

Judy Abrams (nee Judit
Gruenfeld)
Hungarian Displaced
Person and Holocaust
Survivor
April 1949



Story of Judy Abrams (nee Judit Gruenfeld)
Arrived in Canada April 1949 from Budapest, Hungary



Chestnut Boulevard (Spring 1944,
before WWII)

We were walking along Chestnut Boulevard, my mother and I, hand in hand, walking briskly along the seemingly endless street lined with wild chestnut trees, lush and green displaying white and pink blossoms in clusters, like miniature Christmas trees. In a few weeks the blossoms would drift to the sidewalk, creating a soft pink carpet to shuffle in. The flowers would be replaced by round, spiky green pods, weighing down the thin branches, until they dropped to the pavement in early fall, releasing the shiny mahogany chestnuts I treasured, collecting them by the bagful to hoard in a deep drawer all

winter. There they would gradually lose their sheen and begin to wrinkle, wizened faces of old men, of no interest to me anymore, to be replaced by the new crop of the following spring.

My mother held my hand tighter than necessary. I was already seven years old and not likely to rush heedlessly into the road and although the cars, which passed on this bright, early spring morning drove by leisurely, the grasp of my mother's anxious fingers persisted. To the few pedestrians who witnessed our passage we must have seemed an inconspicuous pair - a dark-haired woman wearing a well tailored tweed suit and the little girl in her pale-blue dress, two large matching bows attaching her thick braids to each other, twin butterflies' wings

propelling her onward holding hands as they walked along the boulevard lined with festive wild chestnuts. They both carried light coats draped over their arms. It was quite warm for April, not unusual to want to walk coatless in the sun.

They could not guess that this was a dangerous thing to do. The coats, so casually turned inside out, bore the telltale yellow cloth star. They were Jews, it was Budapest, April 1944.

"Why should I hide it?" I had turned on my mother in anger before leaving the house. "I'm not ashamed."

"Of course", my tried to sound conciliatory, "but don't forget we're playing a new game. You promised," she reminded me with a forced smile. "You gave me your word to do what I asked." Usually, I was an obedient child and my occasional bouts of verbal bravado were mostly a way of earning more approbation and I had folded my coat inside out with care. My mother had made a courageous decision by taking this seemingly innocent walk. She gripped my hand even more firmly as we walked under the festive wild chestnuts toward the convent of the Ursuline nuns.

She rang the outer bell on the gate of the tall, black iron railing around a large, landscaped garden. Yellow dandelions dotted the shaggy grass and the wilting rosebushes looked as though they badly needed a trim. The green wooden shutters of the stately mansion were shut tight and the rusted spikes of the wrought iron fence also showed signs of neglect. The heavy gate creaked painfully when the young nun in a black floor-length habit opened it. She motioned us to enter quickly and now I clutched my mother's hand, as my stomach seemed to constrict about a pebble I hadn't swallowed.

I stared at the patch of face visible under the stiff white band across her forehead. A starched white bib-like collar was attached to it. Strange, there was no glimpse of hair under the black silk veil flowing from the band to below her shoulders and the only surfaces of skin I could see were her cheeks, round and flushed pink. Her blue eyes under pale, almost invisible eyebrows rested on me briefly, smiling after she had carefully closed the latch. Slim, soft hands escaped from the full sleeves of the ample dress and reached for mine which my mother released reluctantly and I offered, trusting her now that the pebble in my middle began to dissolve.

My mother must have waved to me as she turned from the gate, the iron gate which creaked once more to close behind her. We would not see each other again for more than a year. She may have said good-bye in

words that ended in Pipikem (my little chicken), her favorite endearment for me in Hungarian. I don't know what I answered, but I remember that I felt almost relieved that the new game was beginning at last as she released me to follow her on my own along the pebbled path toward the yellow stuccoed two storey villa behind my companion who stepped briskly ahead. From her waist swung a string of large brown beads, ending in a cross bouncing at every lively step. Her silky black veil, fell in elegant folds from the black tipped pin which secured it at the top of her head. She smelled of plain unscented soap, reminding me of freshly washed laundry. We stopped in front of the shut front door.

"Let's go inside, Ili." She called me Ili, short for Ilona, my new name which from now would replace any other I had been called for the seven previous years of my life.

