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The poet of the camps

Behind me two corpses/ Before me the world', declared Miklós Radnóti, in a poem that he composed at the age of twenty-eight.[1] The two corpses were those of his mother, who died giving birth to him, and that of his stillborn twin brother of whose existence Radnóti only became aware when he was already in his teens. The significance of the poem's title, *Twenty-eight*, lies in the fact that it is both the age at which Radnóti wrote the poem and also the age at which his mother died.

Your murderer!' cries Radnóti, perhaps a touch melodramatically, gazing forlornly at a framed photograph of his happy, forever young mother. 'Were the two deaths worth it?'

I can't help feeling that, for Radnóti, the question was rhetorical. His extravagant expressions of remorse at his mother's untimely death coexist uneasily with the searing beauty of his language and with the self-absorption that is evident in the final stanza:

> Mother dear, my blood-soaked victim
> I have grown into manhood
> The sun burns intently, blinding me
> Motion to me with your butterfly hands
> That you know things have turned out well
> That your son is not living his life in vain.

By the time Radnóti came to write these verses he was already an acknowledged, if controversial, poet. Having given up a secure and potentially lucrative career in the textile trade alongside his maternal uncle, who had adopted Radnóti after the death of his father, the young poet

devoted himself to his art. In his early twenties, Radnóti helped to found an avant-garde journal, *Kortárs*, published several volumes of poems and enrolled at the University of Szeged where he studied French and Hungarian literature.[2] Radnóti eventually graduated from the university with a doctorate, which received the highest possible grade from his examiners, as well as a teaching certificate.[3]

Miklós Radnóti, 1930

Radnóti's occasionally irreverent verses brought him to the attention of the authorities. In 1931, aged just twenty-two, his home was raided by the police and copies of an anthology containing several of his poems were confiscated. A court in Budapest sentenced the young poet to eight days' imprisonment for blasphemy and libel. However, the sentence was suspended following the intercession of one of Radnóti's professors at Szeged University, Sándor Sík. An accomplished poet, a highly respected literary scholar, and a priest of the Piarist Order, Sík's testimony, in which he averred that Radnóti's poems, though 'tasteless and revolting', were in no sense blasphemous, carried considerable weight

with the court.[4] One of the poems that led to Radnóti's prosecution is entitled *Arckép* (*Portrait*). Consisting of just five lines, *Arckép*, in which Radnóti compares himself to Christ — without even a hint of irony or embarrassment — suggests that he already had a highly developed sense of self-worth and perhaps even an awareness of his singular destiny:

> I am twenty-two years old. This
> is how Christ must have looked in autumn
> at the same age; he was fair-haired
> and hadn't yet grown a beard;
> girls fantasised about him in their dreams.

Although Radnóti managed to avoid imprisonment for blasphemy, his second brush with the law, which was wholly unconnected with his art, led inexorably to his death in November 1944. In the intervening years he had married his teenage sweetheart Fanni Gyarmati, embarked on a tempestuous love affair with an artist, Judit Beck, and pursued his burgeoning literary career. Prolific as well as gifted, Radnóti quickly established a reputation in Hungary and abroad as a poet and literary translator. Many of his poems from this period, like *Október, délután*, are sensuous celebrations of the passing seasons and of romantic love. 'Fanni is sleeping beside me under the oak', begins the poem. With the tenderness of a lover, Radnóti describes Fanni as she wakes:

> Fanni awakes, her sleepy eyes blue,
> her beautiful hands like the hands of a saint in a holy painting,
> carefully she brushes off the leaves that have fallen on her as she slept
> before tracing my lips with her hand

her fingers resting a while on my teeth
urging me not to speak.

In the last lines of the poem, Radnóti conjures up an exquisite image of a sudden downpour of rain that persists for several days, 'pinning November on us like a black ribbon'.

However, it is the poems that Radnóti wrote in the final years of his life for which he will be chiefly remembered. Instead of romantic love or the timeless beauties of nature, new subjects had come to dominate Radnóti's art as well as his life — the debasement of social and political mores in Hungary and the intensifying vilification and persecution of the country's Jews. Although Radnóti protested in a letter to the Hungarian-Jewish writer and poet Aladár Komlós that he didn't 'feel Jewish',[5] that he hadn't been 'raised in the Jewish faith', and that he regarded himself as 'just a Hungarian poet', Radnóti had been born into a secular Jewish family. Before changing his name to Radnóti in order to facilitate his acceptance as a Hungarian poet, his family name had been Glatter.

