

This is a historical novel.
Historian Márton Matuska's foreword gives a detailed overview
of the historical facts.

Author Sándor Illés describes the bloodshed inflicted by the
Serbs on the town Temerin, which currently belongs to Serbia,
and where the majority of the population was Hungarian before
World War II. The tragedies are recalled by the survivors. It is a
credible account, a documentaristic depiction of those horrid
events.

By reconstructing inhumanity, the author intends to save the
victims from the nightmare of oblivion, so that similar mas-
sacres could never happen again.



SÁNDOR ILLÉS: FOR WHOM THE BELL DID NOT TOLL

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DID NOT TOLL**

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**FOR WHOM THE BELL DID
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Erdélyért Alapítvány

So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the grapes from the vineyard of the earth and tossed them into the great winepress of the wrath of God.

Revelation 14:19

Instead of Redemption of the Soul¹

Preface to the English edition of the novel *For Whom the Bell Did Not Toll*
by Sándor Illés

Following both the First and the Second World Wars, the position of Hungarians in the South Slav state was unsolved. After World War I, a significant part of Délvidék, Southern Hungary, was joined in accordance with the Treaty of Trianon to the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, or the Kingdom of SCS for short. In the state of SCS the former Serbian king became the king of the newly formed country without any special political settlement. The Croats – but the Slovenes and the Montenegrins too – bristled up against this in protest. While the Croats were waiting for the form of government and the head of state to be agreed upon, the Serbian king had already seized the throne of the new country. The grievance of the Slovenes was that even in their part of the country the Balkan state of disorder and the Serb hegemonic aspirations had taken place; that their public administration of European standard was becoming Balkanized. During the time of the World War Montenegro had its own ruler, who had to disappear from the stage in order to give way to the spread of Serbian hegemony². The entire population of Délvidék, where the Hungarians were living, also experienced the economic exploitation directed from Belgrade. The situation kept deteriorating until the Kingdom of Yugoslavia ceased to exist in 1941.

The Hungarians lived under constant oppression in that country. Their schooling, use of the mother tongue and freedom of political organization was curbed. They had no citizenship for years and consequently were not entitled to vote.³ Persons learned in the law, mainly lawyers, led the struggle for defending the rights of the Hungarians: Dénes Strelitzky from Szabadka, Leó Deák from Zombor, Imre Várady from Nagybecskerek and many others. It was also thanks to the fervour of these men that the Magyar Párt, The Hungarian Party, was established after many years of protraction.

The Hungarian masses gave vent to their national pretension in religious and cultural activities that had developed around the churches and their institutions which were headed by learned, erudite priests. It naturally followed from this that it was the politicians and the priests who were

1. It is part of the folk tradition to toll the bells for the salvation of the deceased. This has become widespread in the Christian world. In Temerin this is also referred to as *csendítés*, that is, ringing. The bell rung on these occasions is called the soul-bell and the ringing is called redemption of the soul. "They are ringing for the redemption of his/her soul" – say the people in Temerin.

2. The Serbian reigning dynasty had organized several attempts on the life of Prince Nikola – later king of Montenegro – at the beginning of the 20th century. At the end of World War I Belgrade managed to dethrone him with a coup and integrate the territory – an outlet to the sea for Serbia – into the new state.

3. János Csuka wrote about the evil conditions of the Hungarians in Délvidék in his book *A Délvidéki magyarság története 1918-1941*. Püski Kiadó, Budapest, 1995. (The History of Hungarians Living in Délvidék, Püski Publishing House, Budapest)

most familiar with the Hungarian grievances, and it was also due to these circumstances that when the Hungarians entered in nineteen-forty-one, the politicians and the priests took a prominent part both in welcoming the newcomers that they had been expecting as their liberators and in the new Hungarian administration. The politicians gave exalted welcoming speeches to the liberating Honvéds in front of great masses of overjoyed people; the priests celebrated masses and laudatory ceremonies.

When the borders were restored after World War II, the open showing of their true colours of being heartfelt Hungarians was bloodily revenged on the Hungarian masses altogether, but especially brutally and thoroughly on the priests and politicians. Very few of the available Hungarian leaders in Délvidék had avoided execution for “war crimes”; of them we should mention, first of all, the already mentioned Leó Deák, who was put on show-trial and executed together with several of his associates on 26th November 1945.⁴ The priests were penalized so that – according to our not yet complete data – some thirty of them were liquidated, all formal procedures having been set aside.⁵ It has been proved that the liquidation of parish priests Mihály Virág from Horgos, Ferenc Takács from Péterréve and Ferenc Petrányi from Óbecse was in connection with the holy mass that they celebrated in praise at the arrival of the Honvéds in 1941.⁶ The eminent Reformed Bishop of Bácság, János Gachal, had to be put out of the way because he had written a play with an imaginary plot in which the Honvéds re-annexed the Bácság region to Hungary.⁷

Documents had been drawn about the mass-murders executed at the end of 1944 and beginning of 1945; among others there were lists – more or less reliable – with the names of the victims. However, these have never been made public and cannot be researched even today. It was said about the mass murders that they occurred in order to call to account those who were guilty of the January 1942 extermination of Serbs and Jews in the Sajkás region and Újvidék. Extensive evidence can be produced to reveal the falsity of this statement. For example: Tito and his men exterminated Hungarians in the Bácság too, whereas this region had been under German occupation and therefore, whatever had happened there, it was not the Hungarian leaders, or the Hungarian masses, or even the Hungarian state that could be called upon to accept responsibility. Hungarians were executed en masse in

4. Deák was brought here by Tito's men without even asking the Hungarian authorities. In those days Tito's agents acted almost freely in Budapest under the protection of the Soviet Army.

5. On the executed priests see: *Rémuralom a Délvidéken, (Reign of Terror in Délvidék) Atlantis Kiadó, Újvidék, 2004. A study by János Tari and Imre Ehman, p. 169-190.*

6. See events concerning the named priests in the appropriate places in the book by Márton Matuska, *A megtorlás napjai, Forum Kiadó 1991; Retaliation (A shortened version), Püski Publishing House, Budapest, 1995.*

7. In memory of Bishop Gachal a plaque was inaugurated in the hall of the Reformed church on 17th June 2006. We are still indebted to him for a detailed biography.

the Szerémség region as well, and this region was part of the Independent State of Croatia. In nineteen-forty-two, however, there were no razzias in Szabadka, Zenta, Magyarkanizsa, Verbász, Zombor, Bajmok, Topolya, Bezdán, etc. and yet Hungarians were butchered en masse in these places, too, at the end of forty-four and the beginning of forty-five. Contrary to the official statement, an enormous mass of people were executed, and later proclaimed to have been war criminals, responsible for the nineteen-forty-two bloodshed. The entire population of three places: Csurog, Zsablya and Mozsor were collectively proclaimed to be war criminals.

The retaliation turned into bloody mass manslaughter right after the arrival of the partisans. In the action that began in October 1944 and continued for about half a year on the orders of Josip Broz Tito – the Communist General who conducted the armed resistance of the South Slav peoples – several tens of thousands of innocent Hungarian civilians were liquidated on the territories of Bánság, Bácska, Szerémség, Drávaszög and Muravidék.

Members of the Cabinet had been informed right from the beginning of the bloody tragedy that had befallen Délvidék, demonstrably from February 1st.⁸ Most of the bloodshed took place during the military government that was introduced on October 17th 1944, on the orders of Tito with a decree dated October 17th 1944, in the town of Versec and ended on February 1st 1945.⁹ Among others Tito wrote in his decree: "...in order that we terminate as soon and as completely as possible the harm caused to our people by the occupiers and the **foreign elements that have settled down here**¹⁰ (emphasis by Márton Matuska) (...), it is of utmost necessity that all power is concentrated in the hands of the Army."

What was the aim of Tito, the victorious army general and party leader – with the strict military government that was directly under his control – becomes evident when we read a document written by general Ivan

8. See: Dr Ferenc Balla - Dr István, Balla Bezdán története (1941 – 1952) (The History of Bezdán 1941 - 1952) Publ. by Logos, Tóthfalu, 2001. The authors refer to András Abonyi (Ruff) several times, who had visited his birthplace Bezdán and its vicinity on several occasions in the last months of 1944. He had been an eye-witness to the mass executions in Bezdán. As a confidant to the count Teleky family, he had come to gather information on the events happening in Délvidék and spoke of the facts that he had experienced in Budapest also. Although the authors did not manage to find written records of his information, they are certain that it was on the basis of them that the Cabinet discussed and assessed the bloodshed on several occasions. Abonyi was fatally injured in February 1945 during the siege of Buda. The exact date of his death is unknown.