Nobody had told me about the rumble of cattle-cars carrying their human cargo, the naked bodies under shower-heads streaming gas or the mountains of discarded children's shoes. I only knew that from now on it would be dangerous to tell people my real name and that I had to relinquish my recently found Jewish pride.

The game I had to play was to become Ilona Papp, a Catholic child temporarily separated from her parents who lived in the Hungarian countryside. My mother had told me that I had a crisp white birth certificate to prove this, in case anyone doubted me, but that I shouldn't be afraid as the nuns would be my friends.

The interior of the house was shuttered and the furniture in the large rooms was covered with white sheets, just like in our apartment in Budapest when we used to leave for summer vacation by Lake Balaton or in the Matra Mountains. Most of the nuns had already left for a safer place, the Ursulines' convent in the hills across the Danube. Massive draped chairs and sofas stood guard



eerily in the half-light behind the closed green shutters.

Only one room was bright and cheerful. In her sunlit office the Mother Superior rose to greet me with a smile, suggesting timeless sorrow, beyond the pain of the present moment. She was a tall woman, whose silk veil was even finer than my companion's. She drew me to her. As I let myself be pulled into the generous folds of black cloth, my face touched the silver figure on the smooth wood cross. I drew back from the cold contact. "He is your friend. He loves you and you must love him too", she said.

Later, I learned the stories I would have to know in order to survive. That this new Friend had suffered at the hands of Jews didn't confuse me. It was important, I realized, to dissociate myself from his persecutors. This was the key to the new game. I didn't protest when Sister Elizabeth's scissors snipped the threads that had held the yellow star on my sky-blue coat. She dabbed at the spot with soap and water to mitigate the mark it left.

Sister and I boarded a train for the brief journey from Budapest to the country. As she presented our documents to the Hungarian gendarmes, they looked with respect at her and fondly at the sweet Christian girl in her sky-blue dress going off to be schooled by nuns. It was all so reassuringly easy. There was no more old me, only Ilona, Ili, and nobody would spit at her now because she no longer wore a yellow star. She had become a real Hungarian girl.

The long, unvarnished wooden table was set for a generous afternoon snack in the convent garden when we arrived. Nuns in swishing black habits busied themselves bringing big chunks of crusty buttered country bread and large mugs of milky coffee for us. No more cocoa in my porcelain cup with the blue forge-me-nots. I was ready for this new treat until I noticed a hard leathery layer forming on the surface of the drink. I hated the skin of hot milk. Was this unchristian? I closed my eyes and almost choking on the slimy film, gulped down the warm liquid without pausing for breath.

The Saving Cry (Winter 1944, during the war)

January is a cold month in Hungary, especially in the unheated cellar, which served as bomb shelter during the Battle of Budapest in 1945. That's where my grandmother, my aunt Marika and I hid from Death, a frequent visitor at the time.

In the city Hungarian Jews were the last in Europe to be shipped off in the sealed wagons to the concentration camps of Poland and Germany.

My parents were on one of those trains headed for a camp called Bergen-Belsen, but I was safe with Maria, a Christian friend of our family. When it seemed certain that the Jews of Budapest would not escape deportation and what the Germans called “extermination”.

My parents trusted Maria, a long-time friend and a frequent visitor to our house, who had loved me ever since I was born, had rocked me when I cried as a baby and spoiled me with presents and treats from my first to my seventh birthday in April of this year. Outings with Maria had always been fun. I didn't realize I would not see my parents for over a year as I looked forward to the new 'game' we would be playing together. I was to be Maria's niece, recently arrived in Budapest from the Hungarian countryside. Maria was single and childless, although she was attractive and young enough to marry and have her own family. She led a busy life working long hours in her small office in the Hungarian Ministry of War during the week and spending much time with church related activities on her days off.

She was a kind of godmother to me, even though this was not a Jewish tradition, but with the new authentic-looking documents: the Catholic Birth and Baptismal Certificates, the name of Ilona Papp that Maria had obtained from her church, she had become my godmother in fact. I played my part well, quickly learning the prayers to recite while fingering the milky white beads of the rosary Maria had given me.