Radnóti's clearly defined sense of identity as a Hungarian poet, as a non-Jew, and as a Catholic were to prove irrelevant. Under the Anti-Jewish Laws enacted from 1938 onwards, Radnóti couldn't escape his Jewishness. As someone born to Jewish parents and still nominally affiliated to the 'Jewish confession' — he only converted to the Catholic faith in May 1943 — Radnóti was deemed a Jew and subject to far-reaching restrictions.

The 'Law on Assuring a More Balanced Social and Economic Life' — the 'First Jewish Law' — was passed by Hungary's Parliament on 29 May 1938. The statute introduced strict limits on the proportion of Jews who could be employed as publishers, editors, or journalists, as well as

on the proportion of Jews permitted to work in the theatre and film industries.[6] Although Radnóti could continue to publish reviews, essays, and poems on a freelance basis, he was effectively precluded from joining the permanent staff of a journal or newspaper, which would have provided him with a regular salary. Because of Radnóti's Jewish origins, a teaching post was also out of the question, despite his impressive academic qualifications. Radnóti's modest income consisted of limited financial support from relatives, as well as monies earned from private tutoring and occasional freelance work for publishers. From 1939, with the enactment of the so-called 'Second Jewish Law', or 'Law for the Limitation of the Jewish Occupation of Public and Economic Affairs', Radnóti's ability to support himself from journalism or teaching was further curtailed.[7]

Despite the psychological and economic impact of Hungary's Jewish Laws, which treated Jews as alien and unwelcome, Radnóti stubbornly persisted in seeing himself as 'just a Hungarian poet'. In one of his most celebrated later poems, *Nem tudhatom* (*I Cannot Know*), completed in January 1944, he gave voice to an exasperated but abiding love for his homeland, a country that had rejected him, consigning Radnóti to pariah status. Here are the opening lines of the poem in my own translation:

> I have no way of knowing what this land may mean to others,
> But for me this small country, bathed in fire, is my birthplace,
> It's the far-off world of my childhood.
> I emerged from this land like a delicate shoot from a tree,
> And I hope that, in time, my body will sink back into this earth.
> I am at home here.

In an earlier poem, *Nyugtalan orán* (*In a Restless Hour*), completed in January 1939, just months after the passage of the First Jewish Law, he ponders whether, like the 'mute stones' amongst which he now finds himself, he should embrace silence? 'Tell me,' he cries, 'what would induce me to write poetry now? Death?'

Fortunately for future generations, Radnóti could not remain silent in the face of the savagery and injustices that he witnessed and even experienced at first hand. Rather than opting to remain mute, he became the doomed yet inspired chronicler of the collapse of humane, civilized values in his homeland and across much of Europe. As Radnóti declared in a poem entitled *Töredék* (*Fragment*), which he completed in May 1944, just months before he was murdered by his Hungarian guards: 'I lived on this earth at a time/ when informing was considered a virtue and the murderer/ the traitor and the robber were heroes'.

Simon Leichner at the Jewish Community Centre in Sighet, March 2006

'I was conscripted into a labour battalion,' Simon Leichner tells me in fluent Hungarian when I visit him at his village home in Ocna Șugatag, Romania.[8] Simon, whom I had been introduced to at the Jewish Community Centre in nearby Sighet, was born in 1922. He was just eighteen years old when Hungarian troops reoccupied northern Transylvania, including Ocna Șugatag and Sighet, in 1940. Following mediation by Germany and Italy, Romania ceded a large tranche of territory to Hungary, amounting to 43,000 square kilometres. The Second Vienna Award, as the settlement came to be known, enabled Hungary to recover a significant portion of the land that had been lost to Romania in the peace settlement following World War One.[9]

Later, in Sighet, I am introduced to Magda, an ethnic Hungarian who has spent her whole life in the little town that adjoins Romania's border with the Ukraine. 'Things really started to change when the Hungarian troops arrived here!' Magda tells me.[10]

A spry woman in her eighties, just two years younger than Simon, Magda chain smokes as she prepares lunch for me and for Öcsi, her middle-aged son, in their rambling old home. Recently widowed and in his late fifties, Öcsi tells me that he bought the property, located in the centre of Sighet, from two elderly Jewish spinsters. The women, who had survived deportation to Auschwitz, had no living relatives. Weary of living in such a draughty old house, they'd decided to sell the property and move into a modern apartment in a Ceaușescu-era *bloc*.