9. On the introduction of military government see: Josip Broz Tito összegyűjtött művei, Forum, Újvidék, 1998, p. 47-48

10. „Foreign elements” could be interpreted in three ways. The term could refer either to the persons and their family members who had come together with the Hungarian authorities or to the Székelys from Bukovina, who had been settled down here in May 1941 or to both of them. No matter how we interpret it, we must conclude that of these people only in a very few exceptional cases could anyone have stayed here in Délvidék who would have required the introduction of the military government. In documents dating from these days the term “our people” referred only to the Slav population of the country. It is characteristic that Tito classifies the colonized Hungarians as foreign elements, and the harm done by their presence as a necessity to put right, whereas after the extermination of the Magyars he arranged for hundreds of thousands of Slavs to become colonized in this region. Likewise, hundreds of thousands of Slavs were settled down here in the Délvidék in the first Yugoslavia following World War I, that is, in that phase when the state was called the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Rukovina, who was appointed by Tito and was responsible solely to him. In one of his decrees the general formulated that the military government was a requisite to secure “the future of the nation and the South Slav character of these territories.”¹¹

The execution of the intellectual leaders of the Hungarians, their priests and the several tens of thousands of ordinary citizens was only a part of the means put into practice to achieve their goal, the weakening of the position of the Hungarians. Another one was the expelling of masses of the Hungarian population. Tito and his followers often referred to the inhuman consequences of the anti-minority policy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; they had recited numerous data as evidence to prove their points – of which János Csuka mentions several in his book – but they had never mentioned the bloodshed executed in the second Yugoslavia, nor the fact that after the end of the war some 84,000 Hungarian citizens were expelled from the Délvidék. About twice the number of those expelled from the first Yugoslavia following the end of the first World War. This great number included some 16,000 indigenous ethnic Hungarians to this territory.¹²

In Tito’s Yugoslavia the issue of “magyartalanítás”, de-magyarization was treated at the highest political and scientific level, letting in on the problem Vasa Čubrilović – later member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts –, who had been directly involved in sparking off the First World War as one of the fellow assassins, with Gavrilo Princip, murderer of the Crown Prince. He drew up a serious study on the subject of the elimination of the Hungarian population in Délvidék.¹³ The agreement on population exchange between Yugoslavia and Hungary reached during the 1946 Paris Peace Conference served the same aims. Its implementation was not carried out.¹⁴

The novel *For Whom the Bell Did Not Toll* by the journalist Sándor Illés, born in Temerin, is concerned with the bloodshed and atrocities committed against the Hungarians during the time of the military government. The extermination of Hungarians in the plot of the novel happened in Temerin and Bezdán, but the reader can conclude from several details that there were mass executions in other places as well. In one of the chapters the reader can also learn about the artful method implemented by the operators of the

11. Quotation from the book *Impériumváltások, revízió, kisebbség*, p. 320, by Enikő A. Sajti (Publ. by Napvilág Kiadó, Budapest, 2004.)

12. See: A. Sajti, *ibid.* p. 341-360

13. Čubrilović was considered to be an eminent scientist in Yugoslavia. His study written against the Hungarians, translated into Hungarian was published in the *Ujvidék* (Novi Sad) journal *Híd*, 1996, No.12, p.1043-1060) – The author’s involvement in the Sarajevo assassination was not in doubt, but he was not sentenced to death following the trial due to his age; he was sixteen. Other studies on the liquidation of the Hungarian population include: Dr. Dušan Popović: *Problemi Vojvodine* (Beograd, 1925, published by the author), and Dr. Vladimir Jojkić: *Nacionalizacija Bačke i Banata*, Novi Sad, 1931. (publisher not indicated)

14. See: A. Sajti, *ibid.*

perpetrators of these deeds – the partisan armed forces, who had come as liberators, and the vengeful local Slav population – to execute the actions that had been planned beforehand. The essence of the plan was that the locals ready for revenge and the freshly arrived armed men should be directed by a commander who was detailed to go to the place from somewhere else. In his novel the writer describes the discussion between the temporary commander of the Temerin military station and his motorcycle courier. The task of the latter is to take the plenipotentiaries of the bloodshed in strict confidence into several places on a round from Temerin to Bezdan and back. On his return the courier reports to his commander.

The characters in Illés's novel were mainly real people, men that the author had known or with whom he had even a close relationship as his relatives, friends, neighbours, teachers, father-confessor, idol or adversary. The Doctor Treder of this novel figures in another of his books under his real name: Treuer.¹⁵

Sándor Illés made his name in his birthplace, but also in the whole of Délvidék and even on a much wider scale: in the whole Hungarian speaking world with a novel published in 1977. This “novel” was the “Sirató” (Wailing)¹⁶, in which he described the bloodshed in Temerin. The literary form of this work has been put into inverted commas for the reason that this work could also be referred to as a factual report. He gives a one-to-one account of the mass murder in Temerin making up a frame to it: the story of his homecoming from Budapest to Temerin on the event of his father's death. The changing of some of the names of the people from his town that figure in the book is a trick of the trade. The writer Nándor Gion, born in Szenttamás, does the same in his novel in which he elaborates the similar tragedy of his birthplace.¹⁷ Gion admitted in an interview¹⁸ that he had not changed the names of his close relatives and acquaintances. In 1977, however, it was not without danger to state in Hungary as a fact – even in a book classified as a novel – that the hands of President Josip Broz Tito – who had been endowed with such enormous world reputation – were that bloody. And yet this was a fact well-known not only among Hungarians but also among other peoples living here, including the Serbs. The offence against us Hungarians was, therefore, not an exception in Tito's state but a general practice affecting the majority of people. The thing that distinguishes our fate from that of the Slavs living here is this: they wished to crush the Hungarians in the

15. Sándor Illés, *Irgalom nélkül* (*Without Mercy*), Publ. by Tevan Kiadó, Békéscsaba, 1944. The author treats the extermination of the Temerin Jews in this novel.

16. Publ. by Szépirodalmi Kiadó, Budapest

17. Nándor Gion, *Virágos Katona* (*Soldier with a Flower*), Publ. by Forum Kiadó, Novi Sad, 1973.

18. Elek Tibor, *Fényben és árnyékban*, (In *Light and Shadow*) Publ. by Kalligram, Pozsony, Pesti Kalligram Kft., Budapest, 2004.

essence of their nationality, and they have largely succeeded in doing so. The introductory and determinant means to it were the mass executions carried out in haste.

Lots of time had to pass and great changes had to take place for us to be able to present our “liberation” consistent with the historical facts: bloody terror and extermination of several tens of thousands of innocent Hungarian civilians. The defeated can be held guilty for crimes that the winners had committed like, for example, in the case of the Katyn Forest massacre. As is now known, Stalin liquidated there over ten thousand Polish officers. The world pretended to believe him that Hitler was responsible for this misdeed. It was necessary to wait for the Soviet dictator to die before the facts could be openly disclosed and put to the right place.

The serious harm that had been done to the Magyar population in Délvidék could also not be revealed while Tito was alive. It has to be done now posteriorly.

Number of Hungarian population in Délvidék between 1880 – 2002

The year of the census	On the territory of Yugoslavia	On the territory of Vojvodina
1880	336 464	268 300
1910	577 549	425 029
1921	467 658	371 006
1941	543 692	456 770
1953 ¹⁹	502 175	435 345
1961	504 369	442 561
1981	426 867	385 356
2002 ²⁰	-	290 207

Délvidék- The region of Délvidék is situated in the Carpathian (Middle Danubian) Basin, next to the Northwestern Balkans, and had been a part of Hungary for over 1000 years when it was occupied and annexed by the Kingdom of SCS and Romania, after the end of the First World War (1918).

19. As an example, while in 1931 the number of the German population was 340,480 in 1948 it was not even the tenth of that: they numbered only 31,967.

20. Yugoslavia ceased to exist.

Bácska- An area between the rivers Danube and Tisa. The larger, southern part of it became part of the Kingdom of SCS after Trianon; now it is part of Vojvodina in Serbia

Bánság - It is a region bordered by the river Danube to the south, the river Tisza to the west, the river Maros to the north and the Carpathian Mountains to the east. Currently it is divided between three countries, Romania, Serbia and Hungary. The dividing borders were drawn at Trianon.

Drávaszög – The region between the rivers Danube and the Drava; South-Eastern part of the historic Baranya county, which became part of the Kingdom of SCS after Trianon; now it is part of Croatia.

Muravidék – A region by the river Mura, now the easternmost region of Slovenia; it became part of the Kingdom of SCS after Trianon.

Szerémség – A region between the rivers Danube and the Sava now divided between Serbia and Croatia. It became part of the Kingdom of SCS after Trianon.

Fear

1.

She took the lamp from the shelf and tossed it around. There was hardly any oil left in it. It was the second day without electricity. The day before yesterday the retreating Germans blew up the power station at Újvidék. That was from where Temerin got its electricity.

‘Have you locked the gate?’ Veronika asked her husband in a colourless voice while she was fiddling around lengthily with the matches. András, her husband, walked in haste to the gate to check once more that the gate was locked. It was the second day that every gate in the village was kept locked.

He stood there for a while with the door handle in his hand, and was turning a sharp ear to what was happening outside. He could hear sounds of music drifting from the main street; those soldiers wearing the stars, the partisans, were dancing the kolo like mad, drunk with delight. Now and then the villagers could hear bangs: shots were fired. They could also clearly make out motored vehicles moving along the road. And from the direction of Óbecse repeatedly came the thundering roar of cannons. The battling was still going on there. Soviet troops were moving in the direction of Ókér since early morning.

