Akit itt felejtettek: A deszki árva [The Boy They Left Behind: An Orphan at Deszk] by Viktória Lugosi (Kalligram, 2023)

from the Hungarian by Anna Bentley

Two extracts from the Beginning

A brief introduction to the narrator's relationship with her father and a flashback to his heyday. (pp 9-11 (the first three pages))

My father's shoulder was not one you could cry on. He regarded tears as a sign of weakness even in a small child, so I would try my hardest to hold them back until I got home to my mother, often without success. If he saw I was crying, he wouldn't say anything, just grimace, as if he had sunk his teeth into gone-off meat. I would feel ashamed, though he had taught me early on that humans were essentially cruel, and that mercy was the exception.

Later on, I often longed for him to say something encouraging, to assure me, when I was girding myself up to do something, that it would go well, that I could do it. I longed for him to clap me on the back. Between fathers and sons this meant that's just how people are, don't take it to heart, things will go better next time. My father had wanted a son, and I did my best to live up to those expectations.

I was in my forties when I realized that the password to his laptop was my name in a distorted form. Such a wave of warmth came over me, I wanted desperately to hug him, to squeeze and squeeze him so tight that I could feel the warmth of his body, the warmth of my strong, my own, my darling father. But I didn't hug him.

By the time I allowed myself to be angry at him and felt brave enough not to love him, he had become ill, and then, all of a sudden, I felt sorry for him. This was simpler than anything that had gone before. It was effortless, easy, and had the added bonus that I felt close to him again, because we only really feel sorry for people we have some connection with.

Now that he is no longer with us, the only thing left to do is understand him, and find an answer to this question: was it his desires he couldn't control, or his fears?

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It's half past seven. Behind the city's blue-lit windows, weary mothers are slapping thickly sliced bologna onto buttered bread. In some households, there'll be 'Trappista' cheese too, but not tomatoes. It's early in the season and the price is still too high. Fathers are flopping into armchairs after working their 'second shift' and yelling for a bottle opener. You can get two channels on the TV, but everyone's turned over to the news. We are sitting on the terrace of an elegant hotel, a big picture window behind us facing onto the Danube. As if in a box at the theatre, we're looking at the Royal Palace on the hill, all lit up for the evening. Round about us there's not a word of Hungarian to be heard – but then, to be able to afford dinner here, you have to be living in the West. My father is the exception: a square of fine tartan amidst the cheap, brown alpaca suits.

The family friend from America is older than my father, but when she speaks her voice goes up and down exaggeratedly like the girls from 1B at our school; nine of them had signed up for Mr. Lendvai's Literature Club, all imagining they were Anna Karenina hanging on the words of the gorgeous Vronsky.

My father is not good-looking. He's tall and blue-eyed and has a way of pushing his fingers into his thick black hair when he laughs, but there's a kind of rough asymmetry to his face the source of which is hard to pin down. His whole jaw structure is perhaps longer than it should be, or maybe his lower jaw protrudes more than is usual; there's an angularity to the shape of his head that renders it primeval, almost simian. At the same time, his manner of speaking is urbane and completely without affectation; it's easy and humorous. He's particularly witty after an elegant dinner like this one, when he'll have a shot or two of brandy. This doesn't happen very often—only on special occasions. He handles the fat glass casually; below the knuckle his fingers have clumps of black hair sprouting from them. This could be repellent, but instead it's manly. I don't know what it is he does to women, what reduces them to soppy teenagers when he's around, what the magnetism he exerts consists of, what that something is, the texture of it. I only know that my father is like a coffee machine: charm (I can hear my mother saying) flows out of him at the touch of a button.

There are stripes on my plate where I scraped up the remains of the sauce that came with the Gundel pancakes. Katherine *néni*, an old friend on a visit home, is laughing, her head flung back, and my father is smiling and holding his glass up to the light. In the terrace's subdued lighting he's inspecting the color of the translucent brandy—a velvety shade of warm brown mixed with orange. In the background are the honey-yellow lights of the Castle district; from the loudspeakers standing in the corner comes *The Winner Takes It All*, an 80s summer hit—everyone's feeling sated. The fact that my father's girlfriend Irén and I have become transparent, invisible, that at that table we do not exist, does not bother me in the slightest. Irén cannot follow the ping-pong of witty exchanges. She is silent. For a while, I add my two penn'orth to the conversation, but I sense I am only playing a supporting role. Right now, Katherine néni and my father are the only people on the restaurant terrace, one captivated, the other captivating. I'm proud of my father.

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In the Hospital (pp16-17)

The scrambled egg roll was tasty. It was really good, not dry at all, and the warm egg melted in my mouth. This surprised me, given I was sure they weren't cooking with butter in the hospital café. Every mouthful I swallowed was a delight but also made me feel horribly guilty. How could I be eating with such relish while my father was dying? How come I could even taste the roll? In this situation, any normal person would find the merest morsel stuck in their throats. Or, if they did manage to force something down, they would have no idea what it was they were eating. They wouldn't be savoring the taste of it, you could be dead sure of that. You could also be 'dead sure' they wouldn't use the expression 'dead sure,' when at the other end of the corridor their eighty-year-old daddy was barely breathing.

My daddy. As soon as this word came to mind, I got a bitter taste in my mouth, and the next bite made its way down my gullet stuck together in a big lump, as if I'd swallowed a large pill.

I had never called him ‘daddy,’ not that is, until the last few years, just as he had never stroked my hand, or only since he had reached the advanced stages of Alzheimer’s.

The last time I had bought a roll like this was in the university cafeteria, in another life, at a time when a person still believes anything can happen to them, and when that ‘anything’ is like a Christmas stocking: you don’t know what’s in it, only that every little package will be sweet and thrilling. Of course, by then my father had already told me that as time went on, things only got worse, but I didn’t believe him. I had been unwilling to believe him ever since, though this day was now proving his point. Like so often before, I had asked the doctor for a stamped form giving me permission to take my father out for a walk in the grounds the next day. We called it a ‘walk’, but we both knew he’d be doing it in a wheelchair. That day, though, instead of reaching into her pocket for the permission slip, the doctor told me there wouldn’t be another day, not even another morning. It was her duty to inform me that it was time for me to say goodbye. You know right away what this means, even if the sentence itself is meaningless: there *will* be another morning, of course, there always is, just not for my daddy. For me, yes, there will be, and in the strictest sense of the word it will be ‘other,’ different from any that has ever come before. An ‘other’ day, because I’ll be an orphan. So, my father was right: things *did* only get worse. This morning was worse than yesterday morning, when I still didn’t know that this one would be the last. At the same time this one was still better than tomorrow morning would be, when there wouldn’t be any more to come. Logical. But was this morning definitely worse than any morning in the last eight years, during which my daddy had understood less and less of the world about him—a world he had always been so brilliant at navigating—or in the last three years when every day another memory abandoned him, another skill, until in the end he was left with no words either?

Or was this the same as the scrambled-egg roll and ‘dead sure’? Another thing you oughtn’t to be thinking?

The Crypt (pp204-209)

A flashback to the main character’s (the father’s) experience of going into hiding during the Holocaust.

It was his grandmother who had taken him to the church, and though he had begged her to let him stay with her and his grandfather, though he had yelled and stamped and lashed out with his fists, hitting every part of her he could reach, it was no good. The old woman had just grabbed his hands, pulled him to her and squeezed him so tightly it seemed she would never let him go. She was adamant, explaining that there was no more space in the church, that the boy was the only one his father had been able to get a place for. He could hide there, it was for him, that one place in the crypt. And that was only right, she said, because he had his whole life ahead of him, a great future. He would just need to put up with it for a few weeks, being with these strangers. Compared to the many, many years that were waiting for him on the outside, this was nothing. Only, he must be a good boy and do what the Father said, because he was a holy man.

His grandfather had peeled the hysterical boy away from his grandmother. He was clinging to her like she was the very last thing he could call his own. It was months since he had seen his father, who was in hiding, sheltered by a woman they didn't know. His mother had been taken away. His grandparents were all he had left. He kicked, first with one leg, then with the other but his grandfather was stronger than he was. He prized the boy's hands from round his grandmother's waist and held him at arm's length like a baby that was weeing. Like this, the boy could flail all he wanted, his feet met nothing but air. The boy gradually understood that there was nothing he could do. Whatever his father told his grandmother to do was what would happen. He didn't even need to come over, it was enough to send a message.

It would just be for a few weeks, and then they would come for him, his grandfather promised, but at age seven days feel like years. They are interminable, especially if there's no light to mark off night from day, if the food doesn't mark off breakfast from dinner, or the air the outdoors from the indoors. He soon grasped that the crypt was like a cellar. One week, one month, it made no difference—the whole period blurred into one, long, stinking night, in which he wasn't awake even when he wasn't sleeping.

Grandfather had said that the crypt was a place where long ago the dead had been buried, but that there was no need to be afraid, because the Father had taken the bodies, now no more than bones, out of there to make space for the Jews. He said bodies, but they were both thinking of corpses, and this terrified the boy. Grandfather said there was no need to be afraid of something that wasn't there, but this meant nothing: his grandparents were terrified of the bombers whether they were there or not.

And at that stage, he had yet to find out that there were no rooms in a crypt, just one big room, where the dead lived in the walls.

No one would look for him there, in a place where corpses were kept, he must just promise to be a good boy, not to shout or fight, to stay calm. He would come through it, his grandmother told him. Even afterwards, she never let on how they had, in the end, got him into the crypt. The last thing the boy remembered was her offering him a cup of tea. She had given it a really good stir and told him he must drink it all down to the last drop. The tea was deliciously sweet, even though in all the months he'd been whining for sugar his grandmother had not given him any. He needed no urging to finish it.