'The Hungarian soldiers immediately set to work to improve the town's flood defences,' Magda tells me, as she stirs soup in a large enamel pot. 'The Romanians didn't do anything in all the years they were here!'

Known as Sziget — 'island' — in Hungarian, the town derives its name from the fact that it's almost entirely enclosed by two rivers, the Tisza and the Iza. For as long as anyone could remember, Sighet had been subject to severe flooding.

Magda, like most of her family and friends, was thrilled by the restoration of Hungarian rule over Northern Transylvania. But there was unease amongst the territory's 138,000 Jews, who were keenly aware of the growing climate of anti-Semitism in Hungary and of the raft of anti-Jewish legislation that had been enacted in recent years. In addition to the First and Second Jewish Laws, these included measures conscripting able-bodied Jewish men into specially constituted auxiliary labour battalions.[11] As labour servicemen, Jews were routinely required to dig anti-tank ditches, carry munitions, help to build roads and bridges, load and unload freight trains, and work in mines.

According to the American historian Raul Hilberg, as many as 130,000 Jewish men may have served in Hungary's auxiliary labour battalions during World War Two.[12] Of these, up to 40,000 died, many of exhaustion, disease, malnutrition, or starvation. Withholding part — even a substantial part — of men's rations was not uncommon. For example, Ferenc Pándi, a labour serviceman stationed in the village of Sianki in Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, wrote in his diary: 'Our food [ration] for a day looks quite good on paper… but the reality is different. For example, yesterday's supper was plain bean soup with six to seven beans. It was almost like plain water'.[13] Others died as a result of brutal and sadistic treatment by their Hungarian officers and NCOs. In his detailed account of Hungary's auxiliary labour system, Randolph Braham recounts numerous examples of ill-treatment, including the fate of a unit of labour servicemen stationed in occupied Soviet territory:[14]

> Some of the guards amused themselves by hosing down the Jews in winter until they became 'ice statues' or by tying them onto tree branches with their hands tied against their backs. These, and many other similarly cruel 'amusements', were normally carried out after the Jews had returned from their work.

German army officers who witnessed the treatment of labour servicemen by Hungarian officers and NCOs were appalled. They repeatedly warned their Hungarian counterparts that they had to choose between beating the Jews or using them as an effective workforce.[15]

Unlike many of his peers, Simon Leichner was lucky. When I ask him whether his unit, comprising between two hundred and fifty and three hundred Jews, had been given insufficient or inedible food, Simon shakes his head emphatically. 'No, we always had good food, decent food,' he says. 'We didn't go hungry or anything like that. Definitely not! We were fed three times a day — in the morning, at lunchtime, and in the evening. And there was always a decent amount of bread.'

Even so, life as an auxiliary labour serviceman was far from easy for some of the Jews in Simon's company, particularly those who were unaccustomed to manual labour. 'There were doctors and other well-off people from Budapest,' he tells me. 'They weren't used to the kind of rough work we had to do… They were *uriemberek*, gentlefolk.'

Six days a week Simon and his company felled logs in the forests, built bunkers, and dug holes for landmines in a desperate bid to impede the Soviet Red Army's advance. However, on Sundays, some of the men from Simon's company would put on a show. 'The Hungarian soldiers really appreciated it,' Simon tells me, smiling. 'They were good shows!'

'Was there music?'

'Some people played instruments, some sang, others danced.'

'Were people forced to perform?' I ask. I had a mental image of the Jewish musicians in Nazi concentration camps who were ordered to play for their guards and fellow inmates.[16]

'Not a bit of it!' says Simon. 'Our life wasn't bad at all. It was bad for those who were taken away [to the death camps].'

