strictly enforced. The neighborhood was under the castle hill, along the Danube shoreline, a not unattractive place. The family relocated to a large building, with a sizeable center courtyard and exposed walkways on every floor, facing the inside courtyard, and running alongside the apartments (an architectural style very much in favor in the Central Europe of the late 19th and early 20th century). One entered the apartments from these walkways along the courtyard.

The Slovaks chose not to make this a walled ghetto, in the same sense that made so many Polish ghettos famous. Rather, it was simply a part of town where the Jews were

concentrated. As already mentioned, Nazi techniques at this point were already well known: concentrate them in one location, and then round them up at will, usually in the early hours of the morning.

The first deportations (they were called “transports”) from Slovakia took place in 1942. (Ján knew nothing about these events.) Approximately 20,000 Jews were taken in that year, many from outlying areas of the country, others from a number of Bratislava Jews who had been dispossessed from the city and forced to live in the country, preliminary to deportation. This deportation was a collaborative arrangement between the German Nazis and the Slovaks. The Germans had already, during the previous year,

requested 20,000 Jews for labor. The Slovaks were only too willing to collaborate.

A rather amazing story emerges at this point, concerning these 20,000 potential deportees. The Slovaks, ready to play along with the Germans in every possible way, had an amazing concern: “What shall we do with the families of those 20,000 (presumably men) who were to be transported away? The women and children left behind would become destitute, remaining without the breadwinners of the family.” And so they hatched an interesting scheme: the Slovaks would actually pay the Nazis for each deported Jew, man, woman and child, the entire family. And they did, thus, actually fund some of the first transports of Jews from

Slovakia, avoiding the issue of having to support the women and children....

Ján continued to be ignorant of all these events. Sándor and Nelly were the ultimate sheltering parents. Not only had he been prevented from associating with his extended family (they were too Jewish), but now that real persecution of the Jewish population was beginning, he was ever more ignorant of the facts around him. And, really, what was there to know? People were not being marched down the street in the wee hours carrying a single valise, as they would be later. There was nothing obvious going on, nothing to make an impression on a little boy of eight, who did not even mind living in a new location. As a matter of fact, since Nelly's

parents had been moved together with the family, and all now lived in a few rooms in the large building in the “ghetto”, Ján enjoyed the proximity of his grandparents, the wisdom of his step-grandfather (Kornel Pollák), the cooking of his grandmother, and the many Jewish (and Gentile) kids with whom he could play. (Nelly’s real father, Leo, had mysteriously died in the 1920s. He is said to have come home one day, complaining of illness, and then dying on the spot. The briefcase he was carrying revealed numerous medications, but no one knew or understood, and no investigation was ever carried out.)

CHAPTER SEVEN

There now followed a hiatus of nearly two years during which not much happened to affect the lives of Ján and his parents. Sándor and Nelly presumably feared for their lives, but none of this was communicated to the child. Second grade passed, third grade passed. Ján now had a longer walk to school but still enjoyed the freedom of a normal child. Most interestingly, the Slovak authorities did not discriminate against baptized children at this stage. The 1938 baptism held firm, and gave the right to continue to live a nearly normal life. The Germans were busy elsewhere, the war in the East had turned dramatically against them. Even the wearing of the yellow Jewish star was a function of one's standing in the "onion". Ján, Sándor, and Nelly were not

obliged to wear a star. Nelly's parents, Ján's grandparents, because of a lack of baptism, were indeed required to do so, even though Nelly's stepfather was permitted to continue practicing law for a little while. (Since Therese had been baptized in Hungary with her first husband, the reasons for this are not totally clear. Probably, it was because she had re-married to a Jew.)

In 1944 the Allies began to target Bratislava for air raids. As is now well known, the American Air Force attacked during the day, and the British Air Force raided at night. However, the range of the British bombers was shorter than that of the B17s and B24s, and so the population of Slovakia was never exposed to the British. The Americans,

however, were motivated, precise, and successful. (There is a continuing debate on why these aircraft were not used to bomb the concentration camps. Two answers are commonly given: the Allied command said that they could not spare the aircraft, and bombing precision was not such that only the crematoria could have been wiped out without killing many, many inmates.)

The bombers invariably came up from the south, from Italy, a shorter trip, and the radio announced their progress through Hungary as they were making their way north:

“Légiveszélj Sopron-Győr” (Air raid danger Sopron-Győr). These were cities south of Bratislava, in Hungary. No one ever knew where they would strike, but air raid alarms

were nearly daily occurrences, usually around midday. The family developed a routine: Nelly, the fatalist, did nothing, and Sándor would grab Ján and hustle him off to an unfinished tunnel under the hill dominated by the Bratislava castle. (This must either have been in the summer, or Ján was no longer attending school.)

This tunnel, under construction, and intended to link the upper town with the lower town, was a Slovak project which went on for years. (It was completed after the war and became a tunnel for trams.) During these times it was a perfect place to hide, and at every air raid alarm hundreds of citizens rushed to the tunnel's openings and crammed themselves inside. On one particular occasion, in 1944,

the usual alarm turned into the real thing. No sooner did Sándor succeed in getting Ján into the tunnel, pressing him against the unfinished wall, with Sándor sustaining an injury which would later become severely infected, than the bombing began.

It was strange. The sound was that of many low flying planes, which, of course, could not have been the case as the American Air force was known for their high altitude bombing runs. “Carpet bombing”, it was called. And so the sound must have been that of the bombs falling, but it was a roar, not a whistle. Soon they saw a huge plume of black smoke, as they were not very deep in the tunnel. It looked every bit as though the old town itself, quite close, was burning.