When he woke up, he found himself in a woman's lap. Whatever this place was, it was cold and smelt of cellars. In the candlelight, it took him a while to make out the faces of those around him— all the men were old and hairy, and there were two women. The one whose lap he had been sleeping in stroked his head and shushed him, saying he shouldn't be afraid, he was in a good place, they would take care of him, just he mustn't talk, or if he did, he should only whisper, because no one upstairs must hear him. Then, when he sat up and his eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, he realized where he was. So, this is the crypt, he thought, and as he walked around the small space, he discovered more people crouching in cavities that had been created in the walls. He touched the wall, ran his fingers over it. It was made of bare bricks and felt cold and rough. He could already tell the old bricks from the new, the ones that had just been exposed from the ones that had always been on the surface, and he now understood what his grandmother had been saying when she told him the priest was a holy man who was helping Jews to hide.

Several people were sitting hunched on two long benches facing each other. Others were in the cavities, their knees drawn up to their chins, shivering. There were larger cavities where you could lie down and smaller ones where you do no more than crouch. He was pointed to one of the smaller ones and told it would be his. The woman gave him a blanket. She spread it over the bricks, and said that if he climbed into the cavity, she would tuck it round him. He didn't want to go in there, didn't want to sleep where a coffin had been, but he said nothing. He had decided, there under the ground, that if shouting did no good then he would keep quiet. Perhaps it wasn't so much that he decided; it just happened that way. For a while, he said nothing, and this made him feel as light as he did when a long bout of stomachache ended in diarrhea. To begin with, the strangers asked him questions and talked to him, then they gave up and left him in peace.

The crypt was divided from the steps up into the church by a trapdoor. The Father came at night, holding up his habit between two fingers like the boy's mother did with her evening gown when she leant over his bed and planted a kiss on his forehead before she went out. The Father wore white clothes, always white, and he must have been anxious for them not to get dirty on the dusty steps.

Once a day he brought them food, unpacking it from a big basket. The women wanted to grab his hand and kiss it when they took the basket from him, but he wouldn't let them. This was odd, as the boy had often seen men kissing women's hands, but never a woman kissing a man's. The tall priest wouldn't let them, and the boy liked that.

The Father had wide shoulders and, with his low but determined way of talking, he exuded strength. Close up, he smelt of soap, and the boy thought he would be able to fall asleep easily with that smell around him. The Father said only a few words to the people in the crypt, apologizing for bringing so little—they themselves didn't have much, and he had to be careful not to draw attention by getting through too much food. He urged them to keep their spirits up and told them the latest news as he'd heard it on the radio or on the street. Then he took away the bucket they did their business in during the day and returned a few minutes later with another, empty one.

As soon as the priest had gone, the crypt would become a buzz of activity. Even those who generally kept themselves to themselves would gather round, curious to see what was in the basket. Distribution of its contents was entrusted to the two women. The only person to make a fuss was a squat, balding man with bad breath. He always complained that his portion was unfairly small, but the others expressed no dissatisfaction. They ate what they had been given in silence and castigated the troublemaker. He was called Vilmos, and his breath stank even when he'd come back from having a wash. For sometimes, when the priest judged it to be safe, he would allow them up into the sacristy, and then they could use the washbasin there and even brush their teeth. He laid out toothpaste for them as well as soap. The most common subject of conversation in the crypt was in what order they should go up to wash and whether the Father would open the trapdoor that day or not. The rare occasions he did so were cause for celebration.

So excited were the grown-ups at the prospect of having a wash that they wouldn't think twice about the boy's insistence that he be allowed to go first. Nor did they notice that, after

quickly brushing his teeth, he tended to disappear off. He missed having water as much as anyone else. But the church! The church was magical, terrifying, enthralling. It was astonishing and unsettling. It was grandly decorated, and after the crypt the vastness of it, the spaciousness of it was almost impossible to comprehend. All he had to do was step through the other door of the sacristy, which was near the washbasin, and he was there.

In the dark, touch took on new meaning, and after the dreary feel of the rough stone wall, it was so good to run his fingers along the edge of the pews, to follow the pattern of the carved leaves, to rub the twisted cords that dangled from an internal balcony, and, lastly, to make his way up the four wide steps that led to the end of the church, lie down on the floor, and stroke the cool flags, reveling in their cleanliness and smoothness as his fingers slid over them. It was heaven itself.

Once, as he lay there on the clean, cold stone, where no one was talking and the air was fresh, he had suddenly spotted, in the weak light of the moon, a woman painted on the inside of the dome. Her clothes were blue, her lips violet, or at least that's how they had looked in the gloom. The boy had pressed his palms down on the marble floor, and its smoothness had seemed almost soft to him. He had thought of his mother, of her long, blue evening gown, of her lips as she kissed him on the forehead, and he had thought to himself that this little bit of time, when everything was perfect, was his and his alone.

That night too, he lay down on the cold, smooth floor and let his eyes rest on the big table that stood at the top of the steps. That, too, was made of stone and the boy felt drawn to it. He got to his feet and ran his hand along the cold slab and felt the same cool smoothness he had felt on the floor. The tabletop was high, but he managed to climb up onto it and lie down on it. He imagined he was like the carved stone woman on the other side of the church, on the top of the big stone coffin. He had often run his fingers over the statue's forehead, its eyes, which he could tell were closed, then its nose, its chin, the hollow of its neck, the length of its dress, his fingers catching here and there in the folds of it, all the way down to its bare feet. He had come upon its toes and the soles of its feet, and that was where the stone person came to an end. He pictured her as a queen, otherwise they wouldn't have buried her inside the church, he thought, and as he lay on the big table, he pressed his palms to his thighs, like the statue, and tried to stay completely still. He held his breath for as long as he could bear, and he tried to imagine what it was like—death, this thing that everyone was afraid of, the thing they'd wanted to keep him away from by shutting him up in the crypt. He woke to find he was being shaken by Mr. Szigfrid, who, all bent over, was the oldest of the people down in the crypt. The old man looked terrified and, urging him to hurry, shooed the boy as quickly as he could down into the crypt.

The grown-ups made a big fuss about it. The loudest voice was Vilmos's. He was furious and foaming at the mouth as he shouted in a stifled whisper that he wasn't going to die because some idiot brat had dragged them all into danger. He was standing over the candles, and you could see the tiny drops of spit as they sprayed from his lips. What if they'd all been discovered because of him, because he'd taken it into his head to stretch out on the altar in broad daylight, great big schnozzle and all? The boy was not only mute; he was crazy.

‘Handy’ Géza (pp66-76) and The Promised Bicycle (pp76-80)

My father was like a fairy tale rewritten as a monodrama. He was simultaneously the youngest son going off to seek his fortune, and his own father sending him out into the world.

If, on that ‘goulash communist’ afternoon, that particular woman hadn’t been coming towards him on Andrássy Avenue (which just then happened to be called Avenue of the People’s Republic), and if that woman hadn’t been blonde, then my father would very probably not have noticed her. But she was tall and pretty, and yes, blonde, so my father looked her over, or rather, checked her out. Whether he scanned her surreptitiously or openly ogled her, he never said, though he often reminisced about that moment, that appraisal, during which the woman’s red clip-on earrings had caught his eye.

There were two versions of the story: a shorter one and longer one. The latter was embellished with interpolations. Just like a passage marked with a star in the holiday prayer book which must be complemented by further texts on Saturdays, my father had different ways of relating this fateful moment. In the company of men, for example, he liked to add that he had noticed the earrings *even though* the woman wasn’t wearing them on her chest. This got him a laugh every time, the men guffawing in unison, with no intervention from me. As the laughter died down, he would tell them that if, at that moment, ‘Handy’ Géza hadn’t popped into his head—Géza was a member of his work brigade at the state-run company who supplemented his pay in similarly savvy ways to my father—perhaps he would never have got a taste for the intoxicating world of the wheeler-dealer. And then where would he be? Nowhere.

The word ‘handy’ was as inseparable from ‘Handy’ Géza’s name as the word ‘poor’ was from my stepfather Dodó’s after his death. ‘Poor Dodó’ used to do this or that, my mum and I would say. This epithet somehow became attached to Irén too. In the case of ‘poor’ Dodó it meant there was no longer anyone to look up to. That was the direction, with him, upwards. With Irén, on the other hand…

When my father spotted that woman, and with her the red earrings, neither Dodó nor Irén were yet on the scene. To further the public interest, my father was turning up to work at the state-owned company, while, to further his own interests, he was also getting hold of Bisecurin contraceptive pills and wrapping up patent leather shoes. Géza, meanwhile, was hard at work with his lathe, a skill his father had taught him. My father, who needed help just to blow up a bicycle tire, was enormously impressed by this. Just as, at the matinée concerts, he was eager to acquaint me with the diversity of music history, he was also keen for me to get to know his world and everything in it. ‘Géza, who’s so good with his hands’ was part of this ‘everything.’

Lined up on the garage wall in the most orderly fashion, were tools the like of which I had never seen. At home we didn’t even have a hammer. If we needed to knock in a nail, my mother would go at it with the meat tenderizer.

We found Géza standing by a green machine, with Christmas-scented shavings flying about him, and this was interesting for exactly three minutes. I was bored, like I had been at the Erkel theatre during the second act, but I held my tongue and I waited patiently. “Be a good girl, now,” my father had said a few minutes earlier in front of the ramshackle garage door. And I was.

Wooden buttons were the next things to start dropping out of the machine. These were identical to the ones packed into sacks and stacked in a great pile by the back wall of the garage.

“Turning’s not the only thing Géza *bácsi*’s good at,” explained my father. “On Sundays, he also sells what he’s produced during the week! That’s right! He goes round delivering the buttons to the craftsmen who make traditional items for the tourist shops, because you can’t get buttons like these in the shops, you know! Good thing it’s Easter—he’s not on the road then,” he told me, but his laugh was directed at Géza. I looked at the wood shavings, and I sensed that something serious was in the works. I had met Géza a number of times and I had recognized his car right away. It was parked in front of the garage in the housing estate car park. He had a spinach-colored Skoda. Once, we got in it too, but the proper hike my father had promised did not transpire. Géza took us on a long drive (it seemed long to me at the time, at least). Then he parked the car by a square-shaped yellow house (a so-called Kádár-cube) which was exactly like all the others by the side of the road, and reaching over a barking dog, he handed a man a sack stuffed full of wooden buttons. The same thing was repeated at every house: sack out, us in, *pálinka* out, my father parries it, he won’t hear of it, they insist, a bit of parleying, oh yes you will, oh no we won’t, well, in that case, cheers! In the end the host would down all the drinks himself, but the three of them would laugh and there were no hard feelings.