'What about the Hungarian NCOs and officers who commanded your company?' I ask. 'Were they violent or abusive?'

'No, not really. They were fine.'

And clothes, did they issue you with clothes and proper boots?' Although the situation was to improve later that year while Vilmos Nagy was briefly Hungary's Minister of Defence, 'practically all of the labour servicemen served in their own civilian clothes and footwear' by the early months of 1942.[17] Inevitably, these became tattered and worn as a result of prolonged and intensive use, particularly in the arduous conditions encountered in the Ukraine. At the same time, many labour conscripts, desperately hungry on account of their meagre and irregular rations, which were not always provided in full, bartered some of their clothing for food.

'They gave us clothes,' says Simon, although he remembers that the garments were thin and of poor quality. 'Perhaps some of the clothes came from Auschwitz?' he muses. After the War, he met several camp survivors who had returned to their homes in Sighet and the surrounding villages. Simon learned from these men, as well as from photographs in newspapers, that the inmates at Auschwitz

had been issued with threadbare striped uniforms. 'That's the type of clothes we were given,' he says.

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Miklós Radnóti was conscripted into a Hungarian auxiliary labour battalion in September 1940 when he was thirty-one years of age. Unlike Simon Leichner, who was accustomed to manual labour and to being outdoors in all weathers, Radnóti's working life had been spent as an editor, poet, and literary translator. A medical examination, conducted just weeks after Radnóti was called up, revealed that he was suffering from two hernias. Even so, army doctors ruled that he was well enough to remain with his unit, despite the strenuous nature of the work that the labour conscripts routinely performed.[18]

Until mid-December 1940, when Radnóti was discharged, he was deployed with his comrades in various locations, including territory newly recovered from Romania. His unit's duties involved dismantling the defensive positions that had been constructed by Romanian troops, including wire fences and metal posts. Whether through bureaucratic indifference or a genuine lack of resources, Radnóti and his fellow labour servicemen were not provided with tools or even gloves and were reduced to working with their bare hands.[19]

In summer 1942 Radnóti was called up again, serving until May of the following year. Initially, he was despatched to a region vacated by Romania. Subsequently, Radnóti was sent to an arms factory in northern Hungary and then to a machine workshop in Újpest, close to the capital. While posted in Újpest, he was routinely granted permission to sleep at home in the small apartment he shared with Fanni, his wife. However, in contrast to his earlier period of labour service, Radnóti was now required to wear a yellow

armband at all times that immediately identified him as a Jew.[20]

In March 1943, while Radnóti was waiting at a tram stop in Budapest, a reserve army officer noticed the yellow armband and ordered the poet to accompany him to the nearby Albrecht barracks. Over the course of several hours a group of jeering Hungarian soldiers beat and humiliated Radnóti, together with two other Jewish labour conscripts. Before Radnóti was released his hair was roughly shorn off, giving him the appearance of a convict. As an additional indignity, he was forced to pay the barber for his 'services'. Radnóti was severely traumatised by the incident. He ceased making entries in his diary and only resumed writing poetry after an interval of several months.

Radnóti was called up a third and final time in May 1944, serving until his death in November. During this period, he worked in various locations, including the infamous copper mine at Bor in present-day Serbia. The mine, which contained huge reserves of copper and other precious metals, was of considerable importance to the German war effort, particularly after Axis troops were forced to withdraw completely from Soviet territory.

Radnóti composed his *Seventh Eclogue*, one of his most beautiful and moving poems, while stationed at Lager Heidenau, close to Bor. As the exhausted men around him slept, he remained awake, crafting verses of extraordinary poignancy and power. The *Seventh Eclogue* takes us right into the night-time barracks with its snoring, ragged labour servicemen lying asleep on narrow wooden boards. The men long for their distant homes while uneasily aware that they may have been destroyed along with the familiar, civilized world to which they belonged — casualties of a brutal and remorseless war: 'Tell me, does that home still exist where they know what a hexameter is?' The *Seventh Eclogue* also

allows us to glimpse the petty privations to which the labour conscripts were subjected by their guards:[21]

> Without commas, one line touching the other,
> I write poems the way I live, in darkness,
> blind, crossing the paper like a worm.
> Flashlights, books — the guards took everything.
> There's no mail, only fog drifts over the barracks.