My grandmother and my lovely aunt Marika had also found their way to Maria's tiny studio on Sun Hill, overlooking the Danube. They came to her in desperation when the woman who had agreed to hide them in her home in a village near the city, changed her mind and told them to leave. Her fear was understandable. The Jews who had escaped the trains, and those who had the courage to shelter them and were arrested, were marched to the Danube River, lined up on its banks, and shot into the icy water by young hooligans with arrow-cross armbands. Grandmother ('Nagyi' in Hungarian) and Aunt Marika, in spite of the false documents identifying them as Christian Hungarians, had walked carefully to avoid the omnipresent sentries asking passersby for their papers, until they reached Maria, who invited them to stay with her in the studio apartment on the hill without fear or hesitation.

We stayed in Maria's tiny apartment till Christmas Eve, pretending to be part of Maria's family, helping her prepare for the holiday. There was to be no traditional chestnut stuffed goose accompanied by braised red cabbage and followed by a delicious pastry filled with a sweet poppy seed or walnut paste because of the shortage of food at the time, but dinner would be festive all the same. Maria and I had selected the Christmas tree, the first one of my life, and trimmed it with gossamer strands of

angel's hair, candles, and sparklers. It was the dream of every Jewish child come true - a genuine Christmas tree with piles of presents underneath: story books and board games I had chosen. Maria had decided to dispense with the myth of baby Jesus bringing the gifts to good children and let me choose what I wanted. I don't know where the money for all these treats came from, probably some of it from Maria's small salary at the ministry and funds my aunt and grandmother provided by selling a few carefully hoarded pieces of jewelry. I was in the center of the celebrations and somehow didn't miss my parents, about whose fate nobody spoke in front of me.

Maria, Aunt Marika and Nagyi were busy with other preparations: storing flour, onions and potatoes in large jute bags and frying pieces of goose and duck to be preserved in jars of congealed yellow fat. This food was not for immediate consumption, but was stored in the cellar under the house, the place where we and the other tenants of the two story building sheltered when the sirens announced air raids emerging only when we heard the 'all clear'.

On Christmas Eve we stood around the splendidly decorated tree under the tinsel-haired angel perched at the top. I sang lustily with Maria and the two ladies from the apartment next door, all of us devout Catholics, "The angel from heaven descended to earth", a traditional Hungarian Christmas carol. My lovely Aunt Marika who didn't know the words, opened and closed her mouth miming singing, but my grandmother, in spite of the danger of betraying her secret, would not even pretend to join in. She compressed her narrow lips and surveyed what, to her, was a pagan ritual with a steely gaze from her gray eyes. The parcels wrapped in bright, festive paper still lay unopened. We had not yet sat down to eat, had not even come to the refrain of "Behold, behold!" for the last time, when an enormous explosion shook the house. The sudden simultaneous shower of bombs from the skies and the barrage of cannon balls from the hill fortress opposite was so intense that we and the other tenants, did not need the warning of the air raid siren, to move us to gather a few possessions and take shelter in the cellar. Anticipating a long siege, the women had done well to store their provisions. We would not die of starvation if we did survive the artillery fire and the bombs. Mysteriously, the flimsy cellar held out while the house above our heads gradually collapsed. I never had a chance to open the presents of my first and last Christmas.

Bundled in layers of winter clothing the four of us huddled on the lumpy mattress of an iron bed stand in a corner. Maria thought it best not to attract too much attention, although my aunt's blue eyes were reassuringly "Aryan" and in her eternal black clothes, "Nagyi" had begun to look like an old Hungarian peasant instead of the fashionable Jewish

lady she had been in her other life. She bustled about baking yeastless bread (like our ancestors in the exodus from Egypt, only now there was no Land of Canaan in sight). She didn't waste the few stored logs when she stoked the old wood-burning stove and jealously portioned out the remaining bits of preserved duck, goose and the diminishing onions and potatoes stored in the rough jute sacks. When the taps could no longer be counted on to provide us with drinking water, a few brave tenants ventured outside with buckets and pots to collect the unappetizing snow, which we boiled to render it somewhat drinkable.

Deprivation and anxiety did not improve my grandmother's naturally stern disposition, nor did it make me into a more plant child. I prayed with Maria and Auntie, charming the Christian tenants by my faith, but with 'Nagyia', I was demanding and capricious. Maria tried to placate my nervous grandmother while cajoling me into better humor, calling me her "little puppy".

