

Paul Sherman

Through the eyes of a 9 year old

I was just 9 1/2 years old when the revolution took place. I was living with my mother and grandmother in a flat in Angyalföld. My grandfather had passed away 2 years earlier. My father had divorced my mother shortly after I was born and my stepfather of 18 months was driving a truck somewhere in the country.

The first I knew of my mother's intention to escape from Hungary was one evening in November when she announced that János (my stepfather) had fled the country. A friend of his told us that he took the truck he was driving and instead of cross-country to Debrecen, he headed south towards Italy via Yugoslavia and that we shouldn't expect him back. That's all he knew but it bothered him that János didn't even tell his wife and family so he informed us as it seemed the right thing to do.

My mother couldn't decide whether we should try to escape too or not....my grandmother was quite old, in her 70's and I was too young for her to handle the both of us on her own, not to mention leaving behind everything we had managed to accumulate over the years and leave with virtually what we were wearing. My grandfather provided well for us over the years; he was the secretary of the Budapest Stock Exchange before the war and hoarded shares of quite generous value. But when war broke out in 1939 most of the shares became worthless and he lost everything he invested. We didn't own the flat we lived in, nobody did; the government took them over and charged everyone rent. So there was little to stay for and in the end mum decided to try for a new life while we had the chance.

But she couldn't risk telling me what we were up to and all she said was that we were going on a short holiday and taking only some spare socks and change of underwear. I didn't argue, just dressed and packed. Meantime she asked a close friend who had a car to give us a lift to the Keleti railway station.

Starting Out

Keleti in Hungarian means Eastern of course and I was starting to wonder where we may be headed. I assumed the Eastern station sent trains to the east and the Western to the west whereas it's exactly the opposite, although to this day I've never figured out the reason for this. So actually the train we caught was heading west, towards the Austrian border. What I did figure out was what we were up to and asked my mother about it. She nodded but asked me not to say anything further on the subject, in case someone overheard us and reported us. Although I was just 9½ years old, I knew all about the AVO (the dreaded Hungarian Secret Police) and their treatment of even innocent people, based on little more than suspicion.

Although the events of the next 48 hours are as vivid in my mind as if they had taken place yesterday, two points need to remain blank in this narrative: the name of the town where we disembarked from the train and the name of the guide who guided us to the Austrian border. Over time I have forgotten the name of the small town and the guide was introduced to me simply as "Pista bácsi." I wish I knew who he was, I would love to look him up or his family but alas, I do not.

We were greeted at the railway station by a stranger (to me) who seemed to know my mother and he escorted us to a house where "Pista bácsi" and his family lived. Mum said we would only be staying there a short while, when I enquired about where we would all be sleeping. I was allowed to look around outside and on the street as long as I didn't stray far from the house and would be back by 5.30 for an early dinner.

By dinnertime the number of guests in the house had grown by at least a dozen people, mostly around the 25-40 age group. Dinner was served at 6pm for the guests (Pista's family would eat later, we were told) but there wasn't enough room for everyone at the dinner table and my mother, grandmother and I ate separately in our allocated room. After dinner Pista said I should get some sleep immediately as we would need to be up around midnight and needed the rest for what was going to be a long, arduous night. Mum and granny lay down on a double bed whilst I curled up in a comfortable arm chair and went to sleep after a while.

A Wickedly Cold Night

Pista woke us just after 11pm and told us to dress as warmly as possible as it was going to be an extremely cold night and heavy snow was expected. When we were finished there was going to be a meeting in the dining room. When we arrived, all the other guests were there also, the number now around 20. Mrs. Pista was handing out cups of lemon tea and biscuits to everyone with a friendly smile that put you at ease, despite the concerns of the coming few hours.