The Hungarian labour conscripts at Bor toiled alongside 'Serbian convicts, Greek and Russian prisoners' as well as Italians.[22] There were also ultra-Orthodox Jews from Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia and present-day Slovakia, as well as Christians, mostly Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, who had refused to bear arms.

Conditions at Bor were unremittingly harsh. In his history of the Hungarian Holocaust, Randolph Braham records that the labour servicemen 'worked under gruelling conditions for about 11 hours a day, receiving 7 *dinars* and half a pound of bread and a portion of watery soup per day in compensation'.[23] Braham notes that a number of the Hungarian officers and NCOs accompanying the men 'distinguished themselves by their cruelty', while some even stole their rations.[24]

One of Radnóti's final poems, *Forced March*, was written in September 1944, just days before the poet and many of his comrades were evacuated on foot from Bor as the Soviet Red Army drew closer. 'Only a fool collapses in a heap on the ground, gets up and trudges on,' begins the poem. Instead of remaining where he is, the labour conscript in Radnóti's poem hurries to rejoin the column of exhausted men. 'Why?' someone asks him. 'Because my wife is waiting for me,' comes the answer, 'and a better, more beautiful death'.

A contingent of 2,600 labour servicemen, escorted by Hungarian soldiers, left Bor on foot on 29 September.

Ambushed by Yugoslav partisans, the Hungarian guards surrendered. The partisans freed the labour conscripts, who were provided with food and shelter by local civilians until arrangements could be made to transport them to Timișoara in western Romania, pending their eventual repatriation to Hungary.[25]

Radnóti had left Bor almost two weeks earlier with a large group of labour servicemen and an armed escort. The column, which was 'driven mercilessly with little or no food and water', headed towards Belgrade.[26] Serbian civilians, moved by the men's plight, tried to offer help. After a lengthy halt in Belgrade, the column made its way, in stages, towards Crvenka in northern Serbia. Pausing for three days in the town of Novi Sad, Radnóti and his fellow labour conscripts were given no food by their guards. In their desperation, some of them resorted to eating straw that they managed to boil on an old stove.[27]

In Crvenka, an SS unit methodically murdered several hundred men from the column who were viewed as surplus to requirements.[28] The rest, including Radnóti, 'whose feet were covered with open wounds' and who was racked by horrific toothache, were marched to the southern Hungarian town of Mohács. From Mohács, a train took Radnóti and the other survivors to Szentkirályszabadja.

Those who saw and spoke to Radnóti at this time, including a fellow labour serviceman who had known the poet in Szeged, later remarked that he appeared weak and listless and that his shoes were completely worn out.[29] On the road leading to Mohács, Radnóti is thought to have parted with his wedding ring, giving it to a labour conscript who had promised him food. In the event, Radnóti received nothing.

The precise details of Radnóti's onward journey from Szentkirályszabadja towards the Austrian border remain

unknown. He and his comrades almost certainly set out on foot in the first week of November, although Radnóti, along with others too ill or exhausted to walk, may have been transferred to horse-drawn carts requisitioned for the purpose.

According to several accounts, Radnóti was taken to the town of Győr together with a number of other men in urgent need of medical attention.[30] But the hospitals in Győr, already overwhelmed with the sick and injured, refused to admit them. At this point, Cadet Sergeant András Tálas, commander of the Hungarian soldiers escorting Radnóti and his ailing comrades, took the decision to dispose of them on the grounds that they could be of no further use.[31] On or about 9 November 1944, at the village of Abda, twenty-two labour conscripts, including Radnóti, were summarily executed, each with a bullet to the nape of the neck. The bodies were hastily buried in an unmarked grave.

