

CHAPTER VI THE RED DANUBE

Use the word surreal and people usually envision funny looking melting watches on a barren dreamscape shore. But my perspective is far graver and less illusory. What's more, I see it everywhere, giving rise to an uncomfortable impression that practically the whole world is insane. Regarding this last perspective, most of the so-called civilized world is in agreement with me when it comes to World War Two. How could you think otherwise? One hysterical nut rants some utter nonsense, and fifty million people wind up dead. Certainly, there can be no more awful example of what the dictionary calls the incongruous arrangement and presentation of subject matter in a dream like setting. To say the whole war was a nightmare from start to finish is a statement in very little need of defense. And the emotions elicited by bringing it to mind constitute a morass that consumes any attempt to reason its why and wherefore. How can one reason the totally unreasonable? Of course, this conjecture comes by way of the blessings of distance. At this point in history I'm comfortably separated by time and circumstance from the numbing pain and gut wrenching fear of that awful time and place. However, any mental speculation about the existential parameters of experience find precious little room to blossom inside a head being pummeled by Nyilas bullies. To add to the incongruity it was a lovely summer day, the kind which makes one glad to be alive.

Once that well meaning doctor had removed our patches we decided to continue passing ourselves off as gentiles. Of course, we were far from the first to do so. After all, it wasn't that much of a challenge. We didn't resemble the cartoonish poster caricatures of kinky haired, hook-nosed, unshaven Jewish demons, and we talked like any other Hungarians. The weak link in our chain mail was the lack of presentable identification papers. We had none, which meant we were living on borrowed time at best. But, with our average appearance, and no patches to betray us, we might survive long enough to greet our Russian liberators.

Survival meant, not just avoiding arrest, but finding food to eat as well. After all, if we were free to venture out more often that meant we had more time to search for food, the number one pastime of war torn Europe, besides avoiding bullets. Near or far, the presence of gunfire was the background soundtrack of life in Budapest.

Desperately searching for food in a continent that was basically one big farm with a few widely scattered urban centers was yet another incredible example of the nightmarish mockery of reality called World War Two. There was food indeed, but it was earmarked for the killers. People in uniforms got ninety percent of anything edible. Women, children, and the old were rationed. And the subhuman Jews were on their own.

Confident we'd soon greet the determined Soviets or mythical Americans, and sans the yellow Star of David patch I ventured out into the daylight in search of food. Removing the patch convinced me I'd last longer out there, and with that extra time I might actually bring home the bacon. But confidence bested common sense, because I implemented the plan without taking the care to examine my disguise for defects. That imprudence led to my failure to remove the remnants of threads left around the edges of the excised patch. It was as obvious as the nose on the poster Jew's face. Nyilas gangsters spotted it at once, and wasted no time in attacking. These particular hoodlums were the worst of the breed, teenagers. It's conceivable that an adult fascist might not apply himself with the same fervent dedication in the beating of a young child as the teenaged variety of this scurrilous gang. A grownup very well might enjoy it, but he'd also be the most likely candidate among his species to exhibit a modicum of restraint, especially in public, lest he suffer some shame for it. Fourteen, fifteen and sixteen year olds, on the other hand, found exceptional joy in thrashing a kid. It was their specialty. They loved insulting, beating and shooting everyone, but ganging up on a defenseless kid was for them the piece d' resistance of mayhem. These savages delighted in spreading terror, causing pain, and killing the weakest among our population.

“Hey you, you filthy Jew! What are you doing out in public without your star?”

Immediately, several others joined him.

“Jew! He's a Jew!”

I maintained my innocence, with “Who's a Jew?” But the stitches on my clothing gave credible testimony to back up their accusations. Next they grabbed at my clothing.

“Pull his pants down! Pull 'em down!”

They wanted to confirm their catch of the day, as well as humiliate me at the same time. They never tired of it. But I held on to my pants, finally calling out, “Alright! I'm a Jew! So what?!”

It was violence incarnate. Without the formality of further accusation they lashed out and hit me so hard I fell to the ground. With the wind kicked out of me there was no thought of escaping. Of course, even if I hadn't fallen down they'd have pursued me like a pride of ravenous hyenas intent on finishing off a wounded bison calf. I never had a chance. As I desperately struggled to take a breath they fell on me like a school of piranha, pummeling me with their fists, boots and clubs. In seconds I was bleeding from wounds on my head, face, torso and limbs. I did my best to cover up, but it was futile. While they struck they cursed me, their insults serving to urge them on, and they became hysterical in their frenzy to kill another blaspheming member of Abraham's tribe.