While the Soviet army was fighting the Germans on the ground for control of the city, the American and British planes tried from the air to bomb them into submission. The thin walls didn't muffle the sound of bombs and cannon balls crashing into the ruined house above us. For weeks the battle grew more intense and our lodgings, barely below the ground, became increasingly vulnerable. In the garden adjacent to ours was a "real" bomb shelter dug deep and lined with cement where, some people said, we would be safer during the day. At night, when the combat usually slackened, we could return to our own shelter, they suggested. The first morning that we climbed the stop to the surface to cross the debris littered ground, we stumbled and slipped on the dirty, crusted snow, keeping low as deadly objects whizzed above our heads, exploded beside us, and bullets glanced off the icy mounds. I cried and begged to go back to the basement, but I was pulled and carried along till we arrived at the barely visible steps leading into the deep narrow tunnel where two parallel rows of benches lined the gray cement walls of the shelter.

Most of the tenants sat down close to the other people from the neighbourhood, almost all women and children, perched on the narrow benches wrapped in blankets against the cold. Our small group composed of Maria, Aunt Marika, Nagyia, and me took our places at the back of the bunker, hoping to avoid the scrutiny of strangers. Any feature, word or gesture might betray our ethnic origin, in spite of my murmured Aves accompanying the constant kneading of the rosary by my faithful fingers.

By evening the sounds of battle seemed more muted. Under the cover of darkness we crept back to our insecure shelter, our mattress on the

sagging springs of the ancient iron bedstead and something that passed for an evening meal.

In the morning I wept and screamed and refused to budge. Nagy, her nerves stretched to the limit, gave me a withering look, threw down the pile of blankets she had collected for the journey and muttered, "All right, Miss Hysteria, I'd rather die than listen to you. We'll stay!" This humiliating epithet usually made me raise my volume, but this time I didn't contest the insult, allowing Nagyi to savor her triumph. The treacherous trip to the dismal bomb shelter was canceled and we spent another day in the cellar, listening to the now familiar sounds of war, to my perverse relief.

In the evening when the other tenants returned, they had terrible news. There had been a direct hit on the bunker. A bomb had pierced the seemingly impregnable cement casing. It had made a huge hole in the back, where we had stayed the day before and would surely have sat again. My cry had saved us! We continued our vigil in our fragile refuge for the rest of January.

One day in February an eerie quiet descended on the turbulent world outside. Soon, we hoped and feared the Russians would be coming to 'liberate' us and, rumor had it, possibly some of the few belongings we still possessed. There were other rumors too, so Maria and my aunt, both young and pretty, concealed themselves in the ruins above.

The sun slanted through gaps in the oilskin covering the glassless panes of the basement door when a short, dark-haired man in a Russian uniform with rows of shiny medals suspended from bright ribbons on his chest entered our cellar. He was alone and did not seem to be threatening. One of the tenants, who had been prisoner of war in Russia, had taught me a few Russian words. I called out a brave hello, "Zdrasdviye" one of the tenants must have taught me in anticipation. To our surprise, he did not answer in Russian but asked "Parlez-vous francais?" attempting to communicate with us in the foreign language he knew. This was my grandmother's moment. In her inimitable Hungarian schoolgirl French she answered yes, "Vooi", gradually recovering her air of respectability as she translated for the inhabitants of the cellar the news that the Germans had finally capitulated. The war was over in Budapest at last.

AFTERWARDS

After the Budapest war was over and the city had been officially „liberated“ by the Russians, Maria and Aunt Marika left their hiding places in the ruins of the upper stories of the house, reassured that they were more or less

safe from the 'liberators'. It was February and all that was left of the apartment we had abandoned on Christmas Eve was a pile of rubble. This was not a time to regret lost objects, not even my unopened Christmas gifts. We were alive and Nagyi and Aunt Marika wanted to go 'home' to Pest, on the opposite bank of the Danube Maria was still with us, protecting me from the new dangers of post war occupation. We stumbled down Sun Hill dodging craters in the road and the debris of the once elegant villas, which had lined the steep streets leading to the bank. We crossed the Danube over a temporary bridge made mostly of wood. Gone were the graceful arches of the Chain Bridge, which has spanned the river for a hundred years. Now they were a tangle of twisted metal on broken stone pillars.