In June 1946, when the communal grave was exhumed, one of the corpses was described as male, with light brown hair and several missing upper front teeth, as well as a crowned lower tooth. The body was officially identified as: 'Radnóczi (Radnóti) Miklós poet Budapest, Pozsonyi út 1-4'.[32] Among the personal possessions found with Radnóti was a small, yellowed notebook containing his final, agonized verses, including a cycle of four terse poems entitled *Razglednicák*, a Serbian word meaning 'postcard'. *Razglednicák* is both an ironic allusion to the brevity of the poems and to the fact that they were written while Radnóti was far from home and from Fanni, his wife. Consisting of just a few lines each, stripped to their bare poetic essence, Radnóti's 'postcards' convey the futility and brutishness of war as well as the awful fate of Hungary's auxiliary labour servicemen.

The very last poem Radnóti composed was written on a scrap of paper inserted in the notebook. It is dated 31 October 1944, and Radnóti has written 'Szentkirályszabadja' next to the date. In the poem, which is all the more powerful because of its starkly unsentimental tone, he depicts the random murder of a comrade and foresees his own imminent death:

I threw myself down beside him and his body rolled over
already taut like a string about to snap.
Shot in the nape of the neck. 'That's how you'll end up too!'
I whispered to myself. 'Just lie here quietly,
patience will blossom into death.'
'*Der springt noch auf*,' someone called out above.
My ear was caked with mud and drying blood.

My mother (middle row, far left) with Zoli Füredi (front left) and friends in the Buda hills, 1943

'I was coming home from work,' says my mother. 'At the time, we were still living in Uncle Ármin's apartment. We had nowhere else to go.'

In Hungary, the War had been over for several months but neither Ármin nor his wife and children had returned to reclaim their two-room apartment on Kresz Géza *utca*, leaving my mother, uncle, and grandmother in sole possession. According to Ármin's younger brother Bertalan, Ármin had died of a heart attack on the outskirts of Budapest while serving in an auxiliary labour battalion during the latter stages of the War. His wife and teenage children had almost certainly perished during the late autumn or winter of 1944, whether at the hands of Arrow Cross thugs or in the cramped and disease-ridden Jewish ghetto established in Budapest in December 1944.

'I was just about to enter the building when a young woman, one of our neighbours, happened to come out,' continues my mother. '"Hurry home!" she exclaimed when she caught sight of me. "You're going to have a wonderful surprise!"'

My mother, thinking that her father had returned, raced up the stone steps to her apartment. As recounted previously, teenage Arrow Cross militiamen had hustled Miklós away at gunpoint in early November 1944, along with several other Jewish men who were still living in the building. My mother and her family continued to hope that, despite the passage of so much time, Miklós might still be alive, perhaps interned in a displaced persons' camp in Germany or Austria. After the War, thousands of Jewish slave labourers, including many from Hungary, had ended up in these camps.

'But it wasn't Miklós,' says my mother, with a sigh. 'When I opened the front door to our flat I came face to face with Zoli Füredi!'

My mother's disappointment at not being reunited with her father was mixed with joy at seeing Zoli, to whom she'd become engaged while in her final year at the Kőszegi Dobó Womens' Commercial School in Budapest. Following a brief and intense courtship, which culminated in the young couple resolving to marry as soon as my mother obtained her school leaving certificate, Zoli had been conscripted into an auxiliary labour battalion. He had been sent far away with his unit, and he and my mother had lost touch. In the months since the end of the War there had been no word from Zoli, leading my mother to conclude that he'd either died or that he'd chosen to return to Nové Zámky, the small town in Czechoslovakia where his parents owned a shop and where Zoli had spent his childhood.

'We kissed and clung to one another for ages!' recalls my mother. 'Afterwards, we sat down and Zoli told me what had happened to him.'

Like Miklós Radnóti, Zoli and his unit of labour servicemen had been taken to Bor. Physically strong and tough-minded, Zoli had been set to work in the mine. Despite appalling conditions and confrontations with his guards Zoli had survived, while many around him had succumbed to disease, malnutrition, and exhaustion.

'Zoli took out a crumpled black and white photograph from an inside pocket of his jacket,' continues my mother. 'It was a photo of me. I'd given it to Zoli shortly before he and his unit left Budapest.'

Zoli told my mother that he'd kept the photo with him at Bor and throughout the entire time that he'd been a labour serviceman. 'The guards tried to take it from him, but he refused to let them have it,' says my mother. 'Zoli said that they gave him a terrible beating because he wouldn't hand over my photograph.'