"Stinking Jew. Rotten kike!"

I almost got to my knees, in the hope of fleeing, but they kicked me back down and continued stomping. When I tried to stand my hands momentarily left my head as I tried to push up from the unyielding stone street. In that split second their hard bony fists struck me in the nose and mouth and temples. Blood streamed down my face, mixed with my sweat, and filled my eyes, its acrid salinity burning my senses. I blinked some of it out of my eyes, only to have more of it pour back in at once. I was so defenseless I just shut my eyes to at least block out the sight of my tormentors. Countless wallops subdued me, and the bashing and pounding was a blur of pain. Clearly they were planning on going beyond the typical perfunctory punishment in preparation for arrest. Instead they were committed to meting out the harshest possible execution of sentence. They were going to beat me to death, as I myself had previously witnessed. Beyond the usual hatred they were fueled by anger motivated by the fact that could foresee their own approaching doom. Their whole nasty regime was under attack by intensified Allied air raids, bolstered by land assaults from the approaching Red army. Their days were numbered and they knew it, so they took out their frustration on anyone unlucky enough to cross paths with them. These fascists could not give a good showing of themselves in the face of armed foes, so they avenged their coming defeat upon the imagined and defenseless enemies that lived among them. They were the ultimate examples of cowards and bullies. The primary fascists, the Nazis, had an escape clause in their grand plan for Hungary; they'd simply abandon the place and beat it back to the Fatherland. The secondary Nyilas fascists were Hungarians and had no far off refuge to protect them. But this country was

unique among the nations taken over by the Nazis. In the other lands occupied, and then deserted, by the Third Reich, the populace uniformly celebrated, with reprisals reserved for collaborators. Hungarian fascists however, persisted in their vain war against the Jews even after their German masters fled. By the time they attacked me the hand writing on the wall was crystal clear, yet they persisted in their lost cause, torturing and killing as many women and children as they could. They had absolutely nothing to win by beating or killing me, but they relished every blow. And with each one I felt weaker. The pain was so intense I prayed for them to just get it over with and kill me. At least the agony would end. The pain, the suffering, the hunger, the cold, the hate would all cease. But witnesses to this horrific scene, not as drunk with power, and bolstered by reports of advancing Allied troops, saw the benefit in shrinking from the task at hand and dared to step forward in my defense. A few passing gentiles spoke up in a most eloquent fashion to dissuade the brutes from their passion, and others were gutsy enough to call down from the windows of their apartments.

“He’s had enough!”

“Leave him alone!”

“Don’t let his blood be on your hands!”

I was already half dead so I don’t know exactly what words were most effective, but somehow the bastards became convinced that I did have enough for one day, and the beating stopped.

I was all scrapes, blood, gashes, tears, gouges, mucous, cuts, saliva, rips, sweat, welts, vomit, dirt, and all consuming pain. It hurt even to breathe, and I was soaked in my own urine. But slowly I became aware that I was still conscious and alive, and that nobody was hitting me anymore. The slurs persisted, and my head was ringing, but I came to my senses enough to crawl back home where my horrified, weeping mother and grandma tended to my wounds.

As I’ve already explained, my rescue was due to the intercession of kind strangers. And that obvious principal is nothing more than random chance. Certainly those people who opened their mouths in my defense were noble and good, and deserved to carry the mantle of true Christendom. But, as far as it related to me, it was blind dumb luck, something over which I had no control. I got lucky, and that’s all there was to it. Nobody

in my circumstance could claim otherwise. Most Jews who were saved from extermination during the war were likewise the beneficiaries of *mazel*, good fortune. It's true that there were some fighters who took matters into their own hands, and bought their salvation through guts and guile. And there were cells of armed Jewish partisans in the forest, as well as occasional ghetto uprisings, and even a camp revolt. But the vast majority of Jews were emaciated and powerless prisoners, living and dying at the whim of their captors. The rest just hid. Any among those who rode out the storm will be the first to admit that they only have inexplicable *mazel* to thank. Relying on fickle and unpredictable luck as a survival plan does not sound like a prudent tactic, but in retrospect it seemed as if we had little choice. As proof I submit the two most terrible and traumatic incidents of our lives.