Pista, our guide spoke to the group and explained the necessities of the trip, the need to be ultra quiet, no smoking, etc. As I was the only child (at least in this group), he came to me at the end, sat down with me and spoke to me separately from the adults. He said I behaved very adult-like in the circumstances and was very proud of me but it was imperative that I understood how important it was that no one spoke loudly, shouted or made any noise on the trip because the whole group would be jeopardised and possibly caught. To me, he added that in the extremely unlikely event that I got lost, I should not sit down or rest for more than 2 minutes but should keep moving otherwise I would lose the circulation of my blood; that I should avoid at all costs any haystacks as that's where the AVO were likely to be hiding in watch for escapees and to keep an eye out for men wearing uniforms or carrying guns, as well as long, tall towers where the border patrols were stationed. He said he knew how to avoid all those and none of this would happen, but "just in case." His smile was reassuring.

Just before midnight he led the group to the edge of town and counted heads. One more reassuring smile and we started our expedition through the forests and fields. The route was barely a track, almost invisible (certainly at night) but the guide knew his way. We were fortunate that in was a cloudy night with little moon, good for us.

Split Groups

We spread out evenly into a long, thin column headed by Pista who occasionally halted the leaders as he went back to the rear to check everyone kept up and was ok. The first half hour or so was fairly steady but then the column split into two groups: the younger ones who walked faster than the elderly who started to lag behind a little. We were in the latter group as my grandmother in her 70's was the oldest person in the column. But despite her age and health problems (she was diabetic among other things) she kept up, never asked for a rest break and was a real trooper, just couldn't quite match the speed of the younger brigade.

As my mother had her hands full with my grandmother, Pista suggested that I stay with him so I wouldn't get lost. I didn't mind, leading the column most of the time but occasionally going to the rear to make sure everyone was still following. Moving about helped in the extremely cold conditions. After a while, it started snowing again, which slowed down the column, especially the second group, the "oldies." By now my grandmother was starting to feel the pinch a bit and asked if we could halt for a while. Pista only allowed 5 minutes, explaining in whispers that it was very dangerous to stop for longer; a few days ago the AVO had come across a band of refugees not far from here and were always searching for refugees. Besides, the border was only about an hour or so away and once we crossed, we would be met by the Red Cross with hot food, shelter and beds and even a hospital should it be needed. This gave us the needed adrenalin to start up again with renewed determination to get to the border.

I stayed behind this time, helping my grandmother and holding her hand. By now we were the very last trio in the group but with every step the border was closer, and with it, freedom. We made a valiant effort to keep up with at least the last people in the second group who very kindly slowed down a little to allow us to keep up and not lose touch. Although we all knew what would happen if we were discovered by the AVO patrols, this was not something to think about. If it happened, it happened; meantime, better to think about the liberty waiting for us about an hour's walk away to the west.

Maybe 10 minutes later, my grandmother stopped and said she needed to sit for a couple of minutes as her legs just couldn't go on without a break. Mum told me to go to the front and tell Pista we had to stop for a minute. I took off and went past the second group as well as some of the stragglers from the first group. But these were the last people I would see.

Lost on the Frontier

The snow was getting heavy now and I had trouble following the footsteps in the snow. It was covering it up too quickly. I bent down to search but could barely see anything in the dark. I decided to retrace my steps and rejoin the group under the circumstances. But the problem was that my own footsteps behind me were getting covered up with snow as well. I took my best shot as to the direction I had come from and headed back, expecting to see some of the people I had passed not long ago, but saw no one. I stopped to listen, but all I heard was the wind whistling, scattering the freshly fallen snow. It was at that moment in time I knew I was lost.

Panic hit me momentarily, not for my safety but for what my mother would be going through when she discovered her only son was lost on the vast frontier.

I quickly tracked what I assumed was north, hoping to come across foot tracks a few meters away, then turned around and headed south, hoping for the same thing, but there were no tracks in the snow. So I tried east, back to where the 2nd group should be, hoping to hear some movement, although I knew deep inside this was very unlikely with the wind whistling. But I knew that I had to keep moving as standing still meant freezing to death. So I tracked east for about 5 minutes and when I saw no tracks or people, I turned back west again. Or what I thought was west. Without a compass, I only had my memory to rely on for direction.