We saw houses on our way razed to the ground or cut in half, grotesque cross sections with pieces of furniture and wall paintings exposed to view. Their apartment was miraculously untouched by the war. Only the gray stucco outer walls were pockmarked with bullet holes. My grandmother's apartment was located in a 'better' neighborhood of Pest, behind the Parliament, almost on the river drive. Inside the apartment was dark and somber. Once we were reinstalled, my grandmother dressed in black from head to toe (she had been in mourning since my grandfather's death, thirty years before) and my aunt in muted shades, always in 'good taste', were barely distinguishable from the few pieces of heavy cheerless furniture in dark wood upholstered in gray. I felt alone in the oppressive silence where the women never ceased to listen to the voices of those who were not there. My parents, my other two aunts and their families and my uncle had not yet returned and might never come back.

Maria was ready to begin another life. Our parting was painful for both of us, but she promised to take me on an outing every Sunday. This was to be our secret, our weekly visit to the Catholic mass. Nobody in my family would have approved of my continued religious zeal. To them, I was once more Judit Gruenfeld, but for Maria and me, Ilona Papp had not yet disappeared.

My stay with Nagyi and Aunt Marika came to an end, when my father's family asserted their patriarchal claim to me. The nebulous victory belonged to the Gruenfelds who decided that the home of my Aunt Elza, my father's sister, who had grandchildren of my age living with her, would be the right place for me. I had mixed feelings about this change, apprehensive at moving in with a family of near strangers, relieved at escaping my grandmother's stern and hygienic custody and somewhat guilty at feeling pleased.

Before the war, we had lived on the third floor of my father's family's three story apartment building which was located in an unfashionable part of the city. His parents, two brothers and sister, Elza, lived in the same house, but were much less familiar to me than my mother's relations. My mother had maintained her allegiance to the elegant 4th district (Leopold Town) where her mother continued to live.

During my weeks in Aunt Elza's crowded and somewhat chaotic apartment, I had more fun than I had ever had. True, Uncle Dezso was absent minded and quirky and preoccupied with thoughts of some new business venture and the failure of the previous one. His current investment was in a large quantity of tinned goods, whose labels left no mark on my memory and preserves, pickles of various sizes and hues. Very early every morning, insomnia must have driven him to relocate the mountains from one wall to another of the room, which had served as living room before the war. His wife, my aunt, was very different. Short and plump, she was as funny and loving as Maria. She prepared delicious meals: Chicken soup with dumplings, veal paprikas, overcooked vegetables in the Hungarian style and sugary pastries. Her hot cocoa was thick enough to eat with a spoon. All this, thanks to Uncle Dezso's connections in the black market. Aunt Elza told stories and listened to ours, my cousin Tomi's, Peter's and mine. She was our caretaker and confidante more than their mother, Aunt Hilda, an attractive woman, whose activities accompanied by the click-click of stiletto heels and accompanied by a whiff of delicious perfume, were never fully revealed. Uncle Geza was one of the men who had been "taken away" and would not return.

My cousins were only slightly older than I, but much wiser in the ways of the world and childhood fun. They introduced me to pillow fights on the day we were given our first typhoid vaccine. We romped from their beds to my sofa as soon as the door closed behind the adults, who warned us about the consequences of this exercise and only stopped when, as predicted, our arms and shoulders began to throb and ache and feverish hammers began to echo in our heads.

Tomi and Peter were happy to have a girl to join their games. They taught me to play cards, a repertory of bad words and entertained me with music. Tomi, who later became professional musician, was already an accomplished accordionist. His fingers flew over the white and black keys while alternated pulled out and collapsed the black musical beast strapped to his chest. They also pursued an interest in anatomy, by studying the female body from their resident live model.

Nobody mentioned the words "concentration camp" or "dead". My cousin's father and uncles had been "taken away" or were "dragged

away” and they were not presumed dead, just “lost”. Only one of Aunt Elza’s three sons was found, making his way mostly on foot, from Auschwitz, a notorious camp in Poland. I overheard stories about what had happened to Jews there but I don’t think any of these were real to me until I saw them in print many years later. Uncle Paul didn’t tell anyone about his experiences, but he never seemed to have escaped. Failure and depression haunted him till, once more in exile from Communist Hungary in 1948, bankrupt and deprived of his family, he found himself in a refugee camp in Vienna.