Fear had been hovering above the village like a dark tangle of smoke for two days now. This was even increased with the feeling of uncertainty. There was no electricity, therefore the radios were silent: no one knew what was happening in the outside world. Every moment they expected someone would bang with his hard fist on the gate, and the same moment the red starred communists would flock the yard. Fear of bolshevism had been promoted for years now, and by now terror had bulked out in their hearts, it was like a malignant abscess. Not only frightening but painful too.

When András Molnár started back from the gate, dusk was just starting to settle. It was getting dark early, it was the end of October.

Veronika, his wife, fetched some bacon from the pantry, and put some bread on the table too. They usually had their dinner before lighting up, but darkness seemed to be setting in earlier today. The wick made jerking sounds and let out a smelly smoke, so Veronica blew it out and went into the room to fetch a candle.

Next to the picture of the Holy Mary, tied with a ribbon, hung a consecrated candle in every house. It was lit when a misfortune befell the house, someone died or the kind, but it also eased the sufferings of a sick person when a candle burned by his head. A sacred candle was burning by the body while they were keeping vigil by the bier. Veronka felt as if no greater misfortune could have befallen them than the one that had struck them this time.

The candle kept flaring up, the kitchen was draughty. András brought up some wine in a blue beaker jug from the cellar. He did not have a big vineyard, perhaps half an acre in the great village garden. He had already planted two barrels of wine under the walnut tree behind the stacks of straw, and left in sight only ten litres in a demijohn. Rumours said that where the soldiers found wine they got drunk and dishonoured women.

The food stopped short in their mouths when a plane flew over the houses. 'Is it perhaps the Magyars coming back?' they were thinking. Their hearts shrank, the bitter taste of sorrow welled up in them, and András pushed aside his supper. His appetite was gone. Prostrate with thirst, he raised to his mouth the wine jug. Who would have thought three-and-a-half years ago, when with loud outbursts of joy they welcomed back the Honvédség, the Hungarian Army, that the moments of tragic withdrawal would ever come? The day before yesterday the last one of the Honvéds had left the place, and since then unrestrained sounds of Serbian songs filled the main street. And the accordions seemed to be rejoicing mockingly.

A dog was whimpering in front of the door, the wind had risen and made the well-pulley creak. It might rain but that was now of no interest to anyone.

The dog suddenly stopped whining and broke into angry barking.

'Go, see who it is,' she said with her throat tightening up, and cleared the table with fast moving hands, and hid what was left of the bacon.

He jumped up, jammed his floppy hat on his head, and started towards the gate, but stopped half way because he saw that the dog was rushing towards the end of the yard. That was where the visitor had turned up from, it was the neighbour, the old Jóska Bujdosó who usually came through the garden.

'Come in', András ushered the guest into the kitchen. Seeing him, she also calmed down and pulled out a chair for the newcomer.

'Candle light, like in the time of our grandfathers?' Bujdosó asked, then greeted them politely and hung his lambskin-cap on the hat peg behind the door.

'Unfortunately, we've run out of oil', she was trying to explain. 'I lit the consecrated candle, suppose the Almighty may look down upon us. Hope the Blessed Virgin will take no offence and hold it against me.'

'She's already forgotten us Magyars as far as I can see', grumbled the guest.

András only gave a deep sigh and pushed the jug in front of him. Bujdosó took a swig. He drank long, and drops of wine glittered on his moustache in the candlelight. After wiping his moustache with the back of his hand he said:

'Won't need candles no longer, they'll fix the station, them partisans don't like groping in the dark either.'

'They'll stay here for good, now?' she said in an anxious voice, wiping her hands in her apron.

'Oh, no! We'll surely just wake up to the sounds of the Hungarian anthem once more again! My poor father, let him rest in peace, did not live to see them...How eagerly he had been waiting for them...'

Old Bujdosó had been paralysed by stroke and sat in the gate all day long, even on chilly days, and kept looking to the north. When someone asked him: 'Are you expecting someone uncle Bujdosó?', he would say in a feeble voice: 'The Magyars. Them, to come back!' He did not live to see them. He died in March 1941, two weeks before the arrival of the Hungarians.

She said: 'It'll be the same with me, you'll see. I'll not live to see them come back,' and started crying with heavy drops of tears rolling down her cheeks. She was forty-five. András had just turned fifty.

The neighbour tried to change the subject: 'Any news from Imrus?'

'I pray for him everyday, may God look after him. I think of him all the time. We've had no letter from him for four months now.' Veronka started weeping again, and then with a sudden decision she turned round, went into the room and came back with a framed photograph. Her son, Imre, dressed in uniform with a Corporal's rank badge was in the picture. 'I've taken it off the wall, I'm putting it out of sight, hiding it lest somebody should see it. Isn't that awful? I don't dare put me own son's photo up onto the wall in fear that them brutes, grim-faced toughs could come in and ask in Russian: Who is it? Where is he? Shall I tell them that he's a soldier in the other camp? They'll brand him a fascist right away! For all are fascists in their eyes who're not communists. Why, did my son go to the front of his own will?'

'Calm down now, Verka' the neighbour said reaching out once again for the jug. 'Perhaps it's good for him not to be home. Last night they were picking up onto lorries those who'd been in the Hungarian Army. They took the Csévári boy and András Zelenka, too, they were both home on leave.'

'No one is allowed to harm soldiers' András muttered, to which Bujdosó only waved his hand. He took a long time to utter:

'They know nothing of law. They're like the plague. I've sworn, they can bang on my gate, I'm not going to open it for them!'

'They'll just break in then,' she joined in. – 'May even put the house on fire.'

Silence fell; all three were listening to the thickening night outside where it started raining again.

When the neighbour left, Veronika checked if she had locked everything, the cellar, the pantry and also whether the fatted geese had water. Then she slid the bolt closed on the kitchen door, and blew out the candle.

They slept in what they called the “small house”, a cob cottage of one room and a kitchen. The upper house with the “clean rooms” stood closed since Imrus had been called up. The parents used to live there earlier: grandfather Molnár, who had eight children. When it came to the distribution of property András stayed with the parents, and he inherited the big house with the garden. His only son, Imre, was called up in spring and his company was sent off to the front lines straight away. Last they had heard from him was in a letter in the summer.

They got into bed but could not fall asleep for a long time. Something was burning somewhere, flames lit up the darkness; András peeped out of the window, but the fire was far away. The drunken partisans may have set the straw stacks on fire, the ones who tolled the bells in the tower for hours the previous evening. It was terrifying.

‘People are saying that they shot the poultry in many homesteads and did not spare the pigs either. They carried away the bloody meat. Oh Lord, just don’t let them come here!’

Veronika was telling her beads in a subdued voice, András kept squeaking the door of the cupboard. That is where he had hidden the pálinka that he brewed from mulberries when the Hungarians were still here in August. She did not like him to drink pálinka in the evening, yet she did not say anything now, she was despairing, tormented by fear and worry over her son. She thought of the poster that made her stop in horror whenever she went to the shop to get something. It was put up at every corner; it showed a hairy, brutal hand throwing flaming torches on peaceful homes. Communism! And now it was here, danger had swept down on them. Oh God! What kind of great ordeals are lying ahead of them?

‘Holy Mary, Holy Mother of God, pray for us,’ she commenced – who knows for how many times already – sitting up in her bed paying attention to the fire and noises outside.

András went on panting, grumbling, perhaps even swearing. When drunk he became quarrelsome, he was mad at the whole world. It was better not to speak to him at all. So she did not bother about him, she was thinking of the boy, could see his fair hair and his smiling eyes. If anything happened to Imrus, she would hang herself right away, for there would be nothing to live for any longer.

That moment somebody brutally and wildly banged on the gate. He was hitting it with his fists. The dog barked up and tried to defend the house, baring its teeth. The prayer fell silent on her lips. András sat up too. But the banging was not repeated. Those who wanted to come in went away with a loud clamour. They went from gate to gate banging on them and kicking them; the dogs roused from sleep were barking foaming at the mouth.

Then silence fell onto the street. Veronka also became tired of saying her prayers and pulled the blanket over her head. András was already sleeping, snorting soundly.

3.

When the old battered jeep passed through the crossroads the officer in a uniform buttoned up to his neck pushed the driver with his elbow.

‘Na desno! To the left now!’

The car turned off the road and braking short stopped in front of a shabby house whose door looked like the broken wing of a bird in the smeared greyness of the autumn dusk.

Half of it tilted forward onto the street. The officer jumped out of the car.

‘Go to the headquarters, I’ll be there in half an hour’s time too!’

The soldier stepped on the gas and turned back onto the road. He was exhausted and looked terribly haggard. He had not slept for three days and could not wait to get to bed now. The officer was not in a better way either: he was making his steps toward the gate as if carrying a heavy load on his stooping shoulders.

He stopped hesitantly in front of the house for a moment, then he looked up onto the wall where he could still make out the place of the name plate that had been wrenched off. His name used to be on that plate: Med. univ. dr. Treder László, general practitioner. Working hours 2 pm – 6 pm.