I continued "west" for 15 minutes on the trot, then changed 90 degrees again to see if I could see tracks crossing my path. I travelled about 100 meters without seeing anything so I turned around and tried in the other direction for about 200 meters. But all I saw was freshly fallen snow.

Without much choice, I decided to try and find the border myself and headed in the direction I assumed west was. I had no idea what to expect on the border....perhaps barbed wire? But then I could follow it to where there was a break. There had to be one otherwise how were we all going to cross into Austria? So I kept walking, silently, my ears always on the alert for human sounds or for any sounds but only the wind kept me company. I had no appetite so food was not a problem. I drank the snow when I was thirsty; there was no shortage of that.

The Haystack and the Watchtower

I walked at least an hour before I came across a haystack in the distance. I was very tempted to crawl into it for the warmth it offered and rest my weary bones for a while but the lectures the guide gave me were fresh in my mind. The AVO sometimes used the haystacks to hide in especially on cold nights so I steered well clear of it and kept going. A short while later I came across a farmer's hut, probably the owner of the haystack earlier. There were no lights on and no smoke from the chimney. Regretfully, I bypassed the hut too at a safe distance. I simply couldn't be sure who was in the hut. And if it happened to be AVO they would know a kid wouldn't be wandering out there by himself, there had to be a group trying to head for the border. I wasn't going to be the one to put them in jeopardy.

Although my legs felt like lead by now, I couldn't stop walking; in fact, I tried running for a few minutes to warm myself up. I stopped looking for tracks a long time ago and just let my legs take me where they went; it made little difference because I was totally lost. The border was only 60 minutes away when I became lost so obviously I wasn't heading west or I would have reached the border by now. But I felt sure the group was over by this time and felt a pang of sympathy for my mother who surely would know I was lost. Also for poor Pista who was sort of responsible for us all.

I wasn't even watching where I was going any longer as I had lost all sense of direction. As a result, I almost ran into a watchtower that sprang up from nowhere! Luckily, because of the darkness, they most likely didn't see me either. But I quickly backtracked away from it as quietly as I could.

A watchtower also meant a border nearby. But where? I tried looking up at it to see which direction the lookout window was facing but it was too dark. It might have had windows facing all four directions anyway.

I circled the tower at a distance, trying to find a path leading to it (so I could estimate some bearings) but the snow had covered everything and gave me no clue. So I picked a random direction and headed that way. After about a half hour I knew it was the wrong direction but as I had no better ideas, I just kept going that way.

An hour later dawn was starting to shed light on the frontier and I had to make sure I walked between trees so as not to be easily spotted in case someone was looking. But at one point the trees ran out into a clearing. However, the clearing led to a road!

I felt safe enough walking along a road so I started in the direction I thought the town that we had departed from lay. There was no traffic at all. After 30 minutes, a car came along. I didn't wave or signal to him and he just drove past. Soon another car came along but this one pulled up on the side of the road. He pulled his window down and asked me where I was headed. It seemed to be a farmer, not a soldier or military person so I told him the name of the town. He said I was walking in the opposite direction (naturally) but it wasn't far away and he would gladly give me a lift. Not having sat down for over 6 hours, I accepted his offer and soon we entered the familiar main street of the town I had left the night before.

Back to Square One

Still being a bit cautious of strangers, I asked him to drop me off a long way from Pista's house and waited till he was out of sight before walking to it. Then came the difficult part. What would they say when I knocked on the door? Did I cause him a lot of problems searching for me last night? Did my mother kill him? Did they even make it? Maybe they got caught while searching for me. Well, only one way to find out; besides, I had nowhere else to go. I knocked on the door pensively.

Pista's wife opened the door and immediately recognised me from last night. She was very surprised to see me there, but obviously didn't know what had happened and went to get her husband who had gone to bed after returning from the frontier. A minute later Pista appeared and was amazed to see me alive and well. He had given up all hope of ever seeing me again. As he told me while they were pumping hot tea into me and preparing a hot bath, he didn't even realise I was lost until the group reached the border. He thought I had stayed with my mother and she in turn thought I went forward to Pista and stayed with him. When they all arrived at the border minus me, only then did they realise the enormity of the situation. My mother collapsed and was taken into the emergency hospital (setup by the Austrian Red Cross) and treated for shock. Pista swore he would search the track on the way back and I'm sure he did but of course I was probably miles away, wandering aimlessly in the -10 degree snowstorm. He didn't give me any chance of making it through that night alive or without getting caught.

