Péter Hargitai

No-Man's Land 1956

"When Stalin's Torch lights up the sky, you have to hit the ground," my father said. "Fall down. It's a matter of life and death." My father and I were crammed together with a bunch of strangers in a truck headed toward the Austrian border. But the truck could only take us so far. We would eventually have to trek across several kilometers of frozen marshes known as No-Man's Land. "We all fall down," my father winked at the dark faces, "like in the game A pocket full of posy." It was meant as a joke but no one was laughing.

I frowned. I was too old for a nursery rhyme. I was already nine. Old enough to know that we could not go back to our homeland because the Russians crushed our revolution. And if I didn't do as my father said they might even shoot us. There were Russians soldiers along the border. My father had smeared black shoe polish all over my cheeks, nose, chin, ears, behind the ears, everywhere except the eyes. I had trouble seeing in the dark of the canvas covered truck. My father's face was a black smudge. Pieces of straw stuck to his patchy coat. I wasn't used to being on a truck, not for this long, not at these breakneck speeds, and not at these hours, way past my bedtime. I didn't want to play A pocket full of posy. I didn't really want any black shoe polish on my face, didn't really want any war paint. And how could Stálin, "the great father and liberator," light a torch in the sky? He was dead, wasn't he?. Even his statue was torn down during the revolution. I knew. I was there with my mother when it happened.

My father saw that I was about to cry or get sick so he said: "Oh, don't worry about Stálin's Torch. It's not like his ghost is haunting us in the heavens. It's just a fancy name for a flare. That's all."

I told him I missed my mother.

"I know, son. I miss her, too."

She had been with me when the demonstration started on Petõfi Square on the 23rd of October in 1956. I remember how she squeezed my hand when we heard a man on a makeshift pedestal recite "Rise Up, Magyars":

Rise up, Magyars! Your homeland calls!
The time is here! It's now or never!
Shall we be free or slaves forever?!

"FREE!" the crowd roared. Thousands swelled the square, banners in hand, students arm in arm from the nearby university, workers from the factories, wearing their light work clothes and berets. My mother let me climb a lamp post sign so I could see. There were people everywhere. Hungarian colors waved in the air, many with a gaping hole cut in the center where the red star had been. Then a chant: Ruszkik haza! Russians Go Home! A red flag burst into flames and they cheered the rising smoke. Word got out that there would be another demonstration at Heroes Square where demonstrators were trying to pull down the statue of József Stálin.

My mother and I took the subway to the square, hundreds joining us at each of the stations where one wave after another lapped into overflowing cars. I had never seen anything like it. Something told me there would be no homework due in the morning. Or the morning after that. We were soon among a mass of people swarming up the stairs into the darkening air.

The throng at Heroes Square clamored wildly. Truck headlights crisscrossed beams, fixing at last on József Stálin's giant bronze knees. The metal knees creaked like a hinge, then buckled, the

steel-braided noose vibrated around the statue's neck. The truck's engine whined. Something had to give. It was József Stálin. His legs. They gave out, ripped just under the knee, and left a pair of hollow boots on a pedestal of marble. The truck dragged the hulk onto the cobblestone, showering sparks each time the great father and liberator clanged against trolley tracks along the boulévard that carried his name. A woman spat. Shouting. Screams. Feet shuffled somewhere in the crowd. A voice not very far away said that ÁVO men, the dreaded secret police were ferreting a stash of guns into the city sewers. "Flush them out!" the crowd shouted. "Flush out the rats!"

My mother jerked on my arm. Dragging me alongside her, she wormed her way through the jostling crowd back toward the subway entrance. But there were so many people, it was impossible to take the subway back. We had to go on foot for several city blocks. Strange faces surged from every direction, and we were losing our way. Then we heard what we thought was gunfire somewhere in the distance. The crowd was going wild. The air reeked of gasoline. More cries of "Flush out the rats!" Suddenly there was panic everywhere.

My mother found the church in the nick of time. We darted through an alley to get to the church, a vast, dark cathedral. The heavy doors creaked as they opened. There was just enough light coming through the stained glass windows to see a metal bird perched over the altar. Its wings radiated shiny rays like a rising sun. My mother took me over to the statue of the Virgin Mary. I remember asking her why the nose was broken off. She took a deep breath, let out some air and said, "the war," as if those two words explained everything. I nodded as if I knew. It was not the time to ask any more questions. Especially when she was praying.

I remember slipping out of her hand and wandering back to the heavy doors. It was stupid of me but I opened the door. Just a slit. That's when the shooting started. RAT-TAT-TAT. Like that! Bullets were flying, chipping stone. The next thing I knew, my mother let out a cry and yanked me from the door. She held on to me so tight I couldn't breathe.

I told my father I couldn't breathe. That I was going to get sick. Right here in the truck. Right in front of everybody. "No, you're not," my father said. " You're just scared. You're going to have to be brave. Your mother would want you to be brave."