He stood silently for a while in front of the open gate and then stepped in. He knew that nobody was living in the house, therefore he could not meet any strangers and obviously no danger could be threatening him, yet his fingers felt for his gun. It was more out of habit than from fear.

He went along the paved path that led to the corridor. The October night had arrived together with him: it became suddenly dark. He still managed to find the stairs, he could even find them in his dreams; the door was to the left, he was feeling for the handle. He caught a whiff of stuffy air and then the familiar smell of the furniture. He pushed up the light switch but there was no light. He took out his torch.

The commode used to be there in the corner, a wicker armchair covered with a fringed blanket in front of it. That was where his mother sat after lunch every day; that was where she would fall asleep. The whole family

would walk around on tip-toes then lest they should wake her up. She had to be looked after tenderly.

He circled the light round the closed-in verandah as if he were trying to find something, but his hand was rather unsteady, even shaking a bit, and he did not know what he was looking for. Was it perhaps the old table with the plush cover? Or the framed photographs on the walls? They were amateur shots, he could remember, there was a childhood photo of him between the two doors: a small, fair haired boy with freckles and protruding ears next to a big komondor sheep dog. It was taken in front of the old house, he was standing in the gate, and the lilacs were in blossom above the fence.

They moved into this house only fifteen years ago when his father's shop had gone bust. He was bankrupt and asked for compulsory settlement. He was a medical student in Brünn at the time. Things sent from home stopped coming, often he had no money to pay even in the canteen. They also had to move out from the house with the big garden, and later they rented this three roomed house on the main street.

Things improved a bit only later when he came home and opened his consulting-room. He specialized in abortion, and made good money. One-child family was the trend in Temerin.

He opened the door of what was his consulting room; the room was completely empty with not even a sign of the old furniture. He looked for the instrument cupboard against the wall, in front of it used to be the couch covered with a wax-cloth. A fusty smell struck his nose. There was an out of use bathtub by the wall with corn grits and a battered pot to be used as a ladle in it. The people who had recently lived in this house kept the feed for fattening the pigs in this room.

He turned out of the room with disgust, and went hurriedly along the corridor. He put his nose into the kitchen; next to it was the big living room where the whole family sat together on Friday evenings. There was no furniture in it either. He opened the window to let in some fresh air from the damp, autumn street. He found a tiny candle stump on a shelf. Next to it there was a pair of glasses with a broken bow. Could it have been her mother's? He lit the candle with his lighter and looked fixedly into its flickering flame, like someone seeking for the past in it.

He closed his eyes, and as he was weakening he thought he could suddenly feel the smelly smoke of his father's cigar: it was swirling back from the past. Smoking was bad for him; nevertheless, a fag-end was always hanging out of his mouth. He had asthma, his breathing was laboured, and he had heart problems because he had put on too much weight. But he also had a good quality: nothing ever bothered him, he lived for the day. He never touched a newspaper, and when his wife turned on the radio he instantly fell asleep.

He could still remember that in April 1941, when the Hungarian troops entered Bácska, his father rejoiced together with the Hungarian population of Temerin. He became embittered only later, when after the Serbs had left the village, the Jews were also moved out from the village. They were sent over the border, and found refuge in the district of Bogatić in Serbia. But from there all of them filtered back slowly, and reoccupied their own houses. But the good old life had never come back again. The political situation deteriorated day by day and, after the razzia in Újvidék, the Jews in Temerin were also liquidated.

In the Sajkás-region, in the nearby villages of Gospogyinci, Zsablya Csurog and Turija the partisans were beginning to stir. The notary of Temerin reported to the district office that in his opinion the partisans got regular support from the Temerin Jews. In 1942 a gendarme lieutenant arrived and solved the Jewish problem in Temerin in half a day. He confiscated a bus from Ámann and took the Jews to the Tisza and had them shot into the river.

The ones who happened not to be at home at the time were the only survivors. Doctor Treder was lucky to have been on urgent business in Novi Sad that day. He left on the nine twenty train, the military police started on their dealings at nine thirty.

He started back on the afternoon passenger train but learned about the appalling massacre on the way when they reached the Római Sándok station – the crossing point for the train from Titel – and he jumped off the train. This was lucky, for the military police were waiting for him at his house in Temerin trying to make sure that no Jews were left alive. Even the two Gussmann brothers were sent a telegram to come back home from Zombor. Somebody had posted them a telegram saying: “If you wish to see your father alive come back immediately!” The two boys with tear-stained eyes were surrounded at the station as they arrived, and were also done away with.

He could not help thinking of that day, memories rushed in front of his eyes like hungry apparitions. The stump of candle in his hand, he went back to the verandah. He looked out onto the courtyard. The night had become impenetrably thick.

He remembered as if it had happened the day before: he was hurrying along this same way, clutching his heavily packed briefcase, and his mother with a cup of tea in hand tiptoed after him: “Drink this tea, my dear boy, it’ll warm you up! It’s chilly outside. Have you got your scarf round your neck? Let me see!” He dismissed it all, he was impatient and in a hurry lest he should miss his train. The train of life. “I’ll be back in the evening, mother, I’ll certainly come back on the afternoon train! Ask the patients to come back tomorrow.”

His mother walked him to the door murmuring all the way, and asked what she should make for dinner. “Shall I bring some meat from Miavec? Or would

you rather have me kill a goose? Would you like a bit of liver, my dear Laci?"

He ran back from the gate, for he had not answered her last question. "Oh dear Mom! I haven't had roasted goose for a long time; with roast potatoes and pickles." Big kiss. "You see that's a clever idea - but you shouldn't come any further, you'll catch a cold! You've forgotten to put your shawl on your shoulders again!"

There was a cold wind swirling and blowing the snow. When he reached the Kmetovits shop on the corner he wanted to turn back. Why on earth must he go in this weather? Could he not go tomorrow or the day after? Then step by step he went on, and saved himself from dying. He could clearly remember that, pounding along in the snow to the station, he was thinking about the roast goose.

If he closed his eyes now, he could feel the smell of that roast that was never to be made, and he could imagine the meticulously laid table that would have been waiting for him. His mother always took great care about the table. He could see Karcsi, his younger brother, rubbing his hands together and going round the table with a smile on his face. 'What do we have Mom? Roast goose? Treating my brother, aren't you? Did this goose have a liver too? The last one certainly didn't!'

True, it didn't; mother hid it for him to eat. How she bustled around on that day, too! As soon as he left she had the goose killed, then she got things ready and brought the potatoes up from the cellar. Karcsi, her younger son might have helped her before he went over to the neighbouring timber shop, where he worked as a clerk.

The roast goose was never to be prepared. And he had not been home since; this was the first time he was back home since two and a half years ago. When he learnt what had happened to the Jews in Temerin, he got off the train that was taking him home; he went on foot as far as Káty, where a Serbian family took him in. Some fishermen took him over the Danube to Pétervárad and from there he started on foot to Uzšice; it was already spring when he met up with the partisans. They welcomed him with delight; they needed a doctor: they had many wounded.

He had been promoted to a lieutenant. He was wounded twice. He was allowed a week's leave now because he had been posted to an operative division with a confidential mission.

The mission was to carry out Moša Pijade's directives. This was a highly confidential directive for retributive punishment of the fascists. In short: "Desetkovati!" Decimate them! He agreed to do the task since he himself was thirsty for revenge. He could feel his blood thickening and his heart throbbing in his throat now. If he only had some sedative on him, he would take it now.

He blew out the candle and threw away the hot stump in the yard. He

stopped in the gate and turned back as if he were looking for his mother in the darkness, and then with a bitter taste in his mouth he started in the direction of the parish hall which was only half the distance to the next corner. He turned to look once again but could not see anything. It started drizzling.

4.

The Chief-notary's room in the old building of the parish hall, embellished with saltpetre crystals, was full of smoke and turmoil. This was where the partisan unit had its headquarters; the political officer, the commissar, a certain Žarko Mladenov second-lieutenant was also there with a machine-gun on his shoulder and two hand-grenades hanging from his belt. Like someone who was always frightened of being ambushed. He was a Bosnian, just over twenty five, and he had been fighting in the mountains since the autumn of forty-one and had learned that no harm can ever come from being on guard. He had been taken by surprise many times already.

He came to Temerin yesterday, and he would go in the direction of Óbecse if he got orders for it. A section of his company was to secure the traffic on the roads. This was necessary because a larger Soviet unit was moving into the Northern-Bácska region towards Szeged. The company were put up in the school. The commanding officer of the occupying troops, captain Čubrilović, was sitting opposite him and drinking. He had not had a shave for weeks now, his eyes were bloodshot, and his voice was hoarse.

'Have some pálinka Comrade Žarko, it does no harm!' he offered the spirits to him, but the Bosnian shook his head. Two partisans in ragged clothes burst in.