With mere months remaining to the conflict, not that we knew as much at that time, the round up and deportation of Jews intensified. My grandmother, pregnant mother, and I were all living together in one small apartment in a Jewish designated building, venturing out only for food. After my beating I was more scared than ever to go out. I was a mass of welts and scars. My eyes were both blackened, there were cuts along my scalp, and every bone and joint ached. In addition to all that puss was oozing out of sores on my neck. By then I had developed a condition, caused by a lack of vitamin D, and it caused running sores to develop on my neck. Many died from this and other such conditions caused from malnutrition. The war had claimed my body even if death had not yet performed its coup de grace. I almost constantly felt as I did during my beating. My whole body throbbed. Why couldn't it just end? Then, it almost did.

Had we known how deliciously close the Allies were we would've been encouraged. But we never heard any news of the outside world, and confidence eluded us as long as the fascists kept their strangle hold on the city. They controlled the radio, newspapers, and the posters on the round metal kiosks that dotted the city. All of this media boasted endless German triumph and served to keep us in fear and anxiety. And while some Russian artillery units might have been approaching our eastern outskirts the Nazis still held the population in its grip. Nothing can demonstrate that perfect power more than the mass arrests that were now a daily part of life in the capital, and we felt no surprise when we fell under their shiny cold boots. We accepted it as our inevitable, predetermined fate.

In the early winter of 1944 a mass arrest occurred, and all the inhabitants of our building were taken out and marched toward the ghetto, the next step in our destined deportation to a concentration camp. The significance of this was unmistakable. Our turn had finally come. We were doomed, along with the countless other Hungarian Jews who had gone this route before. Our entire building was cleared of Jews. We slogged along like zombies, abandoned and alone. There were no Yankee GIs coming to the rescue, and the Russians were just a mirage. All our options were closed. We were dead. But as we marched toward our black fate a most bizarre and unmistakably surreal event was coming toward us from a plateau so secret we had no idea it even existed. It came roaring up to us in the form of a shiny black limo. It caught everyone's attention equally, brutal tormentors and frightened victims alike. Its brakes squealed as it careened to a stop, and out jumped a man who then leapt up onto the magical car's running boards. As soon as he did he broke out in loud glorious speech.

“We are with the Swedish Embassy and have *shuspass* -visa- for many of you here!”

Next he started to call out Jewish sounding names. He spoke with great authority and without fear. He looked absolutely heroic. Then my mother and grandmother blurted out at the same time, “My God, it's Nandorbaci!”

It was true! My ardently religious uncle Nandor, now free of facial hair and dressed like a typical Hungarian peasant, was standing a few meters away from us, waving these papers, these *shuspasses*, and calling out names. If anyone would have told me that I had an uncle that was still alive in Budapest I would have cackled at the irony of such a ridiculous statement. And if you would have added that he was about to jump out of an ambassador's limousine right in front of me I wouldn't have even taken it seriously enough to be offended by the cavalier indifference of such callous whimsy. No such reality was possible. It was unimaginable and inconceivable, yet here he was. He had hidden underground, and survived long enough to be rescued by the very same man who was now about to rescue us. Nandor stood on the running boards, making him taller than anyone else around, imbued with authority, calling out names and saving lives. When he called out a name happy people ran forward and claimed their sanctified Swedish visas. Uncle Nandor issued *shuspasses* and bold announcements.

“We are with the Swedish Embassy and we have visas for many people here!”

I didn't really comprehend what all of this specifically meant, and it contributed to my usual state of confusion. Apparently, even death was incomprehensible to me. But our marching had stopped, and excitement replaced mother's and grandmother's usual terror. It must have been good. And as I grasped for these threads of understanding I heard our own names called out by Uncle Nandor.

"Shuspass. Shuspass for the Gabor family. Ilus, Freddy, Zelma."

My mother and grandma looked at each other with dismay, and Nandor continued.

"Please come forward for your Shuspass."

Gabriel has sounded his trumpet and Saint Peter opened the gateway to Heaven. We rushed to the car and grabbed our papers, affording one incredulous look deep into the eyes of my uncle who returned the glance with a brief but equally intense stare. During this exchange we stood next to the shiny limo, which looked like a vision from a dream to me. I peered within it and beheld the man who was our true savior. I didn't know it at the time, but the dignified, aristocratic looking and well dressed young man sitting in the back seat was one of the most famous saviors of the Jews of World War Two. Raoul Wallenberg was the ultimate Righteous Gentile, but he looked as if he could have been one of the Aryan occupiers. His saintly actions did indeed contradict his physical countenance, for he was determined to save as many Jews from the Nazis as possible. I stood there transfixed by the beatific image of this true Aryan as my uncle continued.