When, at last, we parked under a willow tree on the edge of a ditch full of duckweed and set off on foot it felt more like a walk, at least, even if it wasn’t a hike. The difference was that we kept having to stop. Géza was checking out every garden. Puzzled householders and women wiping their hands on their aprons came hurrying to the gate. They couldn’t imagine why anyone would come bursting in on them just before Sunday lunch. The sight of the two strange-looking guys and the little girl just made the whole thing more mysterious, though Géza’s logic was as simple as it gets: wherever he saw a felled tree or a wood pile in the garden, he knocked on the gate. If the wood seemed too green, we went further on, but if he judged it to have been lying there for a while, then out from his wallet would come the blue twenty-forint notes.

On the way back, the front end of the Skoda was practically scraping the ground. My father was hanging onto the handle over the door for dear life, scared that the whole thing was going to fall apart. Géza chuckled and put his foot on the accelerator pedal.

The very same day he spotted the woman with the red earrings my father paid a visit to the garage. He needed to kick at the door for a few minutes because Géza couldn’t hear the bell over the whirring of the lathe. When he did suddenly open it, my father pitched forward into the workshop, very nearly landing on the machine’s main spindle. It was just as well he didn’t impale himself on it. If Géza happened to be present when my father was telling the story, he would also chip in with his own take on how their new life had got started: the moment the seed was sown, how the seed took root in my father’s mind and began to sprout, and his own role as the one who nurtured it, watered the tender shoots and pruned back the branches as it grew. He would remark that, really, neither of them could have imagined how soon their joint endeavor would bear fruit. Géza always stressed that he wouldn’t be worth a damn without my father, though my father wouldn’t have got anywhere without him either.

On that particular afternoon, my father was unable to conceal his excitement. He began by saying, “Time to ditch those dumb wooden buttons, it’s a new life for us!” He was already talking in the plural: he and Géza. Géza was still gaping at his brigade leader and wondering what he was going on about when my father came out with it: from now on they would be making jewelry. Not real jewelry, of course—costume stuff. From plastic! Géza immediately shook his head; no way, he only worked with wood, and he was a creature of habit. My father told him that while this may have been true thus far, by God, from now on, things were going to change! At this, Géza began to explain that plastic was no good for turning, except for plexiglass, but that wasn’t something you could get hold of anyway, it wasn’t in circulation. My father brushed this off, saying Géza could leave that to him. The overconfidence of the ignorant, thought Géza, but he kept it to himself, only adding that he couldn’t make pieces bigger than four centimeters across on this lousy machine even if it were for the Devil himself. But my father wouldn’t take no for an answer. Géza’s excuses seemed to have gone in one ear and out the other. No problem, he said, if four centimeters was the limit, so be it. Géza then pointed out that the plexiglass would need to be dyed, and he’d never done that kind of thing. He had no idea how to. My father countered by asking Géza why he thought he, my father that is, was there in his garage. He’d come looking for a partner! Géza laughed at this and said that shop signs like Grünberger and Co. had gone out of fashion, in case my father hadn’t noticed. Again, my father batted this away and tutted for good measure, saying that for his part he could do without a fancy black sign with a gold border; that wouldn’t cause him too much heartache, but the *money*, well, that was a different matter altogether.

Géza would generally remark, at this point, that he still didn’t know why he hadn’t told my father to go to hell, given that in those days him marching in and saying they should start turning plastic was pretty much like saying they ought to go to the moon and he’d bring the space suits. But at that moment he’d been so swept along by father’s enthusiasm that he’d felt, well, why not? In the evening, when he’d told his wife, Ildi, the whole idea had seemed crazy of course. The spell cast by my father’s personality had faded, and only the bare facts remained, along with the words ‘plastic’ and ‘costume jewelry’, which had never been used in this combination. As for the object they applied to, neither of them had seen it up close. But by then it was too late.

When I first heard this story, I didn’t wonder at Géza for a moment. I knew exactly what he was talking about. Everyone wanted to live up to my father’s expectations. But why was that? How did he get them to bow down before him, to fear him, to be so eager to please him—the girl who delivered the mail, the boutique manager and the company director, the wide-boy and the headwaiter, the pastry chef from the patisserie on Hollán Ernő Street from whom he’d never ordered a cake? Then there were the people who would reap no benefit from being on good terms with him: the morose gastroenterologist and the toothless artist, the retired museum director, the physicist with his weird theories, the equestrian vaulter from the third floor and the linguist he met at the swimming pool who was on the radio. And, above all, the women. I have no idea how he did it. Whatever the case, Géza was no different from the others. My father won him over; he impressed Géza so much that he couldn’t say no to him.

That first earring was not so very different from a wooden button, if you left aside the small matter of it *really* being impossible to get hold of the material to make it with. “There’s no such thing as impossible, only incapable,” my father had insisted on the countless occasions when I had failed to find a way round something. He disregarded the fact that thirty years after his moment of greatness, this maxim might well have ceased to hold true.

He saw his chance, my mother would say proudly, your father always had an eye to the main chance. And yes, with that eye of his he discerned that there was only one place in Hungary that used plexiglass, and that was the Videoton factory, where the televisions were made. The picture tubes in the CRT television sets were prone to exploding, boom, into a thousand pieces, so in order to prevent tiny shards of these appliances landing in the eyes of their viewers, the oval screens were covered with sheets of plexiglass. It soon turned out that sheets like these could not be obtained from the factory, because they weren’t for sale. And, despite it being common knowledge that ‘bringing things out’ of a factory didn’t count as stealing, it proved impossible to ‘bring out’ a piece here a piece there, or to have them ‘brought out.’ This was hard to stomach. Everyone brought out this or that—it was considered a game, a bit of harmless fun, a lark, like cheating in a test at school. If the factory belonged to the people, if it was held in common, then it was ours too: yours, mine, everybody’s. My father fumed, he banged on the table and swore until he discovered that, during the manufacturing process, the edges of the big sheets of plexiglass were discarded. The factory had no use for them, and they ended up on the shelves of the ‘Handyman and Pioneer’ shops. The only thing was, other people were also eager to get their hands on them. These pieces, which could be glued together, were worth their weight in gold. You could assemble a small fishtank from them, for example, or leg shields for your Pannónia motorcycle. This was where my father’s famous sense for how people tick came in. He would keep looking till he found a shop and a shop manager who was willing to talk terms. He’d recognize the unmistakable hunger in their eyes, and detect in them enough imagination to believe, to be capable of believing that things could be a little better than they happened to be just then. He also knew that he couldn’t rush things.

Feri stood behind the counter in the same long, brown coat as every other shop assistant in the city. Just like all the others, he clipped a ball-point pen into the upper pocket of this coat, and, just as it did on all the other pockets, the pen left an indelible mark. But my father’s nose for a good potential business partner did not let him down: he watched Feri, picked him out, engaged him in conversation and agreed terms. After a long period of sweetening-up in which he patiently slipped Feri small sums of money, Feri became ‘our man Feri’—my father’s and Géza’s that is.

Feri realized it would be simpler for him to sell the incoming wares in one job lot, rather than futzing around with them one at a time. There were too many knick-knacks in the shop already, and he didn’t know what gave him more of a headache: the old granddads who fancied a bit of do-it-yourself and spent hours looking for the right bit of wood for a shelf, or the customers who stood gaping at the materials available that day in an effort to figure out what they might be good for—a shower base, a window box or a mat for a mini grill. And then there were the kids who went rummaging through the electronics parts; there was always something they needed for the radio of their dreams and couldn’t find, while at the same time they wouldn’t for the life of them buy the things they were supposed to, the things the company intended for them. Because of them that Feri was unable to fulfil the demands of the Plan.

My father's opening offer was that, if he were to be given first dibs on the pieces of plexiglass coming into the shop, he would be happy to purchase up to fifty Pioneer whistles alongside them. Feri stared at him dumbly, his pupils dilating for several long seconds, then said, "Plus fifty astronaut badges." At that point, my father knew he was onto a winner—his nose for a partner had not let him down this time either.

A year later, there was no longer any need for such tactics; cognac did the trick. My father didn't mind. By then, he had paid multiple visits to the dump, not daring to throw the Pioneer whistles and badges into the regular trash.

Géza was the producer, my father the procurer. This was the division of labor, and perhaps the secret was that each of them was following their passion, each of them was doing something they got a kick out of. Géza felt at home in his garage and wasn't troubled in the slightest by the fact that, four stories above him, his wife Ildi was having to change their daughter's nappies on the top of the washing machine. Granted, Ildi didn't pressure him for anything. She was a pedicurist and did her work with devotion and precision. Her tendency to go about in baggy dresses two sizes too big made it difficult to guess at her figure, which, though it resembled a stuffed pigeon, was still shapely. She also dragged Géza to concerts by the rather niche band, Kex. He went along without a word of protest, though if there happened to be a chair by the wall, he would be likely to nod off. My father couldn't get his head around how a man could sleep with a woman who didn't use eye make-up, didn't back-comb her hair, and who was difficult to locate under all that drapey fabric. But he was crazy about her pig-knuckle-and-bean soup and her stuffed cabbage. He would insist on eating these right there in their bite-sized kitchen, and whenever he went to see Géza, he would run up the stairs to Ildi, who would have set aside for him the parsley root and the green tops of the celeriac, which no-one in their family ate. My father made the trip over to Géza and Ildi's apartment from his place on leafy, middle-class Tátra Street like he was visiting a living-history museum in East Germany.