'Captain! We cannot find that bastard of a notary although we have searched through half the village,' they said casually and looked for a place to sit down in the room. One of them sat onto the corner of the desk. The captain pulled out a list from the drawer: the more important names were put down on it. The name of Eichard the Chief-notary was the first, and the rest were underneath it: the guilty ones that had to be liquidated. The captain was given the list some time ago. But the ringleaders had run away in good time. The German population of the neighbouring village Járek, once Tiszafalva, had gone to the last man, and all those rich Swabian houses with their valuable furnishing were left empty. Beyond the village by the old power station a pasture was encircled by barbed wire; the partisans found it suitable for a detention camp. They were reinforcing it now. They were also going to drive there those Székelys from Bukovina who happened to get stuck here. Captain Čubrilović wanted to entrust the guarding of this camp in the making to the company of the Bosnian lieutenant.

‘Slušaj Žarko, you’ve been fighting long enough, take this camp over. There’s no other unit to do it. Why, you could certainly have a rest for a while. What do you say?’

‘No, captain, that’s not for us. My men are not going to be prison guards. Do you want to make partisans watch over civilians?’

‘Who should I get to guard them?’

‘That’s up to you to decide.’

‘We mustn’t spare the guilty ones, Žarko. Take for example this Eichard! If I manage to put my hands on him, I’ll hang him up by his balls onto the first tree. He was the one who exterminated the Temerin Jews!’

‘I’m not here to pass sentence over the guilty. I am a soldier. Find the fascists yourself.’

‘I will find them, don’t you worry. They’ve just brought in one of them; wouldn’t you like to deal with him a little? They’ve got him in the guard-room. He’s a skinny, liverish chap.’

‘I’ve always been disgusted at dirty dealings. You know well that I’m a Bosnian.’

‘You put such an emphasis on this that I’m beginning to think that you Bosnians are special creatures. What are Serbs compared to them? E, moj brajko! Things aren’t like this! Don’t you forget that we must impose discipline. Do you think I like doing this? Hell, no. The order was that we must punish Temerin because it is an ethnically pure village. The people from here went hunting down partisans at Zsablya and Csúrog with the military police. We must have a little talk with them...’

‘I know what talking to them means and I don’t want to have any part in it. And why must the army do this?’ burst out the political officer with indignation. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Because of the military government.’

‘Why don’t we hand over the power to the liberation committees as we did in other places where they took over everything? It’s obvious that they are eager to do it here, too. They had been sitting in a warm room waiting for this moment.’

‘You’re lagging behind, Commissar. Tito signed the decree a week ago on October 17th saying that in the regions Bácska, Bánát and Baranya all power will remain in the hands of the army. The military government will stay in force until the war ends, and only then will the liberation committees take over. Why so, you’re asking? So that they can start on a new clean page. Have you read General Rukovina’s order for the day, or has that also escaped your attention? The goal is future for the nation and the preservation of the South-Slav character of the territories. And do you know what’s meant by this? The implementation of Moša Pijade’s orders. Please don’t ask, commissar, that I should blurt out everything to you even if you’re a Bosnian. Before we move

on, we must make some order around here and settle our old accounts radically with all the ethnic Germans and all those Hungarians who are guilty of crime. They've shed a lot of innocent Serbian blood...'

He stopped talking because the guard at the door said that lieutenant doctor Treder had arrived.

'Hey, doctor, good that you've come! I've been expecting you!' he greeted him jumping to his feet. He embraced the doctor, and then said delightedly: 'We've brought in that lousy deputy clerk for you, that Bódy. Do you wish to talk to him?'

'Where is he?' the doctor asked, a blush rising to his pale cheeks.

'We're keeping him in the guard-room. Come, I'll walk you there! Žarko, are you interested?'

'No!' the commissar said firmly and went over to the telephone that had been ringing for a while on the next table. 'Hallo, Temerin speaking!'

Captain Čubrilović and doctor Treder hurried along the corridor; the thumping of their steps echoed. The police detention-room was in the opposite wing of the building. The captain pushed in its door. Two armed soldiers were sitting on a stool and jumped up when they saw the captain.

'Where's the captive?' he stormed at them. 'Bring him over!'

They jumped up and readily dragged out Géza Bódy, the half-dressed former deputy clerk. He was having his supper when the partisans broke in on him and "picked him up". They did not even let him put on his jacket. Katica, his wife was still loitering somewhere around the building or at the gate with his jacket, scarf and a blanket on her arm but she was not allowed in.

'Well, is that him?' the captain asked the doctor pointing at the skinny man shivering with fear and cold.

'Géza Bódy!' the doctor uttered his name dryly and firmly.

'My dear Laci!' the deputy clerk looked at him imploringly. The two of them were of the same-age group, they knew each other, what is more, used to be even friends once. They played football together on the village green in front of the manor house.

The doctor pretended not to hear the beseeching words of the puny man.

'I swear to you that I am innocent!' he shouted at the top of his voice.

'Šta kaže?' 'What's he saying?' asked the captain in Serbian because he did not understand. 'Why are you not speaking in Serbian? You stinky mother fucker!' he hissed into his face spitting all over it. He stank from cigarettes and pálinka. The deputy clerk gaped at him like someone who had just woken up to reality. He realized that the doctor was the only person who could save him; there was nobody else to turn to. But seeing the doctor's indifferent, cold face all the hope died out in him. He felt like he needed to speak up and since he could speak perfect Serbian, he started in Serbian.

‘Lacika, molim te, kao Boga! – I’m turning to you as to a god!’ he looked at him again with his mouth curving.

‘Hajde!’ Captain Čubrilović motioned to the two guards. ‘See him into the office and stand guard by the door.’

When the procession was back in the office, the captain put the half empty bottle on the table, and beckoned to the lieutenant who was on his way out.

‘Have a sip Žarko. It’ll do you good, you’ll see. It’s damn windy outside. It’s really time we finished this war; winter is coming again, ugh! This would be the forth one.’

‘Don’t worry; there won’t be a fourth one,’ the commissar asserted. ‘We’ve finished with it too; whoever wants to, can go further even as far as Berlin. We’ve done our bit’.

‘Time for revenge!’ the captain roared out and gulped from the bottle.

‘It’s time for peace.’

‘You’re becoming more and more a civilian, my friend. What the hell are you carrying a machine gun round your neck for and hand-grenades in your belt?’

‘Stop grumbling, captain. I’m tired. I’ll go and lie down.’

The two guards shoved Géza Bódy into the room and pushed him next to the tiled stove into the corner. There was no fire in the stove, it was cold. It would do no harm to light the fire; there was plenty of wood around. The captain himself did not know why he had not thought of it earlier. He would give orders immediately to have the stove well loaded and have a good fire going. Then he turned to the deputy clerk.

‘Let’s see this stinker! Need we draw up a record doctor?’

‘Not worth bothering about it,’ said the doctor. ‘He will be anyhow impeached for war crimes.’

‘But I’m not guilty of war crimes!’ Bódy cried out in a voice hoarse from fear. His Serbian was good, so from now on the interrogation went on in Serbian.

‘What you really are is up to the court to decide. Is your conscience clear?’

‘I feel to be an honest man.’

‘You didn’t behave like one. You’ve served the Fascist regime,’ the doctor flared up with bloodshot eyes. ‘How many Jewish lives burden your conscience?’

‘None, I’m innocent. I was carrying out orders then.’

‘How interesting. Everyone refers to orders, acting on higher orders. On command. But what happened to humaneness and feeling good? Why did you not refuse to act on the order?’

‘Because I didn’t know what it was about. I knew nothing at all, I swear to the living God.’

‘Why did your living God not keep your hands down?’

‘What god are you talking about?’ The captain butted into the questioning after taking a good swig from the bottle. ‘What god are you talking about?’

Bódy lowered his head. He could feel that he was in a blind alley. Nothing he said would matter now. The best would be to keep quiet and let come what had to come. But the next moment the instinct to live flared up again in him. He darted in front of the captain but he pushed him back into the corner.

‘You’re a dirty dog,’ he went on abusing him. ‘Just tell us how it happened.’

‘The Chief-notary came to my room and said: „Géza, draw up a list of the Jews, please.”

‘Did he not say what he needed the list for?’

‘No, he didn’t. And I didn’t know either that there was a military police lieutenant in his office, or that there was a military platoon in the courtyard of the parish hall. I heard of these things only later.’

‘Where’s Chief-notary Eichard now?’

‘I don’t know. Last I saw of him was three days ago.’

‘Why did you not run away?’

‘Because I am innocent...’

With a resounding slap in his face the meagre-bodied clerk staggered into the corner. This moment a partisan entered the room with a bundle of wood in his arms.

‘Are you innocent?’ The captain asked, taking another swipe at the clerk’s face.

The doctor jumping forward held up Bódy’s drooping body: of such terrible force was the blow.

‘Stop it, captain!’

‘That’s the only thing that these dirty swine understand!’ I will flog it out of him!’

‘Everything will come to light in the court. It is absolutely sure that the Jews in Temerin were picked up on the basis of the list. But it is also true that, had the list not been drawn up, they would have collected them anyway. They were sitting in their homes in peace not even suspecting a thing. Marcса Gussmann was expecting her fiancé that day. He was also executed even though he was not a Jew. Go on speaking Géza!’ He turned to the clerk kneeling in the corner whimpering and wiping his bleeding nose. ‘Well, you drew up the list as Eichard had told you to. And then?...’