"You have all been issued Swedish visas and are now under the protection of the neutral Swedish government. Take your papers to one of our Swedish Protective Houses at once. You will be safe there. Hurry!"

Not if God Himself had descended from the clouds would we have been more awestruck. Here was a Germanic looking man interfering with others of his type on our behalf. Blessed surrealism.

At once, several angry and uniformed SS officers approached the car. They ordered him to get out, but he blithely rolled down his window and produced some papers and made his own demands which included respecting his authority. The famed Swedish diplomat did not falter, and he persuaded the bewildered Nazis to stay their bloody hands. As bloodthirsty as the Third Reich was it always sought to exude the aura of propriety. They claimed the mantle of civilization, and as such always gave the impression it obeyed the

established laws of civilized men. They didn't even persecute the Jews until they changed the laws to make it legal to do so. Thus, they were duty bound to honor the official state of neutrality that existed between their two countries. There were a handful of European nations that enjoyed such political indifference, and Germany begrudgingly honored those treaties, keeping a simulated smile of toleration on their frustrated faces through all their dealings. For example, a bearded Rabbi bearing a passport from a country such as Spain or Sweden could theoretically approach Adolph Eichmann and wish him a good shabbos, and escape retribution. And Wallenberg exploited that loophole to the max. He even bent those rules. In this case the Swedish Embassy had issued three thousand visas to Jews, and he printed up ten times that many. As a matter of fact, Nandor's wife was part of the crew that produced the counterfeit papers. The Shuspass was an impressive looking document, and all its recipients felt secure and protected. And, as the Nazi officials had no proof to the contrary, they had to honor them all, even if ninety percent of them were forgeries. They would do so, at least for the time being. As my uncle was handing them out he repeated his instructions of salvation to the chosen few of the chosen people who were to make their way to a Swedish Protective House. These were buildings that housed members of the Swedish Diplomatic mission to Hungary, and all such places granted diplomatic immunity to anyone seeking asylum within its walls. Without hearing another syllable we ran off in search of one.

This incident, a mere footnote in the history of the war, saved our lives, at least for them time being. As luck had it we were marching along the very spot where the limo pulled up. Not everyone heard him, and most of the sad parade marched on as Nandor made his speech. But we heard him, as did those around us, and received the blessed fake documents. However, had that car stopped fifty yards behind us we'd have been goners. That day he only managed to save the last two hundred people on that line, and we were part of that group. Ultimately he saved a hundred and fifty times that many.

In our desperate rush to get to the Swedish Embassy we first passed the Vatican protected house and tried to gain entrance there with our Swedish documents. The Vatican was also neutral and had a presence in Budapest. They did what they could to help, but had to follow the same rules. They expressed regret that they could not let us, and pointed out that our documents were specifically for a Swedish protected house.

They urged us to get there as soon as possible, and even pointed the way. The Vatican, Spain and Switzerland all had protective houses in Budapest, but nobody had nearly so many as did the angelic Swedes.

We flew to a Swedish house and, waving our documents in the faces of the guards, rushed inside. So many documents had been printed and issued, the interior of the building looked like rush hour on the subway. Our home for the next two days was one stair between the second and third floors of the building, and we felt fortunate to have it. Below us were the pathetic remnants of another family, and on the stair above another. Maneuvering those staircases was a real challenge, but nobody complained. Our hosts even provided us with a little food. God bless Sweden forever and ever.

Kids will be kids, and although certain death waited for us just outside the door, we gravitated to each other and found spirit to play. We took off some of our buttons and played tiddlywinks, placing great importance in our innocent pastime. Hours earlier we were on a death march, and now here we were, squeezing buttons between our fingers, imagining great goals and triumphs, oblivious to our imminent execution. I continued to distract myself from the dark reality outside with this quaint game for the few weeks we stayed there. After the first two days there on the stairs we were resettled into a small room, following their redistribution model of three families to a room, all sleeping on the floor. Now we felt not just lucky, but honored. The Swedes were our saviors, and we couldn't stop talking about the aristocratic diplomat in the limo. But, even as we discussed our great fortune Gestapo officials were expressing doubt as to the veracity of our papers, and were plotting with determination to get us into their clutches. Thankfully, they were too preoccupied with the advancing Red forces to dedicate as much time to us as they would have liked. But ultimately their compulsion to kill eroded their grudging adherence to protocol, and they grew weary of the diplomatic protection afforded the reviled Jews. Finally, they reverted to their usual posture of might-is-right and resumed their program of mass murder by placing the dilemma in the hands of their subordinate fascists, the Nyilasok. No veneer of Geneva Conventions or bureaucracy had ever hindered the Hungarian bullies, so they wasted no time in attacking the Swedish Protected houses. They came banging on the doors of our sanctuary with their rifle butts, shouting as they did. We were on the fourth floor when I heard the noise, but we stayed