The earrings were a roaring success. My father sold them so fast, Géza couldn't keep up. It wasn't greed so much as curiosity that led them to branch out and try their hands at something else. When they started, my father had no idea what on earth an injection molding machine could be and how it worked, but he had read that with it you could produce objects in any shape you wanted. The possibilities contained in that word 'any'—the freedom it promised, even if no more than a button's worth—filled him with a tingling, visceral pleasure that he felt more in his lower body than his chest.

Géza expressed no qualms either. The fact that they were limited only by my father's imagination in terms of what they could make—new shapes, new colors, jewelry, buttons, things they hadn't dare dream of before—just spurred him on. Providing, he warned my father, they had polyethylene to put in the machine, which they didn't, did they. They didn't have any tools either, but Géza told my father not to worry about that, he could make tools anytime. My father should concern himself with one thing and one thing only, getting hold of polyethylene, wherever he had to go for it.

What my father needed to lay his hands on was thermosoftening plastic. Then he, Géza, could shred it, warm it to a liquid state and mold it into buttons, because that's what was most in demand. Half the kitchen tables in the country had East German sewing machines whirring away on them and the shops sold only three types of button. Everyone needs buttons, he said.

My father bought up an endless number of plastic objects in his efforts to find the right polyethylene for the injection molding machine. He did this with flair, propelled by hope and probably with the same enjoyment of the thrill of the chase as he would a little while later when combing through colorful, engraved Biedermeier glasses and paintings from the famous Nagybánya artists' colony at the Pawn and Auction House. He brought Géza toothmugs and nailbrushes, plastic trays, soap dishes and hairbrushes, shoehorns, clothes pegs, beach sandals, broom handles, rubber ducks and rattles, and Géza greeted every offering with a shake of the head.

One evening, however, when my father pulled a washing-up liquid bottle from his brimming bag, Géza prodded it and squashed it and turned it around in his hands, even pushing his glasses up onto his forehead as he inspected it.

"Well?" asked my father. "Is it any good? Tell me it's good because I've run out of ideas."

"No," replied Géza. "It's not good, but it's close."

"Fuck!" said my father and slammed the corrugated steel door of the garage behind him.

The yellow hulk of the new machine had been hunkered down in the garage for three weeks, taking up every inch of it. When Géza wanted to get out into the fresh air, he had to turn sideways on and squeeze himself between it and the wall. And all the time, as he would later relate, my father was getting more and more up tight. He had gathered up every single shampoo and detergent bottle he could find at home, and a few days later, everything he could find in the paint shop, where, along with scrapers and paint thinner, you could also get face powder and eau de cologne. The trunk of his car was full of useless containers. He had got to the point where he could hardly bear to touch them, and they piled up, reminding him of his failure.

One evening, he stopped by a gas station to fill up on his way to Géza's, and his eye happened to fall on the motor oil containers. He stocked up.

Stolid and resigned, his long-suffering business partner prodded the new acquisitions spread out on the table. Then, he snatched up a blue container, made off with it into the corner, poured the contents of it out into a rusty bucket, and let out a yell.

"This is it! This could be the one! I'll need to try it out, but it looks good to me. I'll shred it, I'll get right on with shredding it," he said, slapping his hand down onto my father's palm. "How many of these can you get?"

"Why? How many do you need?"

"A lot."

My father nodded, and the two men laughed in relief.

In the soft, light-blue container which held the oil used in Trabants and other two-stroke engines, Géza had found the material they needed. Now my father finally found himself faced with a new task and a new challenge: to find the right Feri at a state-run Áfor gas station, a capable guy who would set aside the empty containers and, in return for the requisite amount of cash, hand them over to him at regular intervals.

As the containers were oily, it was necessary to wash them all before use, before they were shredded, that is. Géza's bathroom was unsuitable for this, due to its size. The first week, it was Éva, Irén's predecessor who, after dinner in the dark-blue-tiled bathroom of the apartment in Tátra Street, did her best to get the oil off the inside of the containers using a baby bottle brush, only to find herself spending an eternity scrubbing the bath out before bedtime. One evening, my father walked in on her while she was doing this and saw this Sisyphean struggle for himself. At that point, he went out into the kitchen and came back with a big pair of scissors.

"Cut them in half, you feckless woman, then they'll be easier to wipe out," he hissed between his teeth, and shut the bathroom door behind him.

The bathroom became one of the lowest circles of Hell. Although the oil could be removed from the sides of the bath, no amount of airing would flush out its smell. Even my father found this intolerable. The fact that his new girlfriend didn't run off during those weeks just goes to show that when it came to choosing his partners, endurance was as much a basic criterion as being shatterproof was—never mind a scratch here or there—when it came to plexiglass.

It was at that point that my father managed to get hold of his building's washhouse. Up till then, Isti from the second floor had been using it. He had formed a band with a few of his friends, and his parents had opted to pay the other residents a modest rental fee for the use of the defunct washhouse rather than have to listen any longer to their son torturing his guitar in the hall of their one-and-a-half room apartment.

Isti was plucking at a seven-stringed guitar, or rather tearing at it, when my father walked in on him. My father held music studies in high regard and, as he looked at the stooped figure of the boy, on whom everything was long—his arms, his legs, his hair—and who was shaking all of these in all directions in his efforts to play, it took him the blink of eye to get the measure of the situation. He lost no time in making Isti an offer: he could continue to use the washhouse, in addition to which he promised him a new guitar, entirely of his own choosing. All he asked in return was that the boy wash out the oil containers as required. For if there was something the washhouse was not short of, it was water. When my father told this story, he always explained that he hadn't been taking too great a risk really, given that at the state-run musical instrument store they only sold rubbish guitars. You could get better ones under the counter, but those were not the terms of his offer. That said, when my father went abroad, he did now and then bring back a record for Isti, just in case he made it big one day, and then my father would be able, in a small way, to think of himself as another Baron Hatvany, that great patron of the arts.

*

My father made promises without any prompting, enthusiastically, convincingly, whole-heartedly. Sometimes, he was seized by a feverish urge to be generous, and on such occasions he would offer to buy or make a present of something unusually appealing, special, exceptional, something that could only be attained through his involvement. He would explain to me at length that the toy or the piece of sports equipment or the apartment (because, yes, the stakes rose higher and higher with the passage of time, and he promised ever larger and more expensive things) was truly in a class of its own. If I were just patient, whatever he was

getting hold of and gifting to me would soon be mine. There was nothing in the whole world that could rival it. I would only need to wait a little longer, and then I would see that he hadn't been exaggerating, not a jot. The days would crawl by, but before the big day finally arrived something would always go wrong. I believe there *were* moments when he really did sincerely want to give me a present, when the idea that he could give me something and especially the thought that he could afford to filled him with pleasure, but in the end he was somehow never able to do it. By now, I think of these disappointments as something he could do nothing about, that he must have felt—at least this is how I imagine it—that every forint he parted with was a piece cut from his own flesh, that it caused him physical pain.

I was thirteen when, half-way through the school year, my mother suddenly began to panic that I would not finish the year with top grades. My father also sensed trouble, and he came up with a ploy that was new to me. If, at the end of Seventh Grade, I got fives in every subject, he would buy me a bicycle. A 'Camping' bike! Everyone knew there was no way you could ever save up the price of one of those small-wheeled adjustable bicycles from your pocket money. Not by chance was there a drawing of it included on the back page of the children's savings books as an inducement to us to fill it with two- and five-forint stamps. And in Second Grade, when we had still only learned to count to a hundred, we perhaps even believed it was possible that—albeit a long time off yet—the day would come when, at the end of the school year, when only one or two letters were missing from the word 'VACATION' on the blackboard, that we would go over and stand before Erzsi néni's desk, on which there was a fringed cloth with folk motifs, and she would tap each of the stamps in turn with her squat fingers and mutter the subtotals under her breath as she added them up, that she would even turn the pages, because in the course of the year we would have stuck a stamp in every square, so cleverly would we have scrimped and saved, not even buying chocolate or ice creams, and then Erzsi néni would pull out her drawer, reach into the crumpled plastic bag she kept the savings money in, and count into our hands the price of the bicycle. Back then, we still believed this.

In Seventh Grade it was Physics that I had the most trouble with. It looked unlikely that I would even get a four. As long as we only had to learn laws, as long, that is, as we only needed to get the laws of hydrostatic pressure and torque and Pascal's law by heart, I was fine, but when it came to calculating the density of an iceberg, well, that was beyond my capabilities. Even though Dodó, who was infinitely patient, practiced with me and I knew the equations, whenever there was a word problem and the sentence differed just the slightest bit from the one I had practiced a hundred times, I would freeze, just like that iceberg. If I had to figure out the density of a brick in a test, I would first translate it into an iceberg, like the problem we'd worked on at home. I would change the sentence, substituting ice for the brick. I would imagine the block of it, and my calculations would either succeed or they wouldn't. Dodó and I worked so hard. At the end of the year, by some kind of miracle, I got the required five, more out of compassion than as a reflection of my knowledge, I suspect, and it was really Dodó who was entitled to it, not me. We were both looking forward to getting the bicycle.

I called my father the very day we got our end of year report cards. "I got straight fives, I did it!" I told him. He said he would like to see the report card for himself, so I concluded that I wouldn't be getting the bicycle that Sunday. In questioning whether I was telling the truth, he had punctured my moment of triumph, but I didn't say a word about it. On the Sunday, I

jumped into the car with my report card open and ready in my hands. Dad didn't even take it from me. He glanced at it, smiled and launched straight into telling me, imagine what someone had brought him from America. A cassette player! I was listening, wasn't I? A cassette player! And not just any old kind, not the rubbish MK 25 you could get at home that anyone could buy if they had the money, but a Toshiba, Japanese-made, a tiger cub from one of the 'Tiger Cub' countries. No one else in Hungary had a cassette player like this, he said. I'd blow everyone away with it. I didn't know what he was talking about. Cassette player? No one had said anything about a cassette player. And I wasn't interested in one. He had promised me a bicycle. But I couldn't say anything because he was already asking me, wouldn't I rather have a cassette player instead of a bicycle? No, I didn't want a cassette player, just like I didn't want to blow anyone away. I wanted a bicycle, and I wanted to yell at him, 'But you *prom*ised!' Where had my voice disappeared to? I just shook my head, over and over, and said nothing. I was terrified, thinking what would happen if I had lost my voice forever? Was it even possible for someone's voice to just go from one moment to the next, and if so, when would people notice? Meanwhile, I heard my father saying that I didn't need to give him an answer right now. I should take some time to think, there was no hurry after all, that we should go to the Big Meadow to play badminton. He started the engine and we moved off. The wide silk ribbon round the neck of the badminton rackets bag, which I was clutching in my left hand because I still had my report card in the other, got completely soaked through in my sweaty palm. When I dropped it onto the floor in front of me, it sagged limply.