“*Michalská Brána horí*”, cried Ján.

(“Michael’s Gate is burning.”) This was one of the medieval entrances into the old town. But, of course, such was not the case. The Americans had bombed with great precision, and except for one or two stray bombs, had obliterated the only oil refinery in town, but a major one, the “*Apolka*”. It burned for days and days, an acrid, heavy, oily fire, until nothing remained of it.

Ján and his friends scouted the city after the air raid, and went to look at the damage done by the few stray misses. It was the first time they had seen bomb damage and destroyed homes, actually quite near the ghetto. Several minor air raids followed this one, and there

was panic among the population, but the city contained no more strategic targets, and soon someone in London must have decided to leave Bratislava alone, and that more suitable targets were available elsewhere.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After the transports of 1942, the Slovaks were relatively inactive in their treatment of Jewish issues, except insofar as expropriations, forced translocations, and various racial laws were concerned. The government was weak and depended entirely on the goodwill of their German masters. And this situation naturally resulted in skepticism and unrest. The unrest boiled over in Slovakia in the

summer of 1944, when anti-government partisans and guerilla fighters, primarily in the central parts of the country, staged an uprising. There had been various degrees of unrest since the establishment of the Tiso regime, but now things came to a head and full warfare was taking place. Presumably these partisans were being armed somehow by the Soviets..... It turned out that the Slovak military began to lose ground, and the partisans were making significant progress. Clearly, the Germans next door in the “Protectorate” could not stand for this. The result was a full march and occupation of Slovakia. Unlike previously, when only a token force of Germans was assigned to the country, they now came into Slovakia in full force, the Wehrmacht, the Gestapo, etc. A

country which had previously served as a puppet regime and a buffer state was now a fully occupied German territory.

The results on the Jewish citizenry were almost immediate. The onion became a vegetable with only one skin; there were no more layers, no more protection, no more excuses. And, of course, there was no escape, no means of leaving. There may have been a handful of enterprising young people who at great risk managed to reach Italy, Switzerland, or other places having less persecution. But for the vast majority there was only one remaining alternative: to hide.

CHAPTER NINE

Sándor and Nelly were well aware of the needs of the situation; typically, Ján had no idea. He knew simply that in the autumn of 1944 he could no longer go back to school, which was to have been fifth grade. Ján's extended family was divided on the issue of hiding. Dezső and his family first sought refuge in Central Slovakia. Jožo, his younger son, became a "*Bat'a boy*". (Bat'a was a major shoe store chain and provided training for young people; Jožo lived there as a Gentile trainee.)

Géza had in the 1930s married a Gentile woman, then divorced her to protect her. They remarried later, however, which helped Géza.

Grandmother Karoline was with one of her daughters, Mariška, also in Central Slovakia. When Mariška went into hiding, Karoline was accepted in a hospital where a relative worked as a physician, and hidden as a patient.

Of Sándor's two other sisters, one, Rózsi, had a "*výnimka*" (exception) as a result of her husband's position. They were later caught nonetheless. (The onion was no longer effective!) The other sister, Olga, and her family, first enjoyed a privileged position due to her husband's position on the Jewish Council (see later), but were fooled into believing all was well and were also apprehended. (That onion again.....). The

reader will recall that both women had two daughters, Rózsi's Anni and Liese, Olga's Eva and Agi.

Ján and his family searched among Sándor's acquaintances; he was popular and a well known figure in town and had many friends. But hiding a Jewish family was a matter of considerable risk, and, under such circumstances, friends are quick to turn their backs on you. Nazi law clearly stated that hiding a Jew was a capital offense.

And now the story returns to Nóra Palášthy and her husband, Karel. Partly as a consequence of the shameless "love notes" Ján had frequently dropped on Nóra's desk during class when he was in first and second grade, the Palášthy family had formed a close

relationship with Ján's parents. This relationship exceeded what might be termed a normal "parent-teacher" situation; rather, they truly became personal and social friends. And added to this was the personality of Karel.

Once in a while one meets a person who functions with his heart rather than with only his brain. Such a person will do remarkable things, and Karel was such a person. He felt that the persecution of the Jewish population was simply wrong, he thought that the government was immoral, and he felt that he must help the "underdog" against the overwhelming force of the Third Reich. He would take the side of the oppressed. And so it happened that Karel and Nóra Palášthy offered their home as a refuge to Ján and his

family. Not even the fact that they had a three year old daughter, Evička, lessened their resolve to take this risk. (As stated, families harboring Jews were treated in just about the same way as the Jews who were apprehended there....)

Once again, Nazi tactics were well known: roundups generally occurred during the early hours of the morning, when people were at home in their beds. It was always more difficult to attempt to apprehend a scattered population. Therefore, although there was some risk in remaining visible during the day, the greatest risk was at night, and it was during this time that going into hiding became necessary. Thus, beginning in early September, every late afternoon Ján and his

parents made a short trek from the ghetto to the apartment of the Palášthy family, in a non-Jewish section of the city, actually a minute or two from where they had lived before. There they spent the night, returning to the ghetto in the early morning hours. Life was no longer normal at this time; there was no school for Ján and no work for his parents.