Other members of the family slowly drifted back from hiding, from the countryside, from forced labor contingents, from places as far away as Roumania or Russia. Fortunately, most of them were more ready to go on with their lives than my Uncle Paul.

On the first floor, my grandfather had moved in with my Uncle Max and Aunt Lula. My grandmother, Katrin, had died from a shrapnel wound in their improvised shelter, the windowless bathroom of their apartment, where they had tried to hide from bombs and cannon balls. They were afraid to join their neighbors in the building’s bomb shelter in case they were considered to ‘look Jewish’. Besides, my grandparents had never mastered Hungarian and they worried that their Viennese German would arouse the suspicion of strangers. Years later, I saw a brownish stain on a spare pillow and refused to use it, imagining that this was the one on which she had lain slowly bleeding to death on the tile floor.

Aunt Helen had returned to her second floor apartment. She had survived as a maid in a Budapest hospital, with false documents from a neighbor in the village where she was born. Her two tall sons had joined her there and told tales of bravado about the village girls who had crushes on them oblivious of their real identity. Now they tried to continue their school lives, ping-pong, soccer and girls.

My father’s family had always been in business. They bought and sold wine, beer and other forms of alcohol retail and wholesale. I loved the cool air and the musty smell of wine barrels escaping from the cellar under our house. There was a wagon used for transportation, pulled by ‘Bubi’, a sturdy, placid, brown workhorse. He stood for hours in front of the house, immobile except for the twitching movements of his munching inside the feed bag attached to his ears and the flicking of his tail to whisk away the flies. He exuded a delicious aroma of fodder, straw and manure.

Across the street was a retail outlet, a bar frequented by the working people of the area. Dob utca, Drum Street, was not an exclusive address. That’s where the trouble, which eventually propelled me from Aunt Elza’s

easy-going ground floor apartment to the elegant and formal first floor flat of Aunt Lula and Uncle Max, began. Unsupervised, I had often wandered alone to watch Bubi and talk to the workers who rolled and hoisted the heavy barrels. Eventually, I got into the habit of paying a daily visit to the pub where workers dropped in for a glass of wine, a shot of powerful Hungarian fruit brandy, or a mug of frothy beer. The bartender knew my fondness for the white foam running down the side of the pitcher and usually offered me a 'piccolo', a small glass of blond beer, with lots of bubbles. When news of my drinking habits reached the ears of my proper Aunt Helen, a family council was quickly summoned. Her apartment, often full of adolescent boys, was not considered an appropriate substitute for the lax morals of my Aunt Elza's home. It was decided that I would join my grandfather, Uncle Max and Aunt Lula, who were childless, on the first floor. Uncle Max was kind but gruff and spent most of his time in the cellar, supervising the workers, or the office behind the pub trying to rebuild the family enterprise. Aunt Lula, a buxom lady particularly fond of tight purple wool dresses, was a businesswoman too. She was away from the apartment much of the time and I was alone again, except for Bori, the kind, elderly, lame cook, who let me "help" her make miniature loaves or pastries of my own when she was baking bread or cake.

Solitude drove me to write poetry. Years later, in a leather-bound volume, in my best second grade handwriting, I found one of my poems addressed to a migrating bird. I sympathized with him for having to leave his homeland, but envied him, because he was not motherless, like me. I must have begun to miss my parents.

Then, one day in late spring, when the chestnuts of Fasor were in bloom again, they were there. I don't remember feeling joy, but rather a sense of strangeness and embarrassment. Could I be right?

My mother, father and I were together again. We worked at rebuilding our damaged apartment and our relationship. My Sunday secret outings with Maria were over now. My father hoped to replace them by renrolling me in a Zionist youth movement. My mother thought I'd like to join the Girl Guides with my cousin, Suzanne. I couldn't quite understand why proficiency in the intricate knots I could never master were prerequisite to becoming a member and never did join.

At their Sunday meetings, the Zionist teenagers spent most of their time rehearsing shadow plays behind suspended sheets, reenacting battles between settlers, Arabs and British soldiers, while we, the young ones, had to stand and recite incomprehensible verses about their bravery from yellowed mimeographed papers. I managed to miss those Sunday meetings as often as I could.

I missed Maria, the sweet smell of incense , and the gentle reverberations of the music of the mass, but I realized that I no longer belonged to the worshipers in the gaudy gilded church dedicated to St. Theresa.