In the middle of the week, my father called me up and asked me what I had decided on. By then, I had rehearsed what I would say to him a million times: thank you, but I didn't want the cassette player. I would like the bike. He replied, whatever I wanted, it was up to me, but he would like to remind me that there was nothing special about a 'Camping' bicycle, that was something anyone could buy in the Pioneer Department Store. How many people could claim to have a Japanese cassette player straight from America, though? I should give it a bit more thought. If I was his daughter, I would make the right choice. Not to mention what a childish thing a bicycle was. Did I really think that doing circuits in a park full of dog dirt was the kind of thing big girls did? Because I shouldn't think for a minute that my mother would let me ride a bike on the street or to school. I would have to wheel it as far as the Major park, where I would be allowed to ride it round and round, along with thirty other poor sods. While there was the cassette player, just waiting for me. You could carry it around, it even had a handle, and, like he'd said before, it wasn't just *any* old cassette player—it was a *mini* cassette player. Only the Japanese could make this kind. They could miniaturize anything; it was quite incredible what they could do. When I took it into school, I'd be the party queen.

I said again, albeit in a small voice, "I would like the bicycle. You promised."

"You really aren't my daughter," he said and slammed down the receiver.

The following Sunday, there was no mention of the bicycle, and I didn't dare bring it up. It was only as he was leaving that he said he'd forgotten to tell me that he'd also got a cassette for the cassette player, so, if I decided I wanted it after all, he'd give me the cassette too. He'd be sorry to part with it, because where could you get the original, factory-made recording of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* these days? Nowhere! But he'd decided he would give it to me, so I'd have a cassette of a musical too. A factory-made one at that! He laughed, and I forced some

kind of a smile onto my face to go with my farewell before I turned tail and ran. It wasn't until I heard the clang of the gate banging to behind me and got a whiff of the air in the staircase—part rubbish, part bleach—that I calmed down a little.

Years later, my mother told me that my father had rung her and asked if she had given enough consideration to how much danger was lurking in wait for a child on a bicycle, and told her she'd do better, for her own peace of mind alone, to persuade me to take the cassette player. I wouldn't even need to wait for it, it was at his place, he could hand it over anytime, it was just gathering dust in a drawer. He'd got it from someone he knew, he had another one anyway, a more serious one he listened to classical music on.

When my mother put down the telephone and sat me down next to her on the sofa, I knew what was coming wasn't going to be good. She lifted one of her eyebrows, which made one side of her forehead go wrinkly. Her face fell, like it had done one afternoon in early spring when Grandmother had asked her if we would ever have a flowering plum tree like we'd had in the old garden. I recognized that expression of hers. Then too, she had looked off into the distance. The tram was just about to turn under our window, and the rumble of the garbage truck could be heard from the corner. She put her arm round me and pulled me close. Her long, wavy hair tickled my ear. She said, if anyone knew my father it was her, and she was now sure that he would never buy me that bicycle. I'd be better off making do with the cassette player, that way at least I'd get something. And something was still better than nothing.

The narrator imagines her father's experiences at the camp for Holocaust orphans.

Arrival at Deszk (pp168-182)

Halfway up the hill, the low roofs of the houses they were passing were sagging, as if the rafters had given way. The truck took the boy and some twenty other children past window frames painted dark brown and fading, rain-washed picket fences. This village looked almost nothing like the one the boy's uncle had taken him to on the vine-covered hill, where he'd thought the windows were fringed with napkins, the village that had seemed so welcoming until they had had to flee it. This one seemed sterner. The walls of the houses were made solemn by the brown of the roofs and the windows, and the hot, dry July air also seemed to weigh heavily on them. The sun hadn't come out since early morning, the air was absolutely still, and if the clouds happened to touch each other, they did so tentatively, as if they couldn't decide whether to cling on for a little while longer or burst and unleash a downpour. The boy looked around him, frightened. He didn't want to live in a house like these ones, where they put jars of cucumbers in the windows with soggy, disgusting-looking bits of bread floating on the top of them. He decided right away he wasn't going to eat that kind of bread, that was for sure.

Then, all of a sudden, there it was in the distance, in the middle of a green park, enormous and dignified, with three rows of windows and a big door flanked with columns that was enticing even from a distance. Despite their grand scale, the peeling yellow walls radiated a certain jauntiness that contrasted with the brown inflicted on the white houses he had seen earlier. Later, he was to wonder, when he thought back to the building, if his memory was playing

tricks on him. However, this image of it was forever fixed in his memory: the moment when he had first laid eyes on the big house. It had been like a large, three-tiered sigh.

Long before they reached the building, the children could see the two big trees that stood in front of it, but only when they got closer did the boy notice the bushes, which had been clipped to a ball-shape. The pool was the last thing to come into view. It was right by the perimeter wall, behind a straight, clipped line of hedge. When his eyes fell on the expanse of blue water, he thought it was a fountain missing the usual statue in the middle.

The truck gave a great jolt, and with a final loud growl, the engine stopped. There, in front of the front door, the children jumped down from the bed of the truck, the gravel walk crunching under their feet as they landed, and suddenly there he was standing between the huge weight-bearing columns of the portico. It was as if they had walked into the pages of a magazine.

There were six iron bedsteads in the room the girl showed him to. She introduced herself by saying she would be his *madrich*, and right away explained that this was a like a patrol leader in the Scouts. She obviously doesn't know, thought the boy, that Jews aren't allowed to be Scouts, but he didn't correct her. He couldn't decide how old the girl was. She could just as easily have been sixteen as twenty, but her exact age was unimportant. To him, there were only children and grown-ups, and this girl wasn't a child. She was tall and big-boned, neither skinny nor fat, the kind whose waist blends into her upper body. While you couldn't exactly call her pretty, she exuded energy and cheerfulness.

"From now on, I'll be looking after you. I'm filling in for your mum, your dad or your granny," she said, smiling at the boy as if, with this smile, she was inviting him in. Her careful wording was not lost on him. The order she had used was very transparent, and he remembered what the woman with the twitching eye in the office had said about only orphans or half-orphans ending up at Deszk. The boy thought he must be somewhere between the two.

The girl's name was Chava. She showed him which bed was going to be his. It was below the window and, like the other children's beds, covered with a grey blanket. When the boy flopped down on it in his shorts, the horsehair immediately made the skin on his thighs itch. He scratched, but it was no use—he was always biting his nails, so they were too short to do any proper scratching with.

Chava waited a moment, then she sat down next to him and put her arm round his shoulder.

"It's a good place this, there's nothing to be afraid of here, you'll see."

It was only then that the boy noticed she'd had a package under her arm all the time they'd been talking. She pulled out two shirts, one white and one khaki-colored, both neatly ironed and folded, and placed them on the bed, along with two pairs of shorts, one brown and one blue. She smoothed out the topmost one and told him he would be getting even more clothes and that he shouldn't put on the white shirt and blue trousers just yet—they were for best, for Friday evenings. Lastly, she took out a little white cap, like a military side cap, and settled it on his head. She held the boy's face between her hands and turned it towards hers. She looked at him for a few moments with her head on one side, then tweaked the cap a little more. It felt to the boy like she had put it on wonky.

"There, that's better. Now it's on right," laughed Chava.

One of her middle front teeth was also wonky. It leant towards its partner, something that could have made her ugly, but instead made her face interesting, and the boy wanted her to laugh again, so he could have another look at it. When, for just a moment, she put her arm round his shoulder a second time to reassure him, the boy took a deep breath in, as if, in so doing, he could fix in his memory the fresh smell of soap emanating from her armpit and hide it away to enjoy later, like a piece of bread. Chava's thick, brown, shoulder-length hair was parted on the side, and as he spotted this, the boy thought that her hairbrush must be sure to get caught in it in the mornings, just like his mother's had, but he pushed this thought away.

"Right, time to head to the park," said Chava, leaping to her feet. "Can you play soccer?" she asked. "But of course you can—you're a boy!"

There was only one other child in the room besides them: a thin boy with red hair and sticking-out ears. Up until that moment, he had been sitting on a windowsill a bit further off kicking his heels against the wall and trying to loosen a knot in a thick rope with his teeth. When Chava leapt up from the bed to show the boy the way to the soccer field, the red-headed boy also jumped to his feet and ran after them.

"I'll take him down," he called to Chava, before sticking out his tongue and blowing hard, as if a thread from the rope had got stuck on his tongue and he wanted to rid himself of it. This boy had a strange name too. He was called Tsvi. After being introduced to the boy, Tsvi clapped him on the back, then slipped past him through the doorway and ran off ahead down the corridor, the boy hurrying after him.

Tsvi pointed to a door with an enamel sign on it bearing a picture of a shower done in black. On the next door along, a picture of a boy in shorts held up with suspenders made it clear that this was the lavatory. The guided tour didn't take long.

"Damn! Everyone's gone. They'll be playing something round the back. Let's go and find them!" said Tsvi, already dashing down the stairs.

