THE WAR

"I often think that if it weren't for Lajos and his shoes, I might have ended up in the Danube."

The following is in Peter's own words: "It was March 19th, 1944 when the Germans came into Hungary. My father had prepared everything very carefully and had arranged hiding places for all of us, because we couldn't know how the Nazis were going to apply the racial laws. We were awakened at dawn and Father whizzed me down to Városmajor where I was to hide with a family. The hard part of hiding with different families was that we had no way of knowing how the others were ... if they were safe or even still alive. Father was furious with me because on one occasion I slipped away from my hiding place with Jenő Tarján and went to see a Ferencváros soccer match. In those days Jews were supposed to wear a yellow star and it was very dangerous to come out in the open like that. The factory was safe because Uncle Béla put it in his gentile wife's name and it remained in the family for the time being.

After a while we all shared the same hiding place in Aunt Mitzi's cellar on Gellért Hill. The families who had been hiding us had become afraid. We planned to use it as an air-raid shelter and Father had stocked it with provisions. There was Father and Mother and myself and Aunt Mitzi with Cousin Zsuzsi and Cousin Lajos and Mitzi's second husband, Wunschi. There was Kálmán, an officer with the Hungarian army who had deserted because he didn't want to fight on the same side as the Germans. Mitzi's house was right next to the Swedish Legation, so we became friendly with all the Swedish diplomats – the Ambassador Davidson and his number two, Lars Berg. My father used to play bridge in the evenings with Raoul Wallenberg. He

was an unlikely looking hero, rather insignificant in a way, medium height and balding. He was very modest. Only afterwards we found out how much he had done to save Hungarian Jews. He gave away so many Swedish passports that there was a story going around Budapest that the Nazis stopped an old Rabbi with side-locks and a yarmulka who challenged them: 'Can't you recognise a Swedish citizen when you see one?'

Jews in Hungary miraculously never lost their sense of humour during these terrible times. Cohen is walking down the Dob utca in the winter of 1944 with a large yellow star on his chest. He meets a friend: 'Cohen, I didn't know you were a Jew!' 'What did you think then – that I was the sheriff of the Dob utca?'

Aunt Mitzi had a doorman called Schwartz. One day he came rushing into the drawing room, white and shaking and shouting: 'The Arrow Cross are here!' We all ran down into the cellar and hid behind the coal. The Arrow Cross were the local, home-grown Nazis, the scum of the people. They had no ideology. They were just marauding thugs. We heard their heavy boots on the stairs and somebody – it might have been Schwartz because he had chest problems – started to cough. At once the Arrow Cross men were there, brandishing machine pistols. They started to herd us upstairs, poking and prodding us with their guns and lined us up against the wall. We stood there while the Arrow Cross men jeered at Wunschi: 'Well then, banker boy, how's the Stock Market today?' There was no doubt in my mind but that we were all going to die. I had been given a huge bar of chocolate as my ration to last me the rest of the war. I hadn't eaten any of it yet because even then, as a child, I had this thing about my weight. Even in those days I would go jogging with the bombs raining down. There I was. The Arrow Cross were stamping in front of us, needling Wunschi, and I started to eat the whole thing right there. I thought it was the last bar of chocolate I'd ever see. The Arrow Cross used to round people up and march them to the banks of the Danube and shoot them there. They would tie them up into

groups like asparagus and then shoot one whose weight would drag the rest of them into the Danube where they'd die by drowning. It was a way of economising on bullets. The Danube in those days was more red than blue. The Arrow Cross were starting to herd us towards the door when Lajos, Mitzi's son, asked if he could go and get his shoes. He was in his stockinged feet. For some reason they agreed for him to go and get some shoes and while we were waiting, Kálmán managed to sneak out and run next door to the Swedish Legation. Lars Berg came rushing in. He was a huge man, a national ice-hockey player, and he was brandishing a pistol. He shouted: 'This house belongs to the Swedish government. These people are under our protection. This is a diplomatic incident.' This wasn't true, of course, but Lars was such an impressive figure he managed to persuade the Arrow Cross to leave.

Then the siege began. The Wehrmacht took over Aunt Mitzi's house and we had a young German soldier billeted on us. He can't have been more then sixteen. In those days, war was like a job. Soldiers got up in the morning and went to war and then came home in the evening after a day's work. We always wondered if our little soldier would return in the evening. He was so scared. He used to cry every night for his mother.

The American planes would take off from Bari and fly over Budapest on their way to the oil fields of Ploesti in Romania. We would hear the air-raid sirens go off and then immediately afterwards this awful droning noise. Then came the noise of the German anti-aircraft fire. Mitzi's home was just near the biggest anti-aircraft complex on the Gellért Hill and we were always scared that the Allies would try to wipe it out. My mother couldn't take it. She would kneel and pray, sobbing silently and shaking all over, as white as a sheet. It was a good sign if you heard a whistling. That meant it wasn't a direct hit. In the end, they only managed to hit our chicken-coop. I went out next morning and there were these poor chickens all over the place. We were always worried about Kálmán. He used to

get drunk on Wunschi's vintage wines and we could never find him when the sirens went off. He loved to sunbathe and it was a lovely winter. He would lie almost naked in the snow with the bombs falling down.

Two Russian bombs lay unexploded above our heads for the duration of the siege. The Russians had tiny little sewing-machine type planes, which could only carry little bombs, so they used to tie them together for maximum effect. We called ours Rózsi and Zizi. There was a direct hit next door that killed a man we knew well. The Russians meanwhile were coming into Hungary from the East through Debrecen. We thought then that they were liberators. We welcomed them because it meant the end of the war. They arrived in Pest in the autumn of 1944 and fought against the retreating Germans floor to floor, room to room. We gave our German soldier civilian clothes and he escaped. We never found out if he made his way back home to his mother.

The day the Russians came in, it was the end of the world, as I knew it to be. Thousands of Tartars, Mongols – these were not Europeans, they had Asiatic features – swarmed all over Budapest, looting, raping the women. They had wrist-watches all the way up their arms. They would come into the houses and take the women away saying that they needed them to peel potatoes. We saved my mother by putting her in bed and covering her with blankets and then sitting on top of her. The soldiers just drank a bottle of her eau-de-cologne and went away. They stole my father's shoes – he had I don't know how many pairs of these hand-sewn shoes – but they didn't seem to be able to recognise pairs. Sometimes they took two right shoes or two left ones and so on. They ran their bayonets through our books. (We still have twelve volumes of a Hungarian encyclopaedia with holes boring through the middle from cover to cover. We also have my father-in-law's briefcase with the bayonet tears carefully mended. Peter always keeps it on his desk.)