While at the Palášthy apartment, a drill was developed which was to be put into place in the event of the anticipated knock on the door. For Ján, there was a large suitcase placed on top of a cupboard in one of the rooms. Using Karel's joined hands as a step, Ján was to swiftly climb to the top of this cupboard and hide in the suitcase. For Sándor, the hiding place was to be a broad

and sturdy window box outside the living room window. With the curtains drawn he would be invisible from within, and because of the size of the window box he could also not be seen from the courtyard below. (This building was not built in the style earlier described, with apartment entrances from the courtyard. Apartments were accessed from inside staircases. But, the facility consisted of several adjoining buildings, with large courtyards joining them.) And Nelly was to remain in the open and be introduced as a visiting relative, with forged papers, of course. By fortune, no one in the family looked Jewish, and therefore this ruse was expected to work. As in every fire drill, the tactics were practiced over and over again, in order to achieve effectiveness and speed.

The Germans had established in Bratislava, as they did in all major population centers, a Jewish Council . The mission of this council was to act as the interface between the Nazis and the Jewish population, and it generally consisted of senior members of the Jewish community. It was, for example, the task of such a Jewish Council to supply the Germans with any manpower (deportees) that they required. In the end, members of the Jewish Council (sometimes called *Judenrat* in worse places than Bratislava where they freely worked with the Nazis) were just as susceptible to deportations as were the Jews singled out for earlier transports.

On the day of September 28, Ján recalls clearly, a smallish man with a mustache, a member of the Jewish Council, appeared at the building in the ghetto and announced to all that a discussion with the Germans had elicited from them the promise that there would be no “actions” (as they were called) that evening, as they, the Germans, would respect the Yom Kippur holiday.

This news, of course, gave rise to a great debate about whether or not to believe the German promise. Ján recalls an argument between his mother and father, and grandparents, with Sándor prevailing, and the decision to ignore the news and to hide being made. By bad luck the hiding place already selected for the grandparents was not yet fully

finalized and available, and so there was no question but that they would stay where they were. They were to begin going into hiding in just a day or two. And so the routine was repeated that day, up to the Palášthys in the evening.....

CHAPTER TEN

During the small hours of September 29 what the Slovaks came to call the “*velká chytačka*” (the big catching) took place. As already briefly described, the Palášthy’s apartment was in a block of flats facing several courtyards, with several staircases, each leading to a number of apartments on each floor. The hidiers and the hidden were woken

by loud noises and shout from below, in the courtyards. It was easy to interpret what was going on. There were numerous Slovak soldiers, Hlinka Guards, with a handful of SS supervising. They attacked the block of buildings in military fashion, methodically ascending every staircase. And they were indeed having some success in finding hidden people. Ján, Sándor, and Nelly had all assumed their respective positions and roles. Karel stood at the door, and listened as the Slovak soldiers were making their way up all the staircases and knocking on all the doors.

The Palášthys lived on the top floor of one of these buildings. On the floor below Karel heard two Slovak soldiers discussing whether or not they should proceed. “*Pod’me domov,*

už tu neni Židov” (Lets go home, there are no more Jews here), said one to the other. And the Palášthys’ apartment was never searched! Only two apartments in the entire group of buildings! It is doubtful whether the hiding places would have been effective, Ján always thought. The sizeable suitcase on top of the cupboard would surely have attracted a searcher’s attention.....

Of course, later that morning the family was no longer able to leave the apartment. Karel was dispatched down to investigate what had taken place at the normal ghetto residence. And, as expected, that entire building had been totally cleared of its occupants, save for the Gentile janitor, who was able to report to

Karel the events of the previous night. All the Jews had been marched onto the balconies/walkways, allowed to take with them some minor possessions, assembled in the courtyard, and after a while marched off.

Many thousands of Jews (over 10,000) were apprehended in town, all those who were not in hiding that evening (as well as a few others through some additional, smaller “actions” during the following days). The fate of those caught that night is well known. They were rounded up and assembled later in the day and taken to a camp near a town called Sered, on the outskirts of Bratislava. There they were kept for several days in a sort of marshalling yard, (the Nazis did not want to waste a transport unless everyone was

apprehended) and then shipped by train directly to Auschwitz. The transport arrived there on October 5, the usual “selection” took place at the arrival of the train, and Ján’s grandparents, together with all those considered unfit for labor, were murdered immediately. (This information was substantiated by returning survivors after the war.)

The “selection” is now much better understood. It is now well known and documented that prisoners were hurried out of the box cars of an arriving transport, partly by Jewish prisoners, but under the guard of the SS and dogs. Their possessions were taken, and they were lined up in groups of five, men and women (with children) separately. (Note

here the cleverness of the Nazis: it is easier to count by fives than by threes or fours!) As the lines advanced, an SS officer, maybe Dr. Mengele, asked the person's age, and perhaps one or two other questions, in German, which many new arrivals did not fully understand. He then made an instantaneous decision about whether the particular person should be retained for work as long as he was able, or gassed and burned immediately. The prisoners unloading the train would sometimes whisper to the newcomers: "Tell them you are sixteen", or "*Mach dich gross*" (Make yourself look bigger).

The Braun family was now confined to staying with the Palášthy family. The risk to Karel and Nóra increased exponentially. Ján

and his parents were all too well known to venture forth in public. As in the famous Anne Frank diaries, they had to be quiet during the day, as there was supposed to be nobody in the apartment. The little girl presumably went to kindergarten, and the adults were at their jobs. The ever resourceful Karel managed, through black market or other means, to feed six people rather than the three he officially had living there. At one point Ján was given a pet pigeon, only to have a strange chicken dinner some days later. The pigeon was said to have flown away.....

Recognizing the unreliability of the suitcase on top of the cupboard, and the risk of being discovered, an alternative nighttime routine

was developed by Karel. People in those days frequently heated their apartments with coal, and every tenant had a section in the cellar of the building where his private coal supply was stored. Karel, in their coal pile, created a sort of nest with blankets and pillows, and every evening Sándor and Nelly, equipped with food and water, trudged down to their nest in the coal to spend the night. It was now Ján who was to be introduced as the visiting relative, in the event of a further search, with forged papers.