where we were, hopeful that our Swedish white knight would appear and calm the situation. But he did not appear, and we were all dragged out, screaming and begging for mercy. Some confronted the Nyilasok, waving their schuss-passes.

“You have no rights here! We are under the protection of the Swedish government!”

“Those papers don’t mean a thing to us, you scum! Get outside! Now!”

I looked down and saw that they were lining people up. Everyone had their hands raised in the air as if they were criminals or prisoners of war. The bullies were shouting worse than ever and kicking their victims into line. Then some cars came roaring up and our spirits lifted. The Swedes were here in force! But our hopes were dashed as we observed barbaric Nyilasok, instead of civilized Swedes, jumping out of the vehicles, waving their weapons and adding to the raucous mayhem. They brandished pistols, submachine guns and shotguns. Upon seeing this several people in line dropped their hands and ran. And just as quickly they were mowed down. We were aghast. Unarmed civilians, women and children, were shot down at point blank range in cold blood. They were innocent, just trying to save themselves. Shot from behind they were flung to the cold wet cobblestones, their blood spilling out around their lifeless bodies. One of them, a playmate of mine, was blasted with a shotgun and thrown several yards by the impact. Mangled, nearly cut in half, he lay splayed out across the blood spattered street. Moments earlier he had been just like me. We played on the stairs together, and now his little body was ripped apart. That vision was the most terrifying moment of my life. And now I was next.

More fascist shouting and everyone who was left stood with their hands thrust even higher into the air. There was more yelling downstairs, and now we all had to go outside. It was chaos. As each of us was marched outside we had to raise our hands. Women and children wept. Men begged for mercy. Nyilasok screamed for us to shut up and march.

It was clear that the vast Russian army from the East, and the American forces from the west, would soon batter Hungary and punish its leaders, yet the fascists persisted in their diabolical design to murder as many Jews as possible in the time allotted them. Had we known how close rescue was we would have felt even more persecuted and frustrated. But our only thought now was where were they taking us? Was it to the ghetto? Was it

the train station? But the longer we marched the longer we lived. And we were grateful for every precious second left to us.

We were marched through the streets, and we passed by hundreds of gentiles, our fellow citizens. Some showed sympathy in their faces, and some even cried for us. But some cackled at our misfortune, gleefully calling out, "Now you'll get it, stinking Jewish scum! You won't be taking advantage of us any more!"

These people also threw things at us, and rushed forward to kick and hit us. They especially brutalized the more traditional looking, like bearded old men. The fear I had felt at my beating and for breaking curfew paled before this terror. Now, there would be no mercy for pregnant women, old folks or kids. We were marched through the heartless gray ruins of Budapest, and step by step fear clutched tighter and tighter at our throats. All the while the armed hoodlums taunted us with insults, and ordered us to keep marching with hands raised.

"March you kikes! Turn here! Don't slow down you swine! Keep those hands up! March you filthy rats. March!"

People in line were talking among themselves.

"Where are they taking us? To the Ghetto? No! To the train station. They're going to take us somewhere and we won't return."

Hearing this I started to cry, "Mama, I want to live! Grandma, help me!"

But mama was crying, and grandma was praying, both with lifeless eyes.

As we marched along more Nyilasok arrived, swelling their ranks to over a hundred. Usually it only took a few armed men to handle a crowd of civilians. But now they came out in droves to enjoy the slaughter. They would make short work of us.

After twenty minutes we came to the Danube, to a point about two blocks from one of its bridges. It was so cold ice was already floating in the rigid waters. They lined us up along the banks of the river, screaming and yelling the whole time. They were hysterical with blood lust.