Whether this anecdote is entirely true or whether Zoli embellished it to impress my mother, I can't say. But it undoubtedly had its intended effect, rekindling my mother's ardour.

After he was liberated, Zoli's first impulse had been to go to Nové Zámky to look for his parents. An only child, he clung to the hope that his parents were still alive and that he'd find them living in the little town. But Zoli had been forced to wait until Soviet forces had expelled German troops and their Hungarian allies from Slovak territory.

'Zoli went to Érsekújvár as soon as he could travel there,' says my mother, using the Hungarian name for Nové Zámky. 'But he couldn't find any trace of his parents and he had no idea where else to look for them.'

Although Zoli was unwilling to accept the fact, his parents had almost certainly perished along with most of the Jews of Nové Zámky. In March 1944, German troops had occupied Hungary, a nominal ally, as a result of mounting concern that Hungary's leaders were secretly negotiating a separate armistice with the Allies. In April, after discussions involving high-ranking Hungarian and German officials, the Hungarian government issued a decree authorising the confinement of the country's Jewish population in ghettos.[33] The decree applied to Nové Zámky and to much of what is now the southern part of Slovakia, which had been 'reunited' with Hungary in 1938.

In late May, Zoli's parents, together with other Jews living in Nové Zámky, were taken to a newly established ghetto in the centre of the town.[34] In the first week of June, the occupants were transferred to a second and larger ghetto that had been constructed at the town's former Grünfeld brickworks, joining Jews from the surrounding villages. After enduring appalling conditions in the Grünfeld camp, including the lack of sufficient drinking water, 4,843 Jews

were herded into goods wagons and sent from Nové Zámky to Auschwitz-Birkenau in mid-June. Of these, 4,386 died, whether as a result of gassing, malnutrition, disease, or other causes.[35] Zoli's parents were almost certainly amongst the dead.

'After spending some time in Nové Zámky looking for his parents, Zoli decided to come to Budapest to search for me,' continues my mother. 'At that point, he didn't even know if I was alive'.

Reunited once more, the young couple soon began to plan a future together. 'We were going to get married and move to Nové Zámky,' says my mother. 'Zoli told me he wanted to reopen his parents' shop.'

'What happened?' I ask. 'Why didn't the marriage go ahead?'

My mother pauses. 'For a few months, Zoli commuted between Budapest and Nové Zámky,' she tells me. 'He still believed that his parents might be alive and that they would eventually return to their home.' On these visits to Nové Zámky, Zoli lodged with a Jewish widow whose husband and child had perished in the Holocaust. Although older than Zoli by several years, the widow was said to be attractive.

'We didn't argue or anything, but all of a sudden Zoli stopped coming to see me,' says my mother. 'I tried looking for him, but he was nowhere to be found. In the end, I convinced myself that Zoli had been arrested, that his frequent trips across the border had aroused the suspicions of the Czechoslovak border guards. Perhaps they suspected him of involvement in smuggling or in some other illegal activity?'

'And how did you learn the truth?'

'Etelka could see the state I was in. I'd been on the verge of getting married when suddenly my fiancé disappears

without warning,' continues my mother. 'Etelka pleaded with someone she knew, the husband of a relative, to go to Nové Zámky to make inquiries. Feri had grown up in Bratislava. He spoke Slovak and Hungarian fluently.'

'Was he able to discover anything?'

'Yes. Feri was told that Zoli and the widow had left Nové Zámky together. With the help of the *Bricha*, an underground Jewish organisation, they'd set out for Palestine.'

In the aftermath of the War, such clandestine voyages to Palestine were long, acutely uncomfortable, and hazardous. Because of the continuing opposition of Great Britain, which governed Palestine until mid-May 1948, Jewish immigrants were often crammed into old and unsuitable vessels for the illicit sea crossing. There was a very real risk of drowning or of being intercepted by British warships and of being hauled off to a detention camp in Cyprus or Germany. But Zoli and the widow, in common with tens of thousands of Jews who'd lost loved ones in the Holocaust, were overcome by an urge to leave Europe and to rebuild their lives elsewhere. My mother, for whom the ideological abstractions of Zionism held no appeal, remained in the city of her birth. She never heard from Zoli again.