‘Later, the military police took over the Ámann bus. The rounded up Jews were taken away in that bus. Kmetovits’s wife, the Serbian Milica, happened somehow to be also among them.’

‘And what happened to her? the captain asked.

‘The police had brought her in, too. She implored them in vain; they did not let her go. Kmetovits’ brother, the postmaster called up Mr Fernbach, the

High Sheriff in Újvidék, and finally he dealt with the matter. By the time he called back, the bus with the Jews and Kmetovits' wife had already left. A military policeman stopped it in the next village and got the woman off the bus.'

'And why did the High Sheriff not stop the execution of the Jews? The captain fumed with anger. 'Where is the High Sheriff now?'

'I don't know!'

'I'd very much like to meet him too. My god, he'd rue the day that he crossed me! I would impale him together with your Chief-notary. And you, I'm going to strangle you too, you dirty swine!' The captain banged him on the side again. 'Didn't you also make a list of the Serbs too? Admit it!'

'No Serb was left in the village. All the dobrovoljci had left with the army. Those that they found here, the few in hiding, were taken over the border to the Nedićes by the police.

Treder lit a cigarette and then he turned to the captain.

'I've had enough of this. Do whatever you want to do with him; I will not defend any murderers.'

'Lacika!' The deputy clerk cried out in pain, and his eyes were full of fear.

'Aren't you going to stay for the hearing of the others? They've brought in a few dirty fascists, among them that bloodthirsty tailor. I'll feel my hands on them a bit.'

'I prefer not to take part in this. I don't wish to see any more blood. I've had enough of it. By the way where are they?'

'I'll flay them alive in the fire-equipment shed.'

'Please, spare this Bódy for he is not the guiltiest one.

'Listen to what I'm telling you my dear doctor. If someone did away with my parents I would strangle him with my own hands...'

5.

The fire-equipment shed built in the yard of the parish hall was empty; all the equipment had been taken out from it. Its concrete floor radiated piercing cold. There were no windows in it, only two draught holes; two partisans with machine guns on their shoulders stood guard in front of its door.

'How many of the comrades are here?' the captain asked when he got there.

'Four. Žarko had already left. Sergeant Đurica is here and a civilian who had come on horse back from the next village. Trivo was here too, and said he would be back.'

'What the hell's he doing here? The captain frowned for he didn't like Trivo.'

'Trivo said he was from around here, captain. He used to be a dobrovoljac here in Temerin. That's why he wants to be here.'

‘Tell him to go back to his unit right away! That’s an order! Did you understand?’

‘Yes, captain. I’ll send him off to hell if he comes back!’

The captain went into the shed which was lit by an oil lamp hanging on a huge hook nail on the back wall. His eyes had got hardly used to the dim light when suddenly the light came on: Újvidék was supplying electricity once again. Blinking from the sudden light he looked around.

‘Ti si iz Gospođinci?’ He asked the bearded Serb standing closest to him. ‘Are you from Gospođinci?’

‘The Serb nodded his answer. He looked grim. Revenge had brought him over from the neighbouring village. Later, when the captain lit a cigarette, he uttered:

‘There will be others also coming over for the revenge.

‘What revenge?’ The partisan officer angrily crushed out his cigarette with his boot. He caught him by his collar:

‘Who do you wish to take revenge on, eh?’

‘The Hungarians in Temerin, captain. We don’t forget things.’

‘And up till now you’ve just been stuck in your warm chimney corner, haven’t you?’ He flared up. ‘Stuffing yourselves with good Bácska sausages; cooking big pots of stuffed cabbage and burping under the eiderdown at night. Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves? I’d love to kick you in the ass, you rotters!’

‘No need to lose your cool,’ the Serb raked through his beard and did not seem to be upset at all by the storm of abuses. ‘You know well enough what the Hungarians did to us. They’ve hunted us as you hunt rabbits.

‘Tell me, you with the beard, what’s your name?’

‘Malešev Stevan.’

‘How did you know that these chaps have been brought in? Did anyone send you a message?’

‘There was a smile on the man’s face, but he didn’t answer. He kept plucking his beard and shrugging his shoulders. The captain turned away from him to have a closer look at the detainees. Three human-like figures were staggering in the corner; their tortured faces were covered in blood, their clothes filthy and torn. They obviously had been dealt with already.

The captives’ hands were tied to each other with electric wires. The captain shuddered and would have liked to end his visit as soon as possible. He wondered to himself: ‘These lot, could they be the bloodthirsty beasts?’ One of them was very young, had an almost childlike face.

‘What’s your name?’ he roared at him.

‘András Csévári.’

‘What did you do, you scum?’ he asked pulling him closer.

Csévári remained silent clenching his teeth defiantly and firmly. But he looked back straight into the captain's eyes.

'He was a Hungarian soldier, a soldier in the fascist army. Only the day before yesterday the neighbours saw him in his uniform. They gave him up. They knew where he was hiding!' said a partisan who came in after the captain. Standing next to him, he gave a big kick to the captive soldier.

'Calm your nerves Trivo!' the captain yelled out at him. 'What is it you want in here? Do you happen to know this soldier of Horthy's army?'

'No, I don't. I've never seen him. But this other one, the one next to him I'm going to strangle right away!' He jumped at the other prisoner who was a middle-aged, red faced man with strong muscles. 'I'm the revengeful god of the Serbs in case you didn't know it, captain!' he shouted at the top of his voice, and his breath filled the shed with the stink of marc-brandy. Trivo was drunk already; he had lived here some time ago as a dobrovoljac from Szőreg and therefore knew half the village. 'Do you know who this man is? Pál Prókay, the butcher from the Gyepsor street. He drove away my cow. Stole it. He never paid a single dinar for it.'

The captain suddenly pushed him aside.

'You will either behave or I will turn you out and lock you up. Don't forget that you're a soldier. A partisan. Report to the commissar tomorrow and go back to the battlefield. That's where angry men like you are needed.'

'I'm not going anywhere, not even an inch away, captain! I said it already when I joined you lot. I told you I was going to fight until I reached home. I'm home now. My country, my house and my land are here. I'm not going any further with you.'

'Have you gone nuts? Do you know what you're saying? I'll court marshal you for denying orders. You are a soldier; you are under the oath.'

'I took an oath to drive the enemy out of my country. And I've done it!'

'The army would look really fine if the soldiers drove the enemy as far as their garden gate and then seated themselves in the nook. You're a real scumbag Trivo. Take out this scum, and shut him up in the prison. We'll draw up the records tomorrow. Out with him from here!'

The partisan at the door led Trivo out, kept jerking him, and even kicked him once or twice. He saw him into the old detention room at the parish hall. The captain lit another cigarette, and after puffing out the smoke he asked from Csévári.

'Tell me, how many partisans did you kill?'

'Not a single one. My unit never met up with partisans.'

'You were happy when the Hungarians came in, weren't you? You were singing and pinned a rosette onto your lapel and a ribbon onto your hat. Am I right?'

‘Yes, you are. The whole village was singing. We are Hungarians.’

‘Did you report yourself to the army?’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it. I was called up. I had been a Serbian soldier, too. I served in Kumanovo, Macedonia in the 22nd infantry.’

‘You could’ve gone to the partisans, and fought with us.’

‘I’m Hungarian,’ Csévári said bitterly, and said nothing more. He lowered his head, and tears wetted his eyes. He was thinking bitterly about how he had not listened to the advice of his acquaintances. It was due to his rashness that he had not gone on with the army but stayed at home. He thought foolishly that this way the war was over for him, just like the partisan did whom the captain had thrown into jail a little while ago. He was serving in Újvidék and when his unit was ordered to retreat, he escaped back home to his mother. Yesterday he was still thinking that the storm had passed from over his head. He could no longer hear even the booming of the canons. He dared to come out, even showed himself in the street; he must have been envied by someone who reported him. So the partisans came and fetched him.

‘You are, in fact, a deserter then!’ the captain snarled at him again. ‘We Serbs never liked deserters and traitors. Do you know what the Hungarians would do to you? This neo-fascist regime? The Hungarian Nazis would hack you to pieces.’

Csévári, with his head bowed, remained silent. He hated now the Hungarian Nazis as much as he hated the partisans.

The captain’s look crossed his, and then said nothing more to him but turned to question the butcher.

‘Trivo said that you’d stolen his cow. Is that true?’

‘He’s lying! He’s always been a good for nothing drunkard. He sold me his cow, but I’d already paid for it in advance. He’d asked me for loans, needed them for pálinka. Since he never paid them back I took away his cow, but I decently accounted for every dinar. I didn’t cheat on him.’

Before he could go on questioning the butcher, new men arrived. Two of them were from Goszpozgyinci. All of them were drunk. They poured into the shed shouting foul words.

‘Stop this!’ the captain brandished his arm. ‘What the hell do you want here? Who asked you to come?’

‘We’re here to testify! Them others will also be here soon!’