After we exchanged stories and I had my bath, they put me to bed to sleep until evening when Pista was taking another group across the border. I would go with them but this time, he made me stick to him like glue the whole way, even though he knew that I wouldn't even squeak loudly if lost again. He was quite proud that I chose to walk all night quietly rather than call out for help when I was still within a reasonable distance from the group the night before. But he was not going to allow me to repeat that a second time, no matter what.

The second trip was old hat for a veteran like me and there were no elderly people this trip so it went quite smoothly without hitches. Some time in the early hours of the morning we reached the border, which was not barbed wire, as I had imagined, but merely 2 deep ditches to indicate where Hungary ended and Austria started. On the far side we could see the lights of the Red Cross hospital and emergency services and.....freedom. Some of the people started celebrating even before we had crossed the ditches but I could hardly blame them.

The Border...and Freedom

As soon as we crossed over, Pista spoke to one of the Austrian officials in German who ran off with me to the largest tent there. My mother was still in the hospital under sedation where I was being rushed that minute. They took me to her bed and tried to wake her up from the sedatives to give her the good news. Eventually she opened her eyes, took in where she was, finally saw me sitting on her bed and then she fainted. It was the only time in my life I had seen my mother faint.

They put me into a bed as well and a doctor checked me over, but declared me 100% ok. Then, about a thousand refugees and Red Cross staff came to visit me and brought me all sorts of gifts and chocolates. Apparently everyone had heard about me the night before, and now that I had

suddenly turned up, they all wanted to meet me and ask me a million questions. My grandmother was a tower of strength through all this. She never doubted for a moment that I would find my way across somehow and rejoin them soon and gave strength to my mother. And she was proved right. A real trooper, may God bless her soul.

Postscript

The next day we left the camp, after the doctor certified my mother fit to travel and off the sedatives. We went to Vienna where we were billeted with a volunteer family until arrangements could be made to transport us to a refugee lager where we could be processed and arrangements could be made for us and other refugees to travel to the USA, England, Canada, Australia or other countries that had accepted refugees from Hungary. As we walked around in Vienna, my mother pointed to a poster showing headlines of that day's newspaper. I spoke limited German (my grandmother had arranged private tuition for me to learn German back in Budapest). The poster decreed: "Lost 9 year old boy found on the Hungarian border, 24 hours later!"

Much later, rumours abound that a movie was made of this episode, although details were very sketchy. By then we were on our way to Germany and from there, Australia. I never saw the film, if indeed it was made, nor even know its name.

We stayed in a lager in Salzburg until April of the following year at which time we were put onto a train for Bremen, to catch the Fairsea, an Italian converted refugee ship that took thousands of us to Melbourne, Australia where my aunty and her family, who had emigrated there in 1939, awaited our arrival and welcomed us to our new homeland.

Paul Sherman

Paul has been living in Sydney since his arrival in May of 1957. After a brief stint in the Australian Army, he joined the Globus Group of Companies where he was Customs and Shipping Manager from 1967 until 2000. His interests are computers and bridge (he was among the top 20 bridge players in Australia until his retirement in 2002). He has never married.

Paul's first visit back to Hungary was in 1973 and he has made several trips back since then. His late mother also visited frequently until her passing in 1988. His grandmother sadly passed away 2 years after her arrival in Australia, but not before seeing her other daughter, Eva again and her 2 grandchildren, Christina and Wendy, whom she had never met previously.

Although Paul's stepfather János did follow them to Australia, eventually they divorced. At that time, Paul decided to abandon his stepfather's surname and chose Sherman for ease and convenience in his adopted English speaking country.