I looked down at the river and recalled how when we first moved here I enjoyed coming here with my papa. It was lovely, and I remembered playing there and watching boats cruise by. All my memories of it were beautiful, but now shattered by the shrieking Nyilasok.

“Turn around! Shut up. Don’t talk! You, take off that coat! You too! You, you Jew bitch, take off those shoes. And you, and you! Kick them over here! All of you, keep your hands up!”

Were they just going to rob us of our clothes? Was that what this was all about?

“Turn around. Face the river you Jew scum!”

Sobs and prayers. Frozen panic among the hundreds of us lined up along the icy banks of the Danube on that cold, drizzling, miserable, November afternoon. And then, for a moment, there was absolute quiet. An entire city froze in its tracks. Time stood still, and the wind held its breath. One large thumping heartbeat for all of the humanity of Budapest resounded. Then the shooting began.

The noise of the guns and the screaming cannot be imagined, and the fear is impossible to relate. People were being blasted to bits, the force of the bullets propelling their bodies into the water a few feet below the cement banks. The shooting started at the extreme end of the line, nearest to the bridge to our left, and we were about a hundred yards away.

“Mama, I don’t want to die. Mama!”

My cries were mixed with a terrible discordant choir of desperate plaintiff screams. People choked on their vomit, paralyzed with terror. Women pulled their children’s faces into their bodies just before it came. Most closed their eyes. Some turned and called out, “God curse you evil bastards! You and your children will die like this! Your death is coming soon!”

Some of the killers fired their weapons wildly at their victims, while some took special aim at necks and heads. Blood and chunks of flesh and skin and brain flew through the air. Deafening gunfire. Shrieking agony. Closer and closer, the spray of hot, jagged death inched toward us. Just yards away the bullets were closing in, and now, mixed with the wailing, I could hear the buzzing projectiles parting the air and the flesh of victims just a foot or two away. And suddenly fear gave way to surreal thought. I reached into my pocket to fetch out a little piece of bread I had saved. Dying was certain for me, and I thought that afterwards my grandmother and mother could perhaps share this morsel. I even held it out to them. In the middle of this death and savage mayhem it was an insane gesture, and I probably seized the thought just to escape the reality of what was about to overwhelm me. And just as that incongruous image dashed through my mind the shooting

stopped. There was weeping. There was moaning. But the noise of the guns, and the men who used them, was gone.

My eyes were shut tight, awaiting my death, and for several more seconds after the silence fell upon us I was still afraid to open my eyes. As long as I couldn't see my killers maybe I could elude them. I was a Jewish ostrich on the banks of the Danube. My heart raced. My senses functioned. I heard and felt the wind. Was this how death felt? Then I heard voices. Human voices. Someone said, "They're gone!" So I dared to peek through my squinted eyes. I turned back around and saw that our tormentors had fled. It was true! They were gone. We were alive!

Apparently, some other Nyilasok had brought emergency orders to our killers to stop for some reason, and they all ran off. Miraculously, just like that. We looked from side to side. We touched ourselves to see if we had been shot. For a few more moments everything went quiet. Nobody moved or spoke. No cars drove by. It even seemed as if the river stopped flowing. Then someone came to their senses and yelled, "Run!"

We all took off, my mother's hand grasping mine. She gave her other to grandma, and we moved as one toward some unknown refuge. We were not even aware of the cold any more. We were still among the living, and that was enough. We ran wildly for blocks, and then grandma called out, "We have to make it to a Swedish house."

Almost at once we saw one and we dashed towards it like desperate Olympic sprinters. It was amazing that my mother could run at all, because she was about seven months pregnant. And of course, grandma was older. And we were all weak from hunger. But we had somehow been spared, and we couldn't waste a second. Our would be murderers had vanished, but they might return any moment, so we had to make it to a building and hide. Some mysterious great fortune had intervened in our lives yet again. It didn't seem fit to show its face to others in that line, but rather wait for some inexplicable reason to make its appearance only now.

This scene had been staged hundreds of times before. Innocent civilians were marched to the river, forced to take off their shoes and coats, and then blasted into the icy waters below. No less than twenty thousand of us were murdered in this fashion. But on that day, the very last of the mass executions, the Nyilasok had no time to retrieve the shoes and coats. Fearing for their own lives the assassins ran away without stopping to collect

their usual booty. As eerie evidence of the slaughter, the shoes remained standing there, some tipped over on their sides. They were all that remained to offered testimony to the existence of so many mothers and sisters and sons and daughters and cousins and neighbors.