It is difficult to imagine how the days passed. What does a nine year old boy do all day, when he is instructed that he must be quiet and tiptoe around? What do his parents do to keep him occupied? Ján remembers hardly

anything of the days that followed, and what he did during this time. Perhaps there were books, board games, cards.....Fortunately, there were no additional “knocks on the door”, and so the time passed uneventfully.....

There was an evening activity, however. Forged papers were required for then and for the future, for any variety of circumstances. Karel and Sándor invented the “potato document”. Karel was, as ever, clever at obtaining anything, and he was able to bring home blank forms for any required document, such as ID cards, birth certificates, report cards, etc. These blank documents were then filled out with whatever information was desirable; the problem was the famous rubber

stamp needed to finalize the document and make it official. A potato was cut in half, across its long axis, and the skin at the cut was peeled back for cleanness. The resulting clean surface of the inside of the potato was then applied to a real stamp on a real document. The wet potato face would lift off just enough ink from the genuine stamp so that it could be transferred and applied to the forged document being created. The imprint on the false document was, of course, much fainter than that on the original. But, to an unsuspecting eye, the document would pass as genuine. Many such documents were created, as it was expected that the family would require different ones, and with different names, for different occasions.....

Sándor incorporated the letters “bra” into each of the false names, perhaps to more easily remember them. In retrospect, this seems to have been careless, perhaps allowing for easier tracing.....(Dubravický, Bratkovič, Abranič.....)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

And so the quiet, secretive, and unreal life continued for about four months, well into the winter. And then, a bad piece of misfortune.....The authorities apprehended a woman who was for some reason aware of the family’s hiding place. Karel, always with his ears to the ground, was informed of this. A prisoner could easily be made to confess

anything and inform on anybody. Clearly, it became unsafe to remain with the Palášthys, and immediate plans were made to move. But where? As already mentioned, Sándor had been a very popular man in the community and had many friends. And so every evening after dusk Karel guided Ján and his parents from hiding place to hiding place. There they would stay for a night, or two at the most. Karel had a flashlight which could, by placing a plastic piece over the light itself, shine a red or green beam. And he used this light, walking in front and shining the light behind him, to indicate whether it was safe for the family to proceed, or whether they needed to disappear, hide in a doorway, or in a side street.

The logistic preparations for these moves were very difficult and stressful. Overnight bags, sleeping accommodations, times and places, all for a family of three, were needed. “The Wandering Jews....”. The obvious, but difficult, solution soon reached was to separate, and, if possible, to leave Bratislava and hide in the country. (By now all remaining members of the extended family who had not been apprehended, were hidden, for the most part not in Bratislava.) Nelly was the first to leave, to a tuberculosis sanatorium in North/Eastern Slovakia, in the Tatra Mountains. This was accomplished through various connections of which Ján was once again not aware. Nelly, armed with a set of forged papers, took a train and stayed in the sanatorium for the duration of the war. (It is

indeed amazing that she did not contract tuberculosis herself while there, particularly since her lungs were weakened from her bout with pneumonia.)

Dezső, Sándor's older brother, was also hiding in the same facility. And on several occasions the nuns in this Catholic sanatorium whispered to Nelly: "Do not associate with that man, we do suspect that he is Jewish". And so Nelly and Dezső did not know each other. But no one turned him in, and he, like Nelly, survived there. But Dezső eventually left and spent some time with his wife, Renée, and older son, Tommy, hiding in a cave in Central Slovakia. (The stories of Ján's surviving relatives are many and different. Some hid in hospitals, in homes, in

the woods and forests, some were in contact, others were not.)

Ján was taken to a Gentile family for “safekeeping”. He remembers this period as being the most trying one of the entire experience, and for years had fearful thoughts about the time spent there. He knew that this second family was being paid to hide him, and this obviously entailed a greater risk than being hidden with a family doing the hiding based on moral principles. If, for example, a price had been placed on a Jewish head which exceeded whatever this family was being paid, Ján would have been turned in on the spot. They were simply hired to perform a service, and a dangerous one at that. Also, Ján

was alone, and unaware of his parents' whereabouts or of any long-term plans.

For a short while Sándor stayed behind in Bratislava, and by the same signaling method, using the red and green flashlight, was occasionally escorted by Karel to visit Ján. But these visits were brief, as Sándor needed to get back to wherever he was hiding that night, and Ján was once again left with this certainly not very caring family. Sándor left Bratislava very shortly thereafter, and went to hide, in North/Western Slovakia, with the family of the wet nurse who had served in the family when Ján was an infant. He stayed there till the liberation by the Red Army.

For the occasion, especially for the train trip, he was disguised as a peasant, grew a huge, bushy mustache, and wore the appropriate clothing. He was fairly certain that he was recognized in the train station, but mercifully no one said anything.

They were also foolishly careless, this second family, and took Ján for walks during daylight hours. On one such occasion Ján was recognized by a young boy with whom he used to play. “And what, they have not caught you yet?” exclaimed the boy in a loud voice. Very fortunately no one, or no one that mattered, heard, and Ján was whisked away to safety. Those were scary days and frightening nights, times when Ján felt very

alone and abandoned. He was there at least a month, perhaps closer to two.

The Red Army was advancing, and the population feared hand-to-hand fighting in the streets of Bratislava. This was, after all, the capital of Slovakia. All those who could tried to seek places to go to in the countryside, which was considered safer.