At that time I didn't yet know the French expression, 'deracine', rootless, but I began to feel the emotions associated with this state.

The Inkwell

The principal's name was Mr. Gulliver. The sign on his office door told me that. I imagined the principal, like Gulliver in my old story-book, inert on the seashore, criss-crossed with threads fastened by hundreds of tiny men, a giant beached whale in silk knee pants. The real Mr. Gulliver sat behind a massive oak desk under a picture of King George in uniform.

My father handed the principal my report card, the English translation from the Hungarian was stamped and signed to prove that it was the genuine record of my marks in fifth grade, the last class I had attended in Budapest before leaving Hungary forever. Attached was a brief German letter, no grades, just an official seal and a signature testifying that I had been present for three months in a boarding school in Vienna, the first stop on our way to Montreal. Mr. Gulliver stood up, reaching for the cane which I hadn't noticed leaning against his desk. He was a stocky man, with powerful shoulders, his dark buttoned suit jacket fitted tight. He grasped the cane and hobbled closer, glancing from the papers to me. Strict, I thought, but not mean. He had to pull one leg behind the other at every step, but his lameness exacted no pity. Mr. Gulliver was clearly in charge.

"You are a tall girl," he observed, At five foot five, I already towered above my father and was almost the same height as the principal. Mr. Gulliver added, almost as an afterthought, "This is a good report card". I had taken a few English lessons in Vienna, not enough to understand his comments, but my father, who spoke at least four languages fluently and several well enough to communicate, translated them for me.

"Please, please," I begged silently, "Don't put me back a grade." My memories of the humiliating months spent with puny ten year olds in the dormitory of the Viennese boarding school were still fresh in my memory. My silent Hungarian prayer must have been sensed by the principal.

"I will take you to meet your classmates in grade six". One, two, three, four, five, SIX. Thank God! I followed Mr. Gulliver's uneven steps out of the office, along the long corridors lined with camouflage-green metal

lockers, and up the deserted stairs to the door of the classroom. "Grade Six C, Miss Brown", was printed in neat even letters.

The teacher who answered the knock was gray: She had gray hair, wore a gray suit, and a distinctly cheerless look on her wrinkled face, which was suddenly transformed by a toothy smile when she noticed the principal at her door.

Four rows of students snapped to attention and chorused, "Good morning, Mr. Gulliver". As they stood up, twenty-four wooden seats hit the back of their desks. At the teacher's command, there was another clatter of metal and wood. The seats snapped back down. Twenty-four pairs of eyes scrutinized me as I stood in front, like an exotic insect impaled on the blackboard.

Mr. Gullier introduced me to my new teacher, who bestowed upon me a shadow of the smile with which she had welcomed him and turning to the class referred to me by my new Canadian name, "Judy", not the biblical "Judit", nor the diminutive "Jutka". In Hungarian "j" is pronounced like the "y" in you, a soft liquid initial sound. "Judy" was harsh, unfamiliar. The other words she used meant nothing to me. I understood nothing.

I thought about the brown and green desks of my old classroom in „Sziv utca“, Heart Street, my elementary school in Budapest, where two girls shared a bench, my best friend, Mari, next to me. There, the seats did not spring up with a racket and the familiar ham-shaped map of Hungary dominated the wall above the blackboard. No maps here, but another photograph of the king, who seemed to be looking down with a smile at the flag by the window, maybe because it had a miniature Union Jack in the top left corner of the red field. The Hungarian red, white and green flag had a five pointed red Russian star stuck in the middle.

Strange landscapes on the opposite wall. A single tree twisting in the wind over stormy waves and woods on fire, with orange and scarlet leaves. The scenes painted with rough, bold strokes were as alien to me as the words pouring out of the mouth of the teacher.

In Hungary, I could locate the rivers of the country, the Danube and the Tisza and all the counties with their capitals on the classroom wall map. I could recite the poems of the famous Hungarian poets, Petofi and Arany and Endre Ady. But what was the use? Nobody here would understand, or care.

On the blackboard I saw strange spidery writing, angled, with abrupt breaks between the capitals and the lower case letters. We had been

taught "string writing", rounded connecting loops, giving the 'o' the look of a rogue, with a jaunty beret. The trick was not to raise your pen before reaching the end of a word.