‘Who asked you to come, that’s what I asked. Who do you want to testify against?’

‘Against the Hungarians. Against the whole village if necessary!’ One of them shouted staggering. ‘Accounts must be settled. The snake’s head must be cut off! Oh, the tailor is here too!’

‘Do you know him?’

‘This bastard? The whole neighbourhood knows him. His name is Sanyi Elek. Little-Elek! The rotter. Every time there was a hunt for partisans he took part in it. Shooting and threatening all the time.’

Elek the tailor shut his eyes. Blood was dripping from his lips but he did not lick it off. He let it run down his chin. He was sniffing. His tongue was thick from the beating. He took every blow with clenched teeth lest he should bellow. Sharp pain pierced through him every time he took a breath. Some of his ribs also got broken while they kicked him all over. He had been terribly roughly treated. He wouldn’t mind being done away with as long as the torturing and humiliating suffering came to an end. He could not even hope for mercy from these people.

His mates and the military policemen begged him not to stay and wait for the enemy but he stayed. Why? He himself didn’t know. Did he not realize the graveness of the danger? Or was he just showing off, pretending he was not afraid of them? But he was afraid. Even earlier he had terrible dreams; sometimes he woke with a start and was awake till morning. Other times he drank himself nearly to death in fear.

Now he was cursing his fate, he was mad at himself and kept biting his lips till they burst open and blood gushed forth. He would most like to spit his bloody saliva into the faces of these lot thirsty for revenge, and then he would bear silently being kicked to death. For that is waiting for him anyway. He knows well enough these Serbs from Goszpozgyinci, he can expect no mercy from them. And they righteously hate him. He took part in every partisan hunt. The military police commanding officer in Temerin organized these outings. Two civilians were assigned to each policeman who, armed with shot-guns, regularly combed through the nearby Serbian villages, sometimes even ventured into the houses when they found anything suspicious.

Everybody in the neighbourhood knew the short Sanyi Elek; he was hot-tempered and lost his head easily, he gabbed and frequently drank deep. He considered himself to be a better and superior Magyar to anyone else. He often insisted – whether it was needed or not – that he was ready to die for Hungary. Now the moment had come, but he felt like this was the greatest nonsense.

The partisans always showed up unexpectedly; they filtered in from Bánát across the Tisza. This is when the military police were alerted. The volunteer unit of partisan hunters, as they were called, went with three military policemen on a lorry owned by Povázsán from Temerin to the location. They would be joined by some others at Zsablya or Csurog; a raiding unit was made up of twenty-five to thirty armed men. Once their job done they were not averse to drinking; sometimes they spent the whole night singing in a wayside inn until dawn.

The Serbs living in the neighbourhood called the partisan hunters “the revenging brigade”, and the brigade’s most addicted member was, undoubtedly, Sanyi Elek. That was how he sowed his wild oats. He loved speaking about these outings of his, he told stories of heroic battles, big catches, while everybody was aware that they had not even caught sight of the partisans. The call up for the raid usually was based on a false alarm.

The tailor was considered to be the main Nazi in Temerin. He was a devotee of Szálasi, and a zealous reader of his work *Egyedül vagyunk* (We are alone). After the entry of the Hungarians he became a different person: he neglected his prosperous tailoring shop, and went from one tavern to another to discuss politics in a loud voice. Right wing elements would meet in his shop to exchange ideas, and these sessions usually ended with everybody present sozzled.

‘Come on, speak up you filthy louse!’ the captain went on kicking him, but Elek gave no intelligible answer. He looked in front of himself dully, and his expression seemed to show that he did not understand what was happening to him, and the world around him. Could the whole thing be simply hallucination? A bad dream? Would he just wake up and find that they had all disappeared and find not a single filthy partisan stinking of pálinka around him? But then, then he would have no mercy, he would go with the policemen and find this Trivo and the others. He would certainly avenge this bad dream. Or could this perhaps not be a dream, were they standing around him to take their revenge for the partisan hunting and the dislodgement of the dobrovoljci; had the wonderful, only three and a half year long Magyar life come to an end? And that perhaps for good?

He suffered like Christ on Mt. Golgotha, endured the beatings, mockery, humiliation and the crown of thorns, and now he was running out of strength. He could no longer feel the pain. He was torn to bits, his nails were beaten off, his knee-cap broken, his kidneys battered, his mouth cracked, his ear nearly ripped off, he had spat his teeth out, and a dozen additional injuries marred his body. It was all the same to him now, they could even throw a rope round his neck, it would just be deliverance to him.Once he heard a Passion play in church before Easter and there they said in Hebrew the words that Christ uttered on the cross, but he could not remember them now. He racked his mind hard to remember the words of the Lord as if to cling and hang onto them so as to make this cruel dying easier for him, the dying he himself wished to hasten.

There was no strength left in him, he could not move, he was torn to shreds. He did not know the captain, had never seen him before, but he knew that he was in command, so looked at him humbly and imploringly. But he paid him no attention. Then he thought about how he might snatch

the captain's revolver had he any strength left in him. He wouldn't kill anyone. He would turn it on himself. But he didn't even have the strength to think this possibility over right to the end. Then he thought again of yesterday; he could see the soldiers hurrying along without any order, and he was counting the horse-drawn vehicles. The Hungarian army was moving toward Óbecse. Some civilians were following them with hastily harnessed horses and mooing cows tied to the forage rack. Children were romping on one of the wagons, and a woman was crying seated on a heap of pillows on another one. They might have been settlers from Transylvania. They did not stay on here because they were afraid. But most people were not fleeing: the whole situation was utterly unbelievable, just like a bad dream; only the day before yesterday the radio was still talking with full mouth about victory, and words about victory were boldly echoed in the papers.

He could see now his mother's frightened expression. She had already packed up, tying all the necessary things into a big bed sheet. 'Let's go dear Sanyi,' she said urging him, but he just went on laughing. 'Come on dear mother, you're not going to believe that we've lost the war?' She was sniffing: 'We can come back, then! But for now let's hurry, my dear son!'

How many times had he heard that everyone should stay in their place and hold out where fate had placed them? Oh yes, but those who had given out this order headed the line of the fugitives. The population was still hesitant. They had forgotten to inform the Székelys from Transylvania about the danger, so most of them stayed or were captured along the road because they fell behind the fast moving troops. They were in a desperate situation. This morning he himself would have liked to flee; alarmed, he hastily threw together a few of his clothes, and with a bag of saved money around his neck he had already put on his lace-up boots that he used to wear when he went partisan hunting. His mother was packing something to eat in the meantime, and when he sneaked out into the street around half past ten attempting to disappear, the streets had already been dead empty. He was trying to escape through the gardens but he managed to get only as far as the Schlossberger house where he was flanked by two inebriated partisans.

They took him under escort to the parish hall where the once Hungarian soldiers and the suspicious men were being gathered. This is how the lanky Bujdosó and later Prókay the butcher ended up here; András Csévári was also brought here first.

'Your rotting mother!' Prókay cried out suddenly, but they shut him up with a couple of well aimed whacks. He was punched in his head and kidneys. He had even lost his consciousness for a while; rattling was heard in his throat. When in a good ten minutes he regained consciousness, he

started shouting again in a coarse, inarticulate voice: 'When the Hungarians come back they will hang you up by your balls, all of you!'

More punches followed, first they finished off only the shouting Prókay but then they started beating the others too. Then everything became silent.

'I can't even watch this,' the captain shuddered. 'Do it without me!' One of the Serbs stopped him by the door.

'Captain, we ought to talk about how we should proceed. It'd be best to finish them off straight away.'

'Why, are you afraid that the fascists will come back?' the captain looked at him grumpily.

'Certainly not, they'll run as far as Budapest. But as my late grandfather used to say, revenge is like soup. One mustn't let it get cold.'

'Are you afraid that you will forgive them later, eh? Feel pity for them or what?'

'Not me. If it was up to me, I'd exterminate every Hungarian, so that they become completely extinct. I don't trust that communist Nyiszom either. Because he is Hungarian.'

'But you said that he was a communist, didn't you? Then it doesn't matter what nationality he is, does it? He is an internationalist.'

'But he is a Hungarian.'

'This means that you are not a communist. All you fear for is the property you've scraped together. How many acres of land have you got?'

'Nine. And a small piece of pasture.'

'Then you are a kulak, a large farmer. What would you say if your land was taken away from you?'

'Why, have you been fighting so that the Serbs get their land taken away? You are taking the wrong way, captain.'

'What have we been fighting for in your opinion? So that you could feather your nests? You ought to be happy that it is not you now that is being put on the rack by the Hungarians. It could've happened the other way round,' the captain said angrily, and turned his back on the lot of them.

6.

The phone didn't stop ringing in the Chief-notary's office; Újvidék wanted to speak to the local headquarters several times, then Zsablya called, and then Goszpolyinci rang; the commissar could not stop saying his hellos and answering questions.