Karel and Nóra came to get Ján in March of 1945, and prepared to go to stay with a cousin of Nóra's in South-Central Slovakia. The family was called Dubravický, but Ján had been using forged documentation with that name. As he could not there masquerade as a Dubravický relative, different forged papers were required. This was quickly arranged,

and Ján, now Bratkovič, went back to the Palášthys for a brief few days.

Ján has a clear recollection of a very early spring morning, trudging from the Palášthys' apartment to the railroad station, with a small rucksack with personal possessions on his back. Here was a little ten year old "Gentile" boy, by now somewhat more reassured as he was with friends, going off to new adventures in the country. The train was crowded with people fleeing the city, but it was not a very long trip. (As it turned out there was no hand-to hand fighting in Bratislava; the Germans could not run fast enough at that point of their retreat.)

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ján and the Palášthys arrived in Topolčany in the afternoon, and were transported to the very rural village of Nadlice, where they were provided accommodations with Nóra's cousins. There was no difficulty in Ján adapting to his new role, that of a friend from the city, there to escape the anticipated horrors of the war. As a matter of fact, perhaps Nóra introduced him as one of her pupils. There was no school that Ján recollects, only play. And, there were German soldiers all about, but that seemed to be of no concern. They were the army, Wehrmacht, not the SS.

The host family dug a sizeable hole in the ground in the garden, a "bunker", and covered it with timbers and earth. There were

benches along both sides in this hole, and the space was capable of accommodating about a dozen people. It was the intention to use this hole during the passage of the front overhead.

There are two incidents that Ján remembers clearly from this period. The first of these was sawing wood and cutting himself, which led to a permanently visible scar on his left hand. The second incident consisted of assisting, or rather standing by, a pig slaughter. This was a most frightful experience. Pigs were hung by their hind feet, their throats were slashed, and they were allowed to bleed out. The resultant blood was used for preparing sausages and various food products, and it was also considered to be a

“neater” way of butchering. But the sight of this process was never to be forgotten.

One evening a Wehrmacht soldier came by and told everyone to be sure to hide in the little “bunker”, as they were retreating and planned to blow up everything, in particular a strategically located bridge nearby, at a crossroads. And so they did. After this retreat, the night was eerily quiet. Ján went out, and one could hear only the distant sound of artillery bombardment. The stars were shining, it was beautifully serene....

The next morning the Germans were totally gone, and there was no one around. One day later the Rumanian army arrived, on foot and with horse drawn wagons. The Rumanians

had switched sides during the war, beginning with the Axis and changing to the Allies. The Red Army had no great love for them and used them as front line troops. The Red Army, in turn, then passed in the following days, heavily mechanized, perhaps at least partly with American equipment supplied through the North Sea deliveries earlier in the war.

And at this point, which appears to be just a small punctuation mark, but which was really a major event, Ján's life was no longer in danger.

But, Ján was still without his parents. The Palášthys had surely made arrangements for where everyone would meet after the war,

assuming all survived. Ján took to playing with other kids in the trenches left behind by the Germans, and in the river in the detritus of the blown up bridge, collecting spent dynamite. He did not know why, but he felt drawn to being near this area. He spent much of his days sitting and playing at the crossroads where this bridge had stood. And then, one day, Ján saw a figure coming down the road, sort of shimmering in the distance, and approaching steadily. It turned out to be Nelly, who had made her way from the Tatras on foot, and by hitching on Soviet trucks, the only means of transport available, and somewhat dangerous for women. She had been, because of her easternmost position, the first to be liberated. Imagine the joy of the reunion.....

A very short while thereafter Sándor arrived, liberated somewhat later, the very same way, on the very same road. He soon left to return to Bratislava and to try to recover the house (the pre-ghetto house where the family had lived with Nelly's parents). It was largely vacant, but in a terrible state. After the family had moved to the ghetto, the Germans, probably the Gestapo, had occupied the house. They built a very substantial underground reinforced concrete bunker (it stands there till the end of time) in the front garden, and a garage at the side of the house.

Afterward, the Red Army moved into the house. Southern Slovakia and Northern Hungary were, we now know, liberated by

Marshall Malinovsky's army, which consisted heavily of soldiers from the more primitive, far eastern provinces of the Soviet Union, and of convicts who were promised their liberty if they survived. And so, the toilet practices of these military were very much in question, and it took a great deal of quite unpleasant cleaning to return the house to normal once the family returned there. But the Red Army soldiers were not unkind to the population. The exception was that they had an unquenchable thirst for watches. "*Davay čassy*" (Give me your watch) was the word, and many soldiers walked around with watches up to their elbows on both arms. But they did not harm the people, as they did in Germany, and seemed to have a particular attraction to children.

As soon as the family moved back into the top apartment in the house, a Lieutenant Kolozov was billeted there. By and large Kolozov behaved, he had some sort of administrative position. He was housed in what had been Ján's room. But, every Saturday night he would get roaring drunk and proceed to vehemently argue with the radio. The wall behind the radio was covered with spit, a sign of his venting his rage at whatever he was listening to. The following morning he invariably apologized to Nelly, and once, in a fit of remorse, bit her little finger while doing so.

The Soviets appeared so unthreatening that Sándor once found a Major Pilipienko on the

street, looking for a place to stay. He actually offered his home to this major, who came and spent several days in Kolozov's room. The next day, for totally unclear reasons, Pilipienko placed Kolozov's toothbrush in Ján's hand, and made throwing motions. Ján was obliged to throw Lieutenant Kolozov's toothbrush out the rear window of the apartment.