We were part of the Nyilasok's last Danube firing squad, but why it was halted we never knew. There has passed over half a century of speculation since that day, but still nobody knows for certain. Perhaps the long awaited Russians had finally entered the city, and every fascist gun was immediately needed to repel them. All of the swaggering, gun toting bullies who had for years waged war against the defenseless were suddenly recruited to confront a new and different kind of enemy. If that was the case, then this enemy was not one imagined within the dank mental catacombs of paranoia, but a real one, inspired by righteous wrath. And this new foe was unlike the previous army of unarmed civilian women, children, and the elderly. This one was uniformed, trained and, most significantly, it was armed. History tells us that the Nyilasok's Nazi masters abandoned them to their struggle with the allies, and subsequent official reports do not claim that they distinguished themselves on the field of battle. Every single hometown fascist died a miserable and violent death at the hands of the Reds, either in short lived combat or swinging from a rope, executed as war criminals. But we really don't know if that was the case on the icy banks of the Danube that day. All we know is the shooting stopped, the killers vanished, and we survived.

This incident proves to me that destiny has us all in its grip, and there is nothing we can do to influence any of it. Back at the river we were overcome with a mixture of sorrow for the victims and elation at not joining them. Hundreds were shot and fell into the icy waters. Some were killed instantly by the bullets, while others drowned. All of the bodies plunged into the river, and bits of clothing floated on its surface. After some time more articles of clothing, loosened from the current, slipped off and rose through the blood tinged water. Eerie lily pads of hats and scarves and sweaters and vests along with bizarre floating islands of corpses formed a frightful vision that haunts the memory of mankind. To this day, whenever I hear Strauss' Blue Danube, I am struck by the clash of moods; the lilting waltz providing a macabre soundtrack for the floating bodies on a blue river turned blood red. For me it's the ultimate surrealistic war image. Poets have

commemorated it in verse, conveying a testament far more touching than my own miserable words. With nearly a thousand miles of Danube left, in its meandering course to the Black Sea, how many people would see the bloated, chalk white corpses float by, and what would they think? The countless half naked women and children must have conveyed some terrible message to everyone along the river's edge. This is the result of hatred and intolerance. Hitler has turned our lovely Danube into a graveyard. What has happened to our world?

Without stopping to mourn those already dead in the water, one pragmatic Scandinavian labored to lessen the slaughter. Down river from the butchery, around the first bend that hid their valiant efforts, Raoul Wallenberg and his comrades were fishing out those who had survived the carnage. Badly wounded, bleeding, half frozen and half drowned they were given one more chance at life by a few angelic Norsemen. Their sympathy was in marked contrast to others of their stock who claimed the same birthright as a license to kill.

The safe house had lost half of its roof from bombing, but it still stood. I bolted past its open gate and ran inside. It seemed empty and was as eerily quiet as the riverside had become. I ran from room to room, instinctively looking for food, but there was nothing.

During the war hunger was our constant companion. Practically all of our waking hours were dedicated to two things, avoiding capture and finding something to eat. It was never a matter of shopping. That was out of the question. Stores had little to offer as everything of value was used to supply the troops. Soldiers risked their lives, but at least they got food. I have no doubt that any of us, including the women, would have gladly taken up arms and joined the fight for two or three squares a day. We probably would've done it for just one. Even if we civilians found an open shop with something edible for sale we had virtually no money. This ubiquitous situation caused commerce and capitalism to revisit their ancient ancestor, the barter system. People traded anything of value for food. After all, you can't eat jewelry or art or furniture. If you had such possessions you negotiated them for any crust of bread you were lucky enough to find. And that was for gentiles. Jews had already been disenfranchised, forced to move into dank hovels with whatever meager minimum possessions they could carry, and had practically nothing worthwhile to

trade. Added to that, going out on the street could cost you your life, limiting potential hours for food searches. It's no wonder so many people died of starvation.

I went from room to room and eventually ended up standing in front of the most unimaginable of discoveries. This is not a boast that I unearthed the greatest amount of food, but I dare say it was certainly the most unexpected.

I entered the kitchen of this abandoned apartment on the ground floor and beheld a great monolithic iron stove. Back before refrigerators it was the custom to guard leftovers inside them. Rats couldn't get inside, so it was the best place to leave a plate of food. Plus, you could keep it warm for some member of your family who got home late. So, I had high hopes that I might find some rye bread or pumpernickel, or maybe even the end of a sausage or piece of cheese. Anything was possible with such a large stove.