Outside the door, he stopped short, uncertain which way to head. The gardener, who was doing a bit of work between the hedges, must have noticed his indecision, because he waved the boys towards the western corner of the grounds. Tsvi set off at a run and the boy, somewhat reluctantly, followed him. The garden they were haring through was enormous, and it was some time before they heard the clamor of voices. This grew to a wild yelling as they approached, then fell silent again. The neatly kept lawns gradually gave way to woodland. Suddenly, a tall boy of sixteen or so stepped out in front of them from behind one of the thick tree trunks.

"Coming to join in?" he asked. "Though we're nearly done. Well look at that! A new kid!"

He smiled and held out his hand. "I'm Yozef, the older kids' madrich."

"He doesn't have a name yet, but we'll think of something," said Tsvi, not leaving any time for introductions. "Yeah, we'll join in. Or are we too late? … Mind you, the end's always the best bit."

"Want to be an executioner?" the big boy asked him.

"You bet!" Tsvi said, looking delighted.

“All right,” said Yozef, holding out a black cap. Tsvi took it.

“Yessss!” he cried, giving a little skip in his excitement.

“Tell the new boy how the game works,”

“Okay, okay. Listen up!” said Tsvi, plunging in. “It’s called Partisan. We’re all partisans and the madriches are the Germans. They go off and hide, but they’re pretty cunning—one time they dug a trench for themselves at night, then covered in it branches so we’d have a harder time finding them the next day. There’s lots of us, of course, so we always catch the scum in the end. Then we tie their hands and feet together…”

Just then, a triumphant roar cut through the quiet.

“Ha! That’s another filthy Nazi caught,” explained Tsvi. “The Nazis are allowed to move too, so if they hear us coming, they can slip away. We have to surprise them by creeping through the trees as quietly as we can. But you’ve got to watch out. There are loads of areas in the woods cordoned off by string: they’re the minefields. If you don’t see the string and you happen to step into one of these, you’re dead. You have to lie down right where you are. You’re a corpse. You’re out. If there’s a load of corpses already it’s easy, right, ’cause you can see where the mines are, but even then it’s harder than you’d think. The filthy Germans are pretty good at hiding the string. They’ll put it up behind fallen trees or bushes and under leaves.”

“And when you catch them? Then what?”

“What do you think? We execute them. But only when we’ve got them all. Keep watching, and you’ll see soon enough. Come on!”

“Where to?”

“Our HQ.”

Their headquarters was at the foot of the perimeter wall in a little wooden shed of the sort of that gardening tools are usually kept in. However, the area around it looked more like a rubbish dump. There was an overturned rusty tin bath , an iron bedstead propped against the wall, a few rain-soaked chairs flung every which way, a gutted stove, a battered basin and a pan with a dent in it.

Two madriches were sitting on the bath, their hands tied, swinging their legs and making the side of the bath clang dully. They were whispering to each other, then they laughed aloud, but the children guarding them and holding the other end of the rope (who looked around ten years old) shouted at them.

“You! Quiet!” came the reprimand from both sides.

A second battle cry rang out, then several more in quick succession. Then children came running out of the woods towards them, making for the headquarters. There were so many of them, the boy didn’t know which way to look—several classes maybe, or no, a whole school, big and small, all in identical white caps. The boys were in shorts like the ones he’d been given but hadn’t yet changed into; the girls were in skirts. All the children were wearing the same kind of shirt. They were pushing and shoving and yelling, and no one was telling them off.

It was only when they were all crowded together by the shed, that the boy noticed a twisty branch stuck into the ground with a flag flying from it. The flag was made from a piece of white sheet, and someone had drawn a blue star on it. A few moments later, six captive girls and boys were brought over to stand under the flag, their guards yanking at the ropes that held them. The other children formed a circle around them.

"Is everyone back from the minefield too?" Yozef asked, trying to make himself heard over the noise of the crowd.

At this point, the Nazis' hands were untied and their shirts removed. Five children who were holding the same kind of black cap as Tsvi had been clutching for a while, stepped forward and pulled these caps onto the Nazis' heads. When they had done this, they formed a line, and Yozef gave each of them a piece of boiled beetroot he had stolen from the kitchen.

The crowd roared, "Nazi scum! Nazi scum!"

The execution squad looked across at Yozef, who waited for the suspense to reach a certain pitch before he raised his hand. At this, the children fell quiet. Then Yozef paused again for dramatic effect. The air was fizzing with expectation by the time he moved again. There was no need for him to speak or lower his hand; a little nod was enough. At this signal, the executioners flung the beetroot pieces, which, depending on how well they had aimed, landed on the madriches' chests just over their hearts, somewhere on their chests, on their stomachs or right on their belly buttons. Each of the condemned collapsed as they were hit. A few overacted and twitched for a moment or two before lying still. The beetroot left a red mark on their bodies. The juice trickled down, staining the sparse grass a dark purplish red.

"Hooray! Hooray!"

"Take that!!"

"Die, dogs!" shouted the children, before setting off back to the big house. They did this in the same spirit as they might have headed for the exit at the cinema after the feature was over. They swept the boy along with them. Only later, when his throat began to feel sore did he realize that, when they had executed the Nazi scum, he too had yelled at the top of his voice!

*

To those who stepped through the gate of the big house after that afternoon in July, the fact that Tsvi and the boy were inseparable seemed the most natural thing in the world, as natural as finding the cream of the milk bobbing there on the top of the sweet 'coffee' every morning. You could like or loath it; they belonged together.

Neither Tsvi's father nor his brother had come back from the war. His *muter* had not gone out to work before the war, and when she found herself alone with Tsvi and his sister after the Russian troops had liberated the city, she hadn't known where to begin. The camp had come in handy, Tsvi explained to the boy, who was staring at him, wide-eyed, because in his apartment building, only Fecó, the building super's son, had called his mother 'muter.' "Common as muck!" he could hear his mother saying. She hadn't liked it when he had played with Fecó. The fact that a Jew could also call his mother 'muter' was not only impressive, it made Tsvi suddenly seem all grown up. From then on, the boy thought Tsvi was the coolest friend he'd ever had. There was so much you could learn from him: swearing was a given.

Not only did Tsvi possess a vast arsenal of apt expressions, more often than not he even knew what they meant, or at least he could offer an explanation. He was good at pitch-and-toss and could spit further than anyone else on their floor. He had learned that skill from his brother, who had been able to beat anyone on Dembinszky Street hands down, even though that was a really long street.

It was also Tsvi who suggested a name for the boy. Everyone at Deszk needed to have a Hebrew name, and, as this was the name they used for each other from the word go, none of the children actually knew what the others' real names were, the ones they'd been known by earlier. Tsvi rattled off a list of names he had picked up already, and just as in real life, it didn't matter if there were already children with these names in the camp. If that was the case, then any child who arrived later was given an adjective to go with their name.

"Like the Red Indians," laughed the boy, who had quickly gotten to know Ornery Doron, Ginger Nathan, Lofty Eliezer and One-Leg Zev. The boy chose Shai. "Shai, Shai," he said over and over to himself. He liked what it meant: gift. And it sounded better than Avrohom, the Hebrew name his parents had given him. Nathan had said at the start that unless he insisted on something else, they would use that name. The boy told them he couldn't remember his Hebrew name and hoped his grandmother hadn't dictated it to the woman in the office with the tic. Experience had taught him to lie about himself in order to get what he wanted.

Just like the timetable on school days and the Hebrew lessons, which went on even in the summer holidays, this name was all part of the school's primary mission: to prepare children who had returned from the death camps or those who had lost their parents for emigration to Palestine. In their lessons, it was the history and geography of Palestine that the children were taught about. Hungarian history and geography took second place. In fact, the only reason they learned about these subjects at all was to allow them to pass muster when the big, stern, mustachioed school inspector came twice yearly from the local board of education to test them. He was responsible for accrediting their certificates. Tsvi had explained in their first few days together that they had lessons every day except Saturdays, and exams in the winter and the spring. The boy hadn't shown a great deal of interest, however. After all, he'd only come for a summer holiday and would be heading home when autumn arrived.

This didn't put Tsvi off, however. He went on to impersonate the teachers, sometimes gesticulating, putting on a deep voice or not sufficiently rolling his r's, walking all bent over and doing silly laughs. He mimed a big hat in the air over his head, pulled himself up ramrod straight, bent forward from the waist with his hands linked behind his back, and paced up and down in front of the box hedge, taking seven-league strides.

"Yakov, the Hebrew teacher," he said, turning his head right and left as if he was walking up and down between rows of desks. "He's the headmaster, and the *best* teacher! He keeps on explaining," and here he waved his arms about wildly, "until we get it. They sent him from Jerusalem. He doesn't know a single word of Hungarian—it's hilarious! We can say anything we want around him, anything that comes into our heads, and he won't bat an eyelid!"

"Dan teaches us Hungarian," he went on. "No need to take him seriously. Just get through the exam with the dumb school inspector and you're *gilt*. At the kibbutz, no-one's going to ask you to reel off the first verse of Arany's 'The Bards of Wales'. They're going to ask if you

know how to use a spade. Dan's clear about that too, thanks be to the Creator! In his lessons we read novels and poems. He nudges us over the line in the exam in any case."

Tsvi turned his back and held out his hands as if he had a book in them. He bent his knees and turned them out a little, then moved away, bow-legged, pretending to read as he did so. The children hooted with laughter.

"You see why we call him Chaplin, right? And it's not just the way he waddles, he wears a black hat too! Spitting image of Chaplin, me old mate, spitting image!"

Tsvi sent a gob of spit flying onto the gravel walk, conscious, it seemed, that demonstration was the most effective tool a teacher could have.

"Still with me? Then we've got Moyshe, the tall one who looks like he's going to throw up all the time. He's the algebra teacher and a piece of shit."

Tsvi hunched over, and twisted his lips, as if this could make his face appear longer and more gaunt.