"Judy!" The name called was mine. Miss Brown's voice jarred me to attention. She motioned me to an empty desk in the second row. I obeyed, the brown laced shoes, weights, dragging my feet across the floor. "Click!" I sat down. I tried to smile at the boy in the next row, whose curious eyes followed my every movement. He turned away and, without looking at me again, picked up his pen, dipped it into the inkwell on his desk, wiped the excess moisture off the nib and began to write. The paper in front of him was filling up with twin columns, in the same spidery hand I had seen on the board, as the teacher dictated the words one by one to the army of pens marching along lined papers. They were incomprehensible to me.

At last, I recognized one word. It sounded like 'kalcium'. In my old school we had just started to study chemistry. I had been looking forward to the lessons, but one October day my mother told me, "Pack quickly! We finally received our passports. Now we can leave the country." She seemed jubilant. I was not so sure.

"When are we coming back"? I asked her.

"Maybe in a few years if..." If what? If what? I thought, but I knew better than to harass my agitated mother with my questions.

Now I was in Canada, an ocean away from everything I knew, and from everyone who knew me. The teacher continued to pronounce the words. I didn't even have a paper in front of me like all the other students. Set into the desk was an inkwell with a hinged metal lid. I checked. No ink inside. Another word I recognized, 'oxigen'. What you need to breathe. I held my breath and lifted the metal lid of the inkwell set in a circular hole in my desk....slowly with one finger. No danger. It was just an empty container. I let the lid down very, very careful. Not a sound. Good!

I heard a new word that was like 'hidrogen'. "H₂O", I had learned was water. I was thirsty, but I realized that I didn't know how to ask to be excused to get a drink, even if I had dared.

I repeated the inkwell lid maneuver again and again. I was really getting very good at raising and lowering the metal top, until a sudden unintentional pressure of my finger sent the whole inkwell soaring into the aisle. It hit the floor and rolled on, stopping finally at Miss Brown's feet.

She did not smile at me now. The silence in the classroom was ominous; the awesome stillness of the air before the first clap of thunder. It was broken by one sharp command, "Pickitup!" The accompanying hand movement made the meaning clear. I raised myself very gradually. The clunk of the seat was deafening. It was the longest walk of my life. Step by step, I approached the incriminating inkwell, at Miss Brown's pointing toe. My brown oxfords, which had seemed so elegant when we bought them in Vienna, betrayed me at every step, making hollow sounds like the white canes of those who can't see.

The Prisoner

How I envy you, Bird
You are free
Free to fly.
Look at me!
See, I'm a motherless prisoner.
You live with your mother
And are free.
Bird on the branch,
How happy you must be!

In your world
There is no religion, nationality, or
politics,
No life-threatening cannon, pistol
or gun.
You all praise the lord with one
voice
For all bird-thoughts are as one.

Budapest April 1945



Absence

I was far from my
mother
So far
For so long.
I came to know the world
Came to learn
independence
Came to see so many
people
Beautiful and kind

Mean and cruel.
But now in my heart
I feel springing up
A lake of joy
Because I have found
My dear mother
Once more.

Budapest July 1946

Dream

In my dream
I walked by a chattering brook.
In my dream
I flew on a rose petal to heaven
I flew to heaven
To my dear grand mother
For a joyous reunion.
Like raindrops fell our tears
And with us wept the angel choir.

Budapest August 1946

The Heart

What is the heart?
An organ.
When it no longer beats
The cheeks pale
And life ceases to be.
What is the heart?
A pattern painted on paper
Or cut out.
But what is the real heart
The one which feels pain and joy?
Chimera-
A multicolored fantasy-nothing.
And still it can hurt, even break.
Noone can fathom its depths
Not even the most wise,
However great.
The heart remains
A sacred secret
Forever.

Budapest May 1947

Sorrow

Don't buzz, you fly!
Don't soar you little bug!
Don't bloom you beautiful flowers!
And you sun, don't shine!
Let Noone be filled with joy
Let no cheek glow with delight.
Only pain in every room
No happiness anywhere at all.
My soul is consumed by pain
But who can share what I feel?
I know I am all alone.
Well then, buzz you fly!
Soar, you little bug!
Let all the flowers bloom!
It's easy to sorrow
But hard to forget.
Laugh, you world!
At whom?
Me.

Budapest December 1947