The bunker which had been built by the Gestapo was used to incarcerate drunken Red Army soldiers. The violent ones were placed there to cool off, and then they served a day or two of punishment in the German built garage. A huge Asian Soviet soldier was brought in one day, and proceeded to hammer from the inside at the reinforced steel door of

the bunker with his bare arms. He succeeded in actually bending out the corner of the door. Ján was summoned, a timber was placed between the bent portion of the door and a nearby wall, and Ján, with whatever his small body weight contributed to this process, was requested to sit on the timber so that no further damage could be done to the door. The prisoner was then taken away and returned some hours later heavily bandaged from wrist to shoulder on both arms.

One night a small, also Asian looking soldier appeared at the apartment door, frightening Nelly half to death, and asked for candles. He was heavily painted. The prisoners in the garage were putting on a play, and they needed some light.

Ján, as all other young boys, collected helmets, spent bullets, shrapnel, medals, insignia, and the detritus of war. These were toys, items to be traded..... It was not a bad time. The family was saved from the horror of the Nazis, and this period felt almost like a vacation. There were food shortages, of course, and people made do with vegetables and invented ways to make vegetables and flowers taste like meat. There was one particular flower, looking a bit like Queen Anne's Lace, which, when dipped in egg, flour, and breadcrumbs and deep fried, tasted every bit like a "*Wiener Schnitzel*" (Viennese veal cutlet). This flower, obviously, came to be known as the "Wiener Schnitzel Flower".

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

People began to return from the camps. The family was fortunate to have a roof over their heads, and soon every room in the apartment was occupied by a different group of persons. Sándor took in the family of the Bulgarian consul to Bratislava. The idea was similar to the original “sergeant” scheme when Ján was an infant, i.e. some protection.

Ružena, a woman who was on the ill fated transport in October 1944, stayed in the apartment and was the principal source of information as to what had occurred at Auschwitz. The family of Nelly’s first cousin, Lenke, also stayed there for a while. And,

very importantly, two surviving daughters of Olga, one of Sándor's sisters, Eva and Agi, returned to Bratislava. Ján was allowed no contact with them. It was subsequently explained that this was because they might be "diseased", but perhaps the real reason was that they were Jewish.

Of the survivors, Sándor's mother, Karoline, died shortly after the war. It was said that she counted seventy-four family members dead, and simply could not cope with that. Dezső's older son, Tommy, swam in the polluted Danube, where he may have contracted the polio from which he died. One of Mariška's daughters, Gerti, was so debilitated that she died in Prague days after her return from the

camps. And so the war, although over, still claimed victims.

Eva and Agi, two surviving nieces of Sándor, became active in Zionist affairs, even more active than they had been before the war. Eva helped to establish a home for orphaned Jewish children. Agi took paramilitary training, and eventually (1949) they all emigrated to Palestine (Israel). Eva had married a Jew from Prague, Max, also active in the children's home.

Dezső's family elected to remain in the new Czechoslovakia, and made no attempts to leave. They chose to make a life there. Géza, Ján's youngest uncle, after spending time in

jail based on a run-in with the government, eventually departed for Australia with his Christian wife, Alice, and young child, Katka.

It is important to pause and reflect here for a moment, as much of the remainder of this narrative focuses on the emotions and actions following and resulting from the foregoing events. The Holocaust affected Nelly, Sándor, and many other people so strongly that they never wanted to be Jewish again, for fear of a recurrence of such events. The family had all been baptized, Nelly earlier, Sándor and John in 1938, and so they continued to function as Christians, faithfully attending the Hungarian Reformed Church, and Sunday school for Ján. All male surviving family members, and their families, changed their name from Braun

(which, although it could be a German name, was considered Jewish) to Balan. Balan was selected arbitrarily, as everyone was thinking of emigrating, and Balan is a name that can be pronounced in nearly any language. (It later turned out that the word means “white horse” in Rumanian.) Any and all connection with Judaism was abandoned, which, in the postwar re-combined Czechoslovakia, was not difficult.

Ján’s family renewed their efforts to go to the United States. Somehow, perhaps because the pre-war permission for entry was still on record, this did not take as long as might be expected. In the meantime Sándor worked for UNRRA (The United Nations Relief Agency), distributing medical and

pharmaceutical supplies in the country on behalf of the local Ministry of Health. This enabled the family to travel to Belgium, where preparations for eventual departure to the United States were made, and also gave Ján interesting experiences visiting warehouses (in Trnava, not far from Bratislava) full of supplies from America, including Lava soap, with a strong medicinal, disinfecting smell. There were all sorts of strange products Ján had never seen before, products from a different world, canned goods, strange foods and medicines.....

Once while on an early trip to Brussels, when arrangements for leaving were almost in place, the family made the nearly very serious mistake of returning from Brussels to “put

their affairs in order” in Bratislava. This was February of 1948, around the time of an election which officially put the Communists in power, the so called “Communist Putsch”. The Communist Party was identified by the number “3”, in red. The other parties were “1” and “2”. Ján liked red, and so posted “3s” all over town. Little did he know.....

And while in Bratislava, the “Iron Curtain” began to descend. Sándor rapidly bribed some officials, not so much for false documentation as simply to expedite the process and obtain all the necessary exit paperwork sooner. And so, in March, all three slid out under the descending curtain and returned to Brussels.

Jewelry was taped into a corner of the railroad car traveling from Prague, through a horribly looking ruined Germany, to Brussels. Nelly went by plane. In Belgium the family had to wait another month for reasons of paperwork. Ján went to a class specializing in teaching foreign kids French, the “*seccion étrangère*” (the foreigners’ section). Eventually someone drove them to Rotterdam (through the first automobile tunnel Ján had ever experienced). There, in Holland, they embarked on the old SS Veendam for New York on April 13, 1948.