"To look at him, you'd think he just came up from the cellar in the ghetto. But be warned, with him, playing the orphaned child card will get you nowhere. He won't shed a tear. It simply has no effect on him, end of story. One glance from him and you get the shakes. But you know what the worst thing is? He's like a kuvasz," he said, pausing to illustrate this by baring his teeth and barking. "If he catches you, he won't let go. He sits down with his victim in the dining room after lessons and keeps the poor wretch there till they can solve the problems by themselves."

Tsvi's impersonations were so vivid and his identification with his subjects so complete that the boy found them hugely entertaining. He was also buoyed by the high spirits of the rest of the Tsvi's audience, for when he looked around, he saw there were about ten other children standing there, slapping their knees and shrieking with laughter.

"Miryam, the geography and natural sciences teacher," went on Tsvi, showing no signs of flagging. "She's the funniest one. She's got short hair, parted down the middle like some kind of diva, but she wears glasses with thick, black frames."

He curled his fingers inwards and turned his hands towards his eyes, as if he was holding two big dumplings.

"Her nose starts here and ends here," he said, stretching out his arm and jerking his palm upwards. "Like someone crossed Ella Gombaszögi's turned-up nose with Latabár's long one, but that's not all. Her eyes point in two different directions, but they see in another direction altogether, so cheating is a no-no. When she's on the prowl, there's no-one—and we've tried it every which way—simply *no-one* who can tell who she's looking at."

Tsvi focused all his efforts on crossing his eyes. Second time around, just for a moment, he managed it too; his eyeballs slid towards each other.

"Flin! Do Flin!" shouted someone with a sturdier voice from the back. The boy couldn't identify who the voice belonged to, but it wasn't easy distinguishing between the thirty or forty skinny boys who had crowded round, all with the same haircut and the same cap, and he hadn't even tried to count the girls.

“All right, all right. That’s David,” explained Tsvi, still addressing himself to the boy, “but we just call him Flin. He teaches History. Now *he’s* very decent-looking. Spit of Humphrey Bogart, all he needs is a trench coat. His thing is to draw lines on the board, divide it down the middle and teach us the history of Hungary and Palestine at the same time. He doesn’t buy Old Hebrew talk like ‘I lost my exercise book,” or “I’ve got a stomach-ache.” You really need to know what was happening at the same time in Hungary or Europe and the Middle East. He’ll give you homework like that too—unbelievable! ‘Fuhllin them in, children, fuhllin the tables’.

He said this slowly, stressing the ‘l’, and holding back his tongue before catapulting the word out his mouth.

The other children yelled in chorus: “Flin them in, children. Flin the tables!”

When Tsvi got to the school inspector who came to quiz them on their knowledge, the other children also pitched in. Some of them stuck out their non-existent stomachs, others mimed disgusting gobbling or snoring. Still others wiped their faces with invisible handkerchiefs or summoned examinees with a yell. The overall impression created by this role-playing was that the school inspector cursed the day he had taken the job in Torontál district. It was bad luck and no mistake, ending up as one of only three or four inspectors obliged to listen to the struggles of two hundred squirming children.

The school inspector would never unbutton his waistcoat, not even on the warmest spring day. When he went to sit behind the desk that had been got ready for him, the middle one in the line of desks, he would just hang his coat over the back of the chair. He would stretch out his legs under the desk, and his huge body would balance on the chair as if it was a plank that had been propped there, except that there was the hump of his stomach sticking up in the middle of it. He would sink his fleshy thumbs into the tiny pockets on his waistcoat and only unhook them to look at his pocket watch or wipe away the sweat trickling down from his brow. He did the former at regular intervals out of boredom; the latter he did less often, being too lazy, often not reaching for his handkerchief even when the sweat had reached the edges of his mouth. Then, he would lick at the drops spreading under his moustache. That tongue! It was red and fleshy, and it was bad enough him licking with it, but sometimes he also turned it around and around in his mouth. Tsvi’s mimicry of this was true to life, though at that time the children at the big house were unaware that when the school inspector asked a pupil something in the village school, the blood in the teachers’ veins also ran cold, because he would write a report on them too. This report would go up to the county level, from where little good could be expected. The teachers would frighten the school children with stories about the inspector, so that as soon as he arrived in the village, even children who had nothing to do with him would scamper into their houses.

The children at the big house were not afraid of him. Granted, there was no one waiting at home with a leather belt on the day the end-of-year certificates were given out. What drove them to study was the competitive spirit reigning over the camp. Slacking wasn’t cool. The teachers had nothing to fear from the school inspector, because they got their wages from the *Sochnut*, otherwise known as The Jewish Agency for Israel. They did their job, teaching and examining, and the only reason they gave the school inspector lunch was to establish a more cheerful atmosphere. For his part, the school inspector stashed away everything they gave him in his huge belly but loathed the big house all the same. When the great lose their power, they

grow smaller, and they can stick their stomachs out all they want, it won't make any difference.

The boy was thrilled by the soccer, the team, the lake and especially the pool—all things he had either never had access to, or only a long time ago. He would have liked to send his grandfather a postcard of the photo that hung in the dining room, underneath which was written, 'Gerliczy House'. There was another photo that showed a room from the time when the gentry still lived there. It was furnished with thick-pile rugs and massive armchairs. One corner at the back of the room was dominated by an enormous tiled stove, and there was an oval painting hanging on the wall. He was told that the woman in the painting was almost certainly the old baroness who had burnt to death right there in the house. She'd been smoking in bed, and by the time the servants smelt the smoke and ran into her room (you wouldn't believe how many servants they had!) she was lying on the floor, burnt to a crisp. When he said, 'burnt to a crisp,' Tsvi curled his fingers and writhed in a way that forced you to laugh but was also terrifying. The woman in the painting was sitting in a beautiful white dress, but you couldn't help picturing her charred body, and seeing, in your mind's eye, how the dried up and blackened skin clung to her bones.

The most amazing part of the grounds was the lake. This was no puddle of a pond sporting a few reeds and showy water lilies. It was a real lake where you could not only swim, you could also go boating. There weren't actually any boats, but this presented no obstacle to children who had survived everything that their parents hadn't. It was easy enough to hoodwink the washerwomen, who came and went as if they were ashamed of ending up there, as if they were moving through a painting from which all the other figures had been erased. They walked in through the gate which divided the big house from the village like citizens of a great empire crossing the border into a smaller neighboring country—arrogantly, but uncertain of their footing and with an aggression that was suppressed but all the more palpable for it. Every morning, they would make straight for the small building in the northern, rearmost part of the grounds, and they would stay there until late afternoon. They did this without looking at the children, clattering along the paved path from the main gate to the washhouse, passing the pool and the lake, their feet, in their identical black-strapped sandals, hurrying along improbably quickly so as to reduce the vexation they were exposed to until they had left all those shrieking, unseen interlopers behind them. They wore a kind of sleeveless apron over their clothes and kept their eyes pinned on the ground as they clung onto the round baskets in which they brought their lunch. They refused to accept anything that was made in the big house, despite the fact that the friendly cooks also came from the village. The four washerwomen were cut from a different cloth. It was impossible to tell if it was the children they resented or the dirty washing or the world in general. They bent over their big troughs and pinned the vast amounts of bed linen and clothes up on long lines, and if anyone dared to go near the washhouse or even as much as approached their empire, the limits of which were marked out by the washing on the lines, they would brandish their rug beaters and set up such a howling and a scolding that it was better just to stay away from them. There's no point winding someone up if they won't allow themselves to be placated.

At five o'clock, the washerwomen went home to the village, as did the cleaners, the gardeners and the cooks: the grown-ups of one kind and another who till then had surrounded the children. On Saturdays, the children and the madriches were left even more to themselves.

The moment the washerwomen vanished from view, One-Leg Zev would let out a whoop, the cue for a team of children to line up behind him. Then Zev would set off for the washhouse, swinging his crutches as fast as he could. When they reached the wall of the building, two boys would support Zev, one on each side, while he reached up with one of his crutches and shoved open the window, which was never completely closed on account of the damp. Next, a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old from the Hazorim year group would sit one of the little Kadimah kids (the six- and seven-year-olds) on his shoulders. The little one would climb in through the window, jump down onto one of the big tables inside, from there to the floor and would open the door for the others. They didn't actually need One-Leg Zev at all for this well-practiced maneuver, as the Kadimah kid could have pushed the window open himself once he was up on the bigger kid's shoulders, but it was Zev who had thought up the whole break-in thing in the first place and he who had pushed the window open with his crutch the very first time, so he was still accorded the privilege.

Once the Kadimah kid had opened the window, the boys would press into the washhouse. At least eight of them were needed to lift down the huge five-meter-long washing troughs from the long tables and take them—with the unspoken consent of the madriches—down to the lake. They just about managed to carry the metal troughs out of the washhouse, though they had to ease them carefully out through the door—'squeeze' them as Tsvi put it, but launching them onto the water was tricky. It required everyone to work together and when they squatted down with them strong thigh muscles were needed too, as it was very easy to drop the trough on someone's toes, and that was no joke. But once they had put the 'boats' in the water, they leapt into them, nimble as fleas, as many as five in each one. The little ones splashed randomly at the water, making little headway, while the bigger ones rowed in unison with their hands because there were no oars, of course. The cox stood out from the usual groups of five like the goalkeeper in a football team, and everyone wanted to be cox, the boy included, because the cox enjoyed a certain respect. In a race, a disproportionate amount depended on them, and because the rowers tended to take out their anger on the cox, he or she had to be tough. At Deszk, no difference was made between girls and boys; the only taboo was age—you weren't allowed to beat the little ones because there was no glory in coming first that way. That was what they were taught. At the same time, the children took the races deadly seriously. Brains and brawn, these were the two things that would get you to the finishing line at the lake, and the rowers were cheered on by a sizeable crowd on the shore, too. They would toss the crew of the winning boat in the air—for this, it was worth paddling till you were gasping for breath.