There was nothing on its surface, on the burners, or the shelves overhead. So, all that was left was to inspect the interior of the oven for any remnant of a glorious past feast enjoyed by the totalitarian elite.

I reached down and pulled open the massive black metal door and peered within. I had to squint for a moment to allow the retinas of my eyes adjust to its dark interior, and as the blackness gave way to detail, I could make out a deep round pan. I reached in to grab it, and as soon as I did I felt that it had some heft to it. It wasn't actually heavy, but it certainly weighed a lot more than an empty pan. No doubt, there was something in it!

Gingerly I slid the precious cargo toward me and peered down into it. I couldn't recognize what it was, but it definitely had the appearance of food. What's more it didn't smell rotten. It looked like soup, so I stuck my finger in to see if it was still edible. If it was soup it was certainly very thick soup. It didn't run down my finger like broth. It was more like porridge. Fearful of a poisonous trap left for the Reds I suspiciously sniffed my soggy digit, but sensed nothing toxic. Convinced of its innocence I gently licked my finger and was happy to find that it was sweet. As I continued to lick my finger, relishing each drop, I was reminded of a pastime I used to enjoy with both my mother and our maid, Sonia. I felt it, but I couldn't mentally make a clear image of what it was. Then it struck me. This was cake batter. As a kid I used to always lick the spoon clean when we made cakes, and this was exactly what it was. Ages before, when I had been a child, the prospect of licking the spoon clean on baking day would have satisfied my juvenile

gluttony. But now I was so excited at a similar prospect that I could barely contain myself. This cake, once a luxury, would now serve to sustain us.

We had gone from being prime examples of suffering humanity to the owner of an actual cake in just minutes. It was unfathomable. Six hundred seconds earlier we were about to be shot and drown. Now we were standing before fresh cake batter. We were starving and now had something to eat. But baking a cake meant time, if there was even any fuel. So, we briefly discussed if we could wait for it to bake. The idea of having a bona fide cake to feast upon was a strong argument. And when we discovered that the stove had fuel, and that grandma had a match, all other considerations evaporated. By unanimous proclamation we committed ourselves to enduring the baking process. And, as we had no bread, we would follow Marie Antoinette's advice and eat cake.

Watched pots never boil, and watched ovens never bake, so we distracted ourselves with conversation, speculating on how this had come to pass. The former inhabitants of this apartment must have been about to bake this cake when they had to flee. Everything was all set. They had prepared the mixture, put wood in the oven, and were probably about to strike the match and light the oven when fate came to their door and dragged them away. And all this happened no more than an hour before. Who were they? They might have been Swedes, but the building might have been taken over by their enemies. Maybe they were Nazis, Nazi sympathizers, or Nyilasok. After all, they could afford the ingredients of a cake, which was not something the average nonpolitical individual could. Whoever they were they must have been in a great hurry to leave, electing to forgo the cake, a rare delicacy even for the ruling class.

Separated from our cake by heat and time I went back to rifling through the drawers and closets and shelves with the high hopes of finding something else valuable. If I could come across a little bit of tobacco, for example, I could trade it for almost anything. People went mad for tobacco. At that time it was probably more valuable than money. There was practically nothing to buy with cash and you couldn't smoke money either. But tobacco was always in demand, and if the former inhabitants of this apartment were in a hurry they might have left some behind. There was none to be found however, or anything else of worth for that matter. But I continued to search, investigating every tiny nook and cranny. Finally my nose alerted me that the cake was ready and I raced back to

the kitchen. My grandmother slowly opened the oven door, and using her coat as oven mitts she extracted the golden brown treat it from the oven. The rest of the details are lost in the blur of the celebration we enjoyed. It was delicious and glorious! What a way to celebrate our freedom! The three of us consumed it bit by bit, and we felt full for the first time in months. We had finally come across some incongruity that didn't threaten our existence. It was the first enjoyable surrealism we'd known in what seemed like an eternity. It was the best meal in memory.

In the space of an hour we had gone from the security of the Swedish house to witnessing my friend's murder, to anticipating our own death, to the refuge of this building and a delicious surprise! It was inconceivable. We escaped death by mere inches, and then, our escape was rewarded with a mystery cake. It's something I will taste forever. I just have to think of it to savor its surreal sweetness.