I was scared. Not of the Russians so much but of never seeing my mother again. Every time I thought of her, I felt something tighten in my chest and I thought I was going to get sick.

"We'll be there soon," my father said. "I don't want you to worry about your mother, son. "If she doesn't come after us, I will go and get her. I promise." Soon the bumpy ride would be over and we'd start our march across No-Man's Land. I hated telling my father I was going to be sick. It was only yesterday that I got really sick. It was when my mother and father had their big fight about leaving Hungary and going to America. My mother had run out of the apartment in her pajamas and into her bother's car. The gray Pobeda. It was a Russian car. She slammed the door and pushed down the locks. My father stormed after her. And I after him. He picked up a loose cobblestone and threatened to bust the windshield. "Come out or I'll break the window and your neck."

"No!" I shouted. I tried to pry the cobblestone from my father, but he had an iron grip on it. My mother yelled at him from inside the car, "Get him inside, or he'll get sick!"

My father slammed a cobblestone against the windshield but only made it crack. I remember wheezing, gasping for breath. My father threw the cobblestone at one of the headlights and the glass exploded into a thousand tiny pieces.

My mother bolted from the Pobeda. My father tackled her.

"Let me go! You're insane! You wrecked his car!"

"The hell with your brother and the hell with his car. The son of a bitch works for the ÁVO. You know it. I know it."

"You're crazy," my mother shouted.

But my father grabbed my mother and was twisting her arm.

"Let go of her!" I screamed but my father ignored me.

“You’re going to do as I say!” my father shouted at my mother. He stabbed a finger at her chest. This was it, he said. This was where their ways went different. “Damn you!” he said before letting her go.

“Well, I’m not going,” my mother shouted back. “No one’s going. There’s no money to go. You think they’re going to let you walk across the border just like that? Because your son needs a blessed operation?! What are they going to do in America? Give him a new heart? Don’t you think I know you’re just using that? Just to kick up everything and get the hell out! Go! What should you care? You don’t even care if your son gets killed!”

There was that tight feeling in my chest again. I grappled with the truck’s canvas where there was a flap. I needed some air to rid myself of the feeling. The man who was our guide directed a flashlight at me, then moved the light to a gaping hole in the floorboards. “If you have to vomit, vomit through there,” he said.

I crawled to the hole, the flashlight turned off. Once I was done throwing up into the hole, my father took a handful of straw and wiped around the edges.

Then suddenly the ride got very bumpy. They were saying we must be close to the border. On No-Man’s Land. A few snowflakes swirled in through the opening, empty fields stretching along both sides of the highway. Not a tree in sight. Only brown hedges along the canal. I was about to close the flap when I spotted a headlight in the distance. The headlight was gaining on us, swelling to a huge circle. There was no mistaking. We were being followed.

Our guide ordered everyone to get down. Then he fished out a machine gun from among the hay. The headlight gaining on them belonged to a military vehicle. Of that our guide was certain. By its brightness, he said he could tell it was a military cycle in hot pursuit. A lot more than 6 volts. And the light was flashing on and off. “Probably the goddamm ÁVO,” he said.

I swallowed hard.

Our guide pounded on the cabin with the butt of his gun, “Give it gas, for Chrissake.”

“What if it’s the Pobeda?” I heard myself blurt out. “My uncle’s car!”

“The boy’s right. The boy’s right,” my father said. My father was insistent. “It’s my brother-in-law’s Pobeda, I’m telling you. It’s got a cracked windshield and a busted headlight. It does that. It flashes on and off. It’s crazy.”

“You’re crazy,” the guide said.

I knew my father wasn’t crazy. He was the one who busted the headlight.

“Stop the truck!” my father shouted.

“Get down!” the guide bellowed at the top of his lungs. “Everybody get down!”

We all lay still, flattened to the floorboards and each other. The guide and his gun were moving toward the back of the truck. Before he could stick the muzzle through the opening and get off a few rounds at the mysterious headlight, my father was on him. They grappled for the gun. The gun went off erupting in a flash of loud volleys. The tires screeched, we lurched forward. My father slammed the man into the canvas which gave unexpectedly. Our guide was pitched headlong onto the icy corn-stubble, right into the path of the car following us. The car fishtailed to a stop, its one headlight trained on a snow covered ditch.

It was the Pobeda. My mother and her brother did come after us like my father promised they would. When we were reunited with my mother, I couldn’t begin to describe what I felt. All I know is that she held me as tightly as she had in that church once the bullets started flying.

Péter Hargitai

Péter Hargitai is now an English professor at Florida International University. He was nine years old when he left Hungary in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution. On his visits he often goes to the church where he and his mother were caught in a crossfire. After nearly sixty years the bullet holes are still there.