The same competitive spirit drove the children on the soccer field, and this spirit could also be felt in the classrooms. It was still pushing them on in the afternoons when the children were preparing for the next day's lessons—in their rooms, on their beds, there being no other facility on the first floor of the big house. What they heard, day in, day out, was that only strong people would be able to build the Jewish state, to break ground in the desert and make it fruitful, only smart boys and girls, who could figure out how much was needed of what so the new country would yield crops, produce returns, function effectively, not collapse or go off the rails. The ones to build the future would be those who knew this country of theirs and knew about their people's past. Them.

It was also good just to bob gently on the surface of the lake, of course, especially in the stifling, dry summer afternoons, when the sun threw long shadows and the sweetness of the

soft, melting figs and plums picked by the perimeter wall was still in your mouth, or on Saturdays, when even the greediest of them still had half a bar of the Hershey chocolate that was distributed in the evening by their beds. This chocolate was really filling. The American army had realized there was a need for its soldiers to have something nutritious to hand in emergencies. Hershey met the challenge: one bar, which was somewhat more than a hundred grammes, provided six hundred calories. The boy thought that if his grandmother were to find out about it, she would be amazed. The chocolate was also required to be transportable, meaning it must withstand temperatures of up to fifty degrees without melting. The result was that no amount of chewing or sucking at it, licking it or turning it around in your mouth would result in the Hershey chocolate spreading over your tongue. You could nibble at it, though that wasn't easy. Most of the residents of the big house, however, the boy included, would spend long hours crouching on the steps of the building or leaning against the cool of the stone wall or the trunk of a shady tree and silently, eagerly devote themselves to chipping away at the chocolate with their incisors, as if they were trying to make the moment last. From a distance, they looked like a bunch of overgrown rabbits in white caps.

Moyshe Is Left Behind (pp189-193)

Gravel crunched under the wheels of the truck as it rolled in through the main gate. Below the greyish-green tarpaulin, on both sides of the bed of the truck, benches had been knocked together for the children. It was these they sat on as they jolted along towards wherever they happened to be heading. Sometimes it was possible to travel towards Subotica and Zagreb, other times through Czechoslovakia. For a long time even the name of their final stop was uncertain, only the geographical location remained fixed: Palestine, Israel, Eretz, the Holy Land.

A platform made of crates was dragged over to the truck so that the littlest ones could also climb up onto the back of it, but when they reached the topmost step, the smallest of them still needed to be pulled up onto it by the madriches. The back flap was tied up, and on each side of it, a madrich stood checking the consent forms that the guardians, parents, grandparents or any other surviving relatives had sent back to Deszk, their signature proof that they permitted the emigration of the child they had been entrusted with. To the madriches, this meant no more than a tick by a name, but for Yakov, Chaplin, Flin and the other teachers, every completed consent form tugged at their heartstrings. They knew that it wasn't primarily poverty, hunger or the fear of responsibility that had led these relatives to pick up the pen— it was hope and selfless love.

It was different for the orphans. Most of them didn't even have a guardian, and everything went like clockwork; they needed only to gather up their belongings, and they could jump onto the back of the truck. When the engine growled into life, they grinned from ear to ear, and, as the leavers were driven away, the children still stuck at the big house watched with envy. Some had spent only months learning about the promised land, others like Tsvi had been learning about it for years, and, though they had heard plenty about the hard work that awaited them there, these children, who had yet to do a day's work, were convinced that in Israel they were going to have a grand old time, just as they had done at Deszk. This was what Tsvi felt his mother was depriving him of, in being incapable of parting from him. In the boy's

case it was his grandparents who would not allow him to go, and the two boys were not alone in this.

There was Moyshe, for example. His sad story was the subject of conversation at the big house for a long time. Moyshe had packed up his things along with the orphans, but at the last minute he had been ordered to get down off the truck—so much at the last minute, they said, that had the farewells been concluded just a little earlier, Moyshe would have building a kibbutz in the Negev desert long ago. The engine of the truck was already warming up, when Lea came running hotfoot out of the big house and down the steps. She was a teacher who also handled the secretarial work, and the children knew that she dealt with Yakov's correspondence in both Hebrew and Hungarian. She was waving a piece of paper in one hand and holding up the index finger of her other hand in warning. Yakov knew, without her having to say anything, that he couldn't let the children go yet. Gasping for breath, Lea handed over a letter from Moyshe's uncle, brought by the postman that very morning.

Little Moyshe continued to run after the truck even when it had turned onto the road outside the grounds, and he was still running after it when it disappeared from his sight on a bend on the main road through the village. He had been dragging his sack after him in the dust as he ran, and now he let go of the strap and waved frantically with both arms.

For a while, his voice could be heard all the way to the big house, as he yelled, choking on his words: "You can't leave me here! You can't! It's not fair! It's not fair!"

In the end, it took two of them to bring him back inside the gate. They had to drag him along the ground, and as they reached the straight road that led to the big house, you could see the dust that had been kicked up trembling above them in the hot air like when the camera film has slipped and one image overlays another. Moyshe's feet were turned inwards, and he was holding his upper body stiffly and flailing his arms so wildly that his madrich could only catch hold of one of them. She pulled him along for a while, but then, becoming concerned that the raving child would come to harm, she stopped, but by that time help had arrived.

"We were surprised, too, that she couldn't deal with him by herself," said Tsvi when he was telling the boy about it.

As impetuous as Moyshe was, he was physically small, even for his age. He had been an undernourished eight-year-old, stunted in his development, when he arrived at Deszk. His lips had been covered in pus-filled sores, and there had been concerns that he might be infectious, so the doctor had not permitted him to leave the sick bay. Moyshe had taken such umbrage at this, however, that he had climbed out through the window. He was discovered at the station in the nick of time, in the toilet of a carriage going to Újszeged. The train was already moving when they jumped off it with him.

Although he was taken to the headmaster's office, Yakov did not punish him. He knew from looking at Moyshe's file that he still hadn't turned seven when he and his mother had presented themselves at the National Junior Schools' sports field in Zugló carrying the required three days' supply of food having been informed that they were only going to be sent somewhere to work. He and his mother had wondered to themselves as they walked the long

distance to the collection area, it being too early in the day even for the trams, what use a seven-year-old could possibly be to the authorities.

In the biting November cold, amidst the roaring of the Arrow Cross men, the mothers hugged their children close and gripped their hands tightly, anxious lest they get swept away by the mass of people. Only little Moyshe was pushed away by his mother, there on the crowded sports field. First, she crouched down in front of him, then, seizing his shoulders, she shook him hard, as if this was the only way to get him to pay attention to her, and the child felt that her eyes were burrowing into him, so hard was she willing him to listen. He must go and hide among the legs of the people in the crowd, and the moment the guard looked the other way, he was to run away as fast as he could. He must not bother himself about anything else, he should not try to look back. He must swear not to turn around, not to look for her, just to run all the way home. Last of all, she whispered in his ear that no matter how cold he was, at the first corner he came to he must throw away his coat with the yellow star she had sewn onto it, and then she was pushing him away from her. Moyshe, who was still Jani at that point, ran pell mell as far as Király Street, without stopping once. For one whole day and one whole night, he waited for his mother. It was hunger that drove him out of the apartment in the end, but the only person he could find in their building was Ilka néni on the ground floor. She was so old they had forgotten about her or had felt she wasn't worth bothering with. She was old and she was smelly, but she gave him breakfast and took him in. When she had to go to the ghetto, she took Moyshe along with her and from there back home again, and when she heard about the camp, she wasted no time in sending him off to Deszk.

When the breathless madriches pushed the exhausted little boy in front of him, Yakov shook his head. He muttered something in Hebrew, not raising his voice, only his index finger, indicating that he disapproved of what had happened. Then, he took the boy by the shoulder, all dirty, tattered and covered in bloody grazes, and walked him out of the room.

The other children felt sorry for Moyshe, because he hadn't been allowed to go. Only Ephraim was overjoyed that his friend had returned. As a result of some kind of skin condition, Ephraim's hair had fallen out when he was still in the ghetto, and it hadn't grown back since, but he had such bushy black eyebrows it was as if nature wanted to make up for what it had taken from him. The two blue-black knots of curly hairs gave him a stern look, though he was really shy and tentative. Even though he was around one and a half years older and a head taller than his Moyshe, he danced to his friend's tune. It was only after little Moyshe's return that Ephraim's services were truly needed.

Moyshe cried all night after the incident with the truck, and he wouldn't leave the bedroom all the next day, only going down to the dining room when he had assured himself that everyone had fallen asleep. Then, he crept down to get a little bread, because it was common knowledge that there was always bread left out on the table, even at night. The children rarely touched it, but the fact that it was there gave them a sense of security.

He *had* to get into the office, this was all Moyshe could think about—not an easy task, given that Lea kept the key to it in the pocket of her jacket. But he had no choice; he had to get hold of it. When it came to mischief, Moyshe usually thought big, but theft was not in his repertoire. It wasn't that he was afraid of being punished; he had seen no instance of serious sanctions being employed at the big house. The children were simply left in peace. Even when Ornery Doron had started the spitting chain, there had been no consequences, though food

was a serious matter, something no one dared make a joke of. But no-one liked semolina. They really hated it. They pushed it around their plates instead of eating it, and one dinnertime, which began with them all turning up their noses at it, Ornery Doron had spat into the untouched plate of the boy sitting next to him. And that boy, rather than commenting on this, had turned, powered by the same momentum, to the child sitting on his other side and had spat into that one's dinner. That was the point all hell broke loose. Like a line of dominoes tipping over, the chain went on, from plate to plate, table to table, right through all the two hundred children, zigzagging to and fro across the big room, without anyone uttering a word. An ominous silence descended on the dining room, peppered only with small gasps of shock, suppressed laughter, fidgeting and the little noises associated with expectation. When the spectacle came to an end at the last table, the madriches stood up without a word, gave instructions for the plates be collected up, and all the children headed for their rooms, hungry but laughing and pushing and shoving as they went. There were no more repercussions. That was all.

Moyshe knew it was a sin to steal. But, after that dirty trick, after being promised that he would be taken to Palestine, and then being left behind, he felt entitled to claim what he knew he had a right to.