PART TWO

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alex, Nelly, and John arrived in Hoboken, New Jersey on April 23, 1948. Since they had not been allowed to take more than \$350 each from Czechoslovakia to the United States, they had spent the useless currency of the old country on being able to travel in first class. The crossing was good fun for a thirteen year old, a lot going on, a lot to see.

They were met at the ship by Minnie, Sándor's cousin, and the generous person behind the family's affidavit. Another relative had given up her apartment temporarily to provide housing. John recalls sitting in the tub that first afternoon, crying that he was homesick, and wanting to go back home. Alex and Nelly must have exhibited great patience at this incident.

This day happened to be the first night of Seder, and the family went to Minnie's house where 70 people were gathered for the ceremony, all asking John "how he liked America". The service meant nothing to John, he had never been exposed to anything Jewish, anything like this. It was simply a large gathering of distant cousins and other people.

(Minnie offered to adopt John. The reason for this offer was never quite clear, but it had to do with the family's finances, and with getting started in a new land.)

It is very important to keep in mind that the charade which had begun in Czechoslovakia,

the change of life to becoming Gentiles, was continued with great intensity in the United States. As soon as practicable the family joined the Marble Collegiate Church, headed by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, on Fifth Avenue in New York. They attended every Sunday and became social friends with one of the assistant ministers. All past and present references to being Jewish were vigorously denied. Not only denied, made invisible. And this was seriously enforced, all Jewish evidence erased. Alex adopted the middle name of Franklin, probably to appear more American. Eva (now Chava) and Agi, who had in the meantime left for Israel, and to whom Alex was sending packages, were asked to correspond with him using his office

address so that the postman at the family's home should not see Israeli postage stamps.

John, after spending a few months in public school, basically to become familiar with the language, was lucky to be accepted at a well known college preparatory school, Collegiate. The school was loosely affiliated with the Dutch Reformed Church in New York (as was the Marble Collegiate Church to which the family belonged). Nevertheless, there were many Jewish boys enrolled, the school operated as a non-sectarian establishment. John, of course, was a Christian.

The same thing continued at the University of Pennsylvania, where John joined a Christian fraternity. (Jewish and Christian fraternities were, in those days and at this school, strictly

segregated.) The amusing fact is that religion at university, except for the fraternities, was not much of an issue. John's classmates were a very mixed lot, of all religions and backgrounds.

Many examples could be given, but basically John lived this charade for a half century. It was sometimes difficult; people were inquisitive. But he persisted, spurred on by Nelly's meticulously providing him with newspaper clippings dealing with Skinhead activities in Idaho or Ku Klux Klan activities in the South. The fear of "it could happen again" was extremely strong. And there were times in John's career when being Jewish seemed particularly inappropriate, when others were telling anti-Semitic jokes, or

when he was, in later years, actually advised by his attorney (a Jewish woman) that his professional advancement would be harmed if the truth were known.

Of course, there were people who suspected, especially other Jews. One Jew can usually tell another, no matter the level of denial. John worked with a young Jewish woman, Martha, in Paris, in the 1960s. She was pregnant, her husband was a soldier in Algeria, and John drove her to and from work. She simply would not believe his claims. No amount of denying or protesting would ever convince her. Martha took particular pleasure when John finally admitted the truth years later.

In 1962 John married a Christian woman, Ella Priestley. She, of course, knew the truth, but it was a non-issue and she actually helped in the charade and supported Nelly's and Alex's wishes. Christmas celebrations in those days always took place at the family's home, and many people were invited. John can think of no one, other than Ella and her mother, who knew the truth at these occasions.

John believes that Alex, who died in 1967, persisted in the charade just for the sake of the earlier established survival tactic, and because of Nelly's strong convictions on the issue. Nelly, on the other hand, over the years truly came to think of herself as a Christian. She would not have stood for having Alex buried in Jewish fashion, which was John's

initial concept, thinking, as he did, that Alex had remained Jewish at heart.

After a divorce, in 1969 John met Ann Radding, a young Jewish woman, and began to attend religious festivals with her family. These festivals (Passover, Chanukah) meant nothing to him, other than that they were nice family occasions. When Nelly first met Ann, knowing that Ann was Jewish, she created a rationalization for herself: “She looks just like a Spanish Madonna”, she declared. (Ann had long dark hair at the time, and this worked for Nelly.....).

Throughout John’s career, during the days when “your religion” was on every job application and every official document,

matters continued unchanged. During his last position he noticed suspicion on the part of some of his co-executives. (This was the position when his attorney had suggested denial.) There were no non-whites in the company that John was aware of. At frequent social occasions considerable curiosity and nosiness were exhibited, and Ann, who was not so good at play acting, came close to giving the secret away.

But something began to seem wrong about the continuation of the denial, and of the make believe existence. Perhaps the obvious inquisitiveness of his colleagues got on his nerves, or perhaps it simply got to be too much trouble. In the late 1990s a frightening health crisis, chronic leukemia, led John to

meditation classes taught by a Rabbi, Burt Siegel. At about the same time, realizing that there were no children and that there were a lot of interesting papers, real and forged documents, and several objects, all of which would be eventually thrown away, John contacted The Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. They were happy to acquire this material, both for archiving and for exhibit.

These two circumstances, the association with the Rabbi, and with the Museum, had an impact. First there were some small steps, little lies, like “My father was Jewish, my mother was a Gentile”. Very, very slowly John learned to and began to say “yes” when asked if he was Jewish. It took even longer to be able to express the entire phrase “I am

Jewish”, and even today, although the sentence does come out, John is conscious of what he is saying, of the words he is uttering. It is not a statement made with no awareness given to it. Probably this awareness will never totally disappear.

Not very long ago there was an upsurge of anti-Semitism in Europe, particularly in France, and the destruction of several synagogues. With some inward shame John wondered about the wisdom and timing of his recent revelations, and new and growing change of identity.

And, importantly, John has begun to speak of his experiences during the Holocaust, as a Hidden Child. The talks are given primarily

under the auspices of The Jewish Heritage Museum, and also on behalf of The Hidden Child Foundation. Both organize schools, synagogues, and other groups. Other, independent opportunities also come up from time to time. John continues to find these experiences extremely rewarding, even cathartic, especially those involving Gentile youngsters.

Thus, these young people, not necessarily Jewish, are an especially welcome and enjoyable audience; they always learn something, sometimes asking very intelligent and searching questions. (Referring to Hitler's debilitated stage and poor health in his later years, a fifth grader asked how he could justify the murder of ill and deformed

people, considering his own physical condition? Another wanted to know what John would have done had he found himself in the situation of Karel and Nóra.....). John has a large collection of poignant “thank you” letters from many children, and is often called back to the same school in subsequent years. The talks need to be geared to the age and level of knowledge of the children, and, of course, different age groups react differently to the various parts of the topic. Often John is called back to the same institution year after year.....

When giving a talk, John frequently concludes by saying that: “I was in physical hiding for about a year, but in psychological denial for a half century”.

Through the Rabbi who taught meditation John became a member of a small but later rapidly growing, eclectic, Jewish congregation. Both this membership, and the speaking engagements, although not carried out with religious fervor, provide a feeling of “returning” and “belonging”, sentiments long missing from John’s life. It is more a matter of reclaiming the culture and ancestry of Judaism. It is a strange feeling to be so closely allied with a group of warm and friendly people of the same faith.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Karel and Nóra Palášthy saved the family's lives. They were never compensated. After the Holocaust Sándor gave them a piece of a small garden he owned after the war, and Nelly gave Nóra some jewelry. Karel, ever the champion of the underdog, began helping people against the Communists after the war. He was arrested, and his health was ruined in prison. (Sándor, too, was arrested for a short time for some minor infraction.) He died a not very old man. Nóra, however, continued to teach and lived into her nineties.

In the 70s John undertook the process of having Karel and Nóra declared as "Righteous Gentiles", to be included in the appropriate section of the Yad Vashem memorial park in Jerusalem. This section

honors Gentiles who helped to save Jews during the Holocaust, with no compensation. Many are memorialized there, and their names are distributed to other museums. This was finally accomplished with some difficulties. And, what's more, with the help of their daughter Eva's husband, Peter, the Israeli government invited Eva to Jerusalem for the unveiling of the plaque intended to commemorate the heroic deeds of her parents, surely a thrill for Eva. John has maintained close contact with Peter and Eva, still living in Bratislava, over the years. They have two grown, successful sons.

Peter recently was helpful to John in renewing his Slovak citizenship. This was done at the time of the Slovak Republic joining the European Union, and it just

seemed like a good idea to have a European Union passport.....

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

There were initially six first cousins, children of the brothers and sisters of Sándor. Chava (Eva) and Max live in Qiryat Tivon in a lovely part of Israel. John has visited there dozens of times. It is the most restful place on earth. Agi, Chava's sister, married Moshe Goldstein, a 1930s immigrant to Israel, now deceased. They are his closest living relatives, together with *Katka* (Kathy) in Australia. The bond is very strong. Chava and Max are also Holocaust speakers, and active in the affairs of Terezin, a sort of "Potemkin Village"

showpiece created by the Nazis in the Protectorate.

Chava and Max have two daughters and five grandchildren. Until not too long ago, when more were alive, “first cousin” reunions used to be held in Europe, Israel, and the United States, at three-year intervals. Then they became sporadic, and did not always include everyone. At a family reunion in Israel in 1993 everyone derived a special kind of satisfaction from observing the group photo taken on that occasion. The numerous smiling faces were a testimonial to Hitler’s lack of total success.

Another first cousin, Mariška’s other daughter, Zsuzsi, also survived the war and went to Israel. There she remarried, and her daughter

from her first marriage, Olga, is still living there.

Dezső's younger son, Jožo, died several years ago. His wife, Jana, is in Bratislava. The children, Michal and Lucia, live in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, respectively. Jana is not Jewish, and therefore neither are Michal or Lucia.

Kathy married David Harman, has two grown sons, Andrew and Mark, and lives in Melbourne, Australia. Of all the first cousins, she is not Jewish, and neither are her two sons, as Alice (the marriage that probably saved Géza's life) was not a Jew. Kathy detests traveling, and so has not been able to take part in any of the "cousin" reunions.

EPILOGUE

And that is the story.....A tale less horrible
and frightening than many, filled with several
incredible pieces of good fortune and close

escapes, and with hope. Nevertheless, the events of the times, without a doubt, shaped the hidden child Ján (John), affected his behavior, and caused some significant conflicts and personality issues in his adult years.

No one has emerged from an involvement in the Holocaust with no psychological wounds, some more serious than others. John has, over time, attempted in numerous ways to overcome these and to lead as balanced and positive life as he can. Although some of these attempts have been less than successful, and sometimes the “baggage” he carries appears quite heavy, occasionally there are some more successful attempts. And so, life at seventy one goes on as best as it can.....

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