The flame of revenge had heated up the air stinking of cigarette smoke and pálinka fumes. Serbian peasants in sheep-skin hats kept opening the door, the kind of men that had squatted by their pots full of meat, and

humbly raised their hats to the occupiers. They were coming out now, like swarming insects with indignation in their faces, and seeking their rights. But what were their rights? And what did he, Žarko, the political officer have to do with their rights? He was getting immensely bored with this sanctimonious game. Nevertheless, he agreed with them at the bottom of his heart, for one should not forgive wrongdoings. Anyway, what had he got to do with it all?

He drank a sip of pálinka and held out the bottle to the returning captain.

The captain asked apathetically, 'What does Újvidék want?'

'They've offered to take over the action and don't understand why we have reservations.'

The captain fretted: 'Because we're not a firing squad. Did you tell them?'

'I also told them that we had to move on, we had an order to go on. And I told them that they should take measures this evening, if possible.'

'The plan that you mentioned, is it highly confidential?'

'Most highly,' quietly replied the political officer whom everybody called commissar in the army. 'I was wondering whether we should let the party secretary in on it at all. But who is the party secretary now?'

'A scraggy, mustached fellow has been lingering in the corridor for some half an hour now,' the doctor interrupted. 'His name is Nyiszom István. He was sentenced to prison for his principles several times; I think he must have come here to fish out some function for himself. You may call him in and entrust him with the party secretaryship. Temporarily.'

The commissar immediately called out to the corridor, and Nyiszom entered the room in no time. He shook hands amicably with everybody, murmured his name, and awkwardly stopped by the table.

He stood there for a long time, silently, waiting for everybody to take a good look of him.

The captain suddenly stopped next to him and asked, 'Do you speak Serbian?'

'Govorim, I do,' he said immediately in Serbian, and his heart started fluttering. He had finally come to this. After all the privations, tribulation, disdain and contempt he was going to become somebody. His star was rising; he was going to be the first man in the village. He had been keeping to his principles and he never stumbled, not for a minute.

The commissar, who had forgotten to offer Nyiszom a seat, said: 'We are going to entrust you with the party secretary duties. This is to be temporary and will last until the People's Liberation Committee is established. By then the party organization will have developed and will re-elect its functionaries. For now Vojvodina will remain under military government and this region belongs to Újvidék. The commandant is, as you yourself must know, Major General Ivan Rukovina. Sit down!'

This sounded like an order. Nyiszom sat down, and timidly pulled out his tobacco pouch and rolled himself a cigarette. The captain pushed the bottle closer to him.

‘Take a swig, comrade!’

Nyiszom did and hawked. The pálinka was rather strong.

‘I am going to acquaint you with the decree of the Highest Headquarters, but first with Marshal Tito’s justification for why it is necessary to keep this territory under military government,’ the voice of the political officer became official. Listen to it: “The liberation of Bácska, Bánát and Baranya necessitates the normalisation of the situation as soon as possible, and the establishment of the democratic government’s moral functioning. The extreme circumstances in which these regions were during the occupation, and the need to cure as fast and as far as possible all the misfortune that the occupying forces and those foreign elements that had been settled here had caused to our people, as well as the mobilization of the entire economy towards a successful continuation of our peoples’ liberation war require that, at the beginning, all the power should be in the hands of the army...” Did you understand? And you, comrade secretary?’

‘Perfectly!’ He said standing up in sign of the honour that he felt to the Marshal. His heart was beating faster.

‘Then I’ll continue with the decree of the Highest Headquarters that wishes to prevent all kinds of anti-democratic activities in these regions and is mobilizing all the forces in order to continue the war against the occupying forces. We must preserve the South Slav character of this territory, even if that means clearing the country of all its German population. The Hungarians do not deserve any tolerance either, since they collaborated with the Fascists, and they had also come as oppressors. I wish to make it clear that military administration of justice is not a case for the court; and I’m asking comrade Nyiszom to draw up a list on behalf of the Party.’

‘What list?’ the secretary shrank back.

‘A list of the people we must call to account. In the sense of Moša Pijade’s orders. A list of the Fascists. As far as I know, there were quite a number of them. You, an old communist ought to know who they are.’

‘But, I haven’t been paying attention to them.’

‘You don’t have to pass sentence on them. Don’t you see what this is all about? You draw up a list; a list of names: of the suspicious elements, of those who were soldiers, of those who were talking big and posing as true Hungarians. Put on the list the ones who pinned out the rosette and sang the National Anthem; the ones who gave speeches and recited poems on national holidays; and those who reprimanded Communism. Well, that’s what it’s all about. The rest you can leave for the partisans to deal with...’

The doctor said in a soft voice, 'In Gospogyinci and Zsablya they have already done the list. They also have a special list...'

'They are making it easier for us. But I would like to talk to you in private Mr Doctor, we have some urgent matters to deal with, and I will also inform you about a certain item of the confidential instruction, and also the task that you have been chosen for.'

'Is it at least something in my line?'

The commissar laughed and did not answer the question; he secretly threw a glance at the captain who, although by now aware of what was awaiting the doctor, was sitting there without as much as a blink.

'Let's talk it over then,' he said and jumped to his feet, pushing aside the ashtray full of cigarette ends. 'The sooner we get over with it the better. I think the whole task is rather awkward unless you, Sir, find that it will give you special enjoyment.'

The doctor noticed that he stressed the word "Sir" but he took no offence. He was indifferent, sleepy and low-spirited. He also felt like going to bed; he had been quartered for the night in what used to be the Stuchlik house. Stuchlik was a landowner in Temerin, a Member of Parliament, a keen organizer of the farmers' union and an honest Hungarian; and he had more political sense than to wait for the partisans to arrive. Had he stayed, he would be now struggling in searing pain and breathing his last in a convulsing body in the fire-equipment shed.

'We're not going to put on record our conversation. It is of confidential nature. I'm going to read out to you Comrade Moša Pijade's orders on the call to account of all the places with German and Hungarian population. He also specifies the approximate measures: in the case of the Hungarians the population should be decimated and the Germans should be completely liquidated. I don't know whether you comrades have read the article by Nikola Petrović that was published under the title "A Historic Decision" in the paper Slobodna Vojvodina? He talks about how fear still oppresses people. I'm quoting him: "Although the conquering German and Hungarian hordes have been routed, that is, pushed to the west, we have still not uprooted those entire poisonous weeds that they spread about.... Tens or hundreds of thousands of the foreign elements – those who were settled in the territories where our predecessors had cleared the woods, dried up the swamps and developed conditions necessary for civilized living – are still shooting from the dark at our and the Russian soldiers, and doing everything in their might in order to prevent the return to normal circumstances; in this for us difficult situation they are getting ready to push again knives into our backs at a convenient moment...'

'To hell with all this, commissar, stop making me mad!' the captain yelled.

‘Do you want to make me believe that the timid and terrified people of this village will push knives into our backs, and this is the reason why we must decimate them?’

‘I don’t want to make anyone believe anything. I’m only reading out to you the article that’s mentioned in the instructions.’

‘I agree with the captain,’ the doctor sounded tired and bored. ‘Let’s not dramatize now, and not try and find justification for ourselves. If that is an order we must carry it out. All I’m interested in is to find out what my role is going to be?’

‘I’ll come to that too,’ the political officer said with a gulp, slightly irritated.

‘Do, please.’

‘Let’s vote comrades: should Nyiszom, the party secretary, stay?’

‘A party secretary ought to be informed of everything,’ said the captain. ‘Let him stay. Like this, he’s also taking on the responsibility.’

‘Well then, I’m going to tell you in a few words. In his scheme comrade Pijade pays great attention to conspiracy too. This is the reason why he suggests that the civilian “interested party” who is to supervise the completion of the action, - in our case this is the doctor in Temerin - should do the supervising not in his own village but in another one, where people don’t know him. And from that village the person interested should come into his place here...’

‘Be more precise! What, in fact, is all this about? What do they want me to do? Tell me what I have to do for I’m sleepy,’ the doctor called out angrily.

‘You will be given directives to go over to Óbecse early tomorrow, and report to the officer in command of the occupying forces, and then he will let you know your further duties. I’m going to lie down now. Where have you been put up?’

The doctor gave no answer. He found it difficult to digest this dry, soldierly command that he could not bear, but understood also that there was no good in objecting to it. This was not the commissar’s command, it came from high above. This was politics. Or was it cautiousness? Conspiracy, that’s what the party jargon called it.

‘How shall I go? Shall I be given a car?’ he said once he had overcome his annoyance.

‘There’s no car. But here is the motorized courier. He hasn’t got anything else to do. His name is Lazić, Duško Lazić, lance-sergeant. He will get his order in good time, that’s why I wanted to know where you were staying doctor, so that I could send him over to you. Do you wish to be present at the briefing?’

‘Oh, no! I’ll be waiting for the motorist; I’m staying close here in the Stuchlik house. I’ll be ready at eight.’

When he left, Nyiszom, the party secretary was also getting ready to go but first he took a swig from one of the bottles. Then he humbly backed out.

‘He’s like a beaten dog with his tail between his legs,’ said the captain motioning with his head toward the departing man. ‘But he’ll do as a party secretary. Lock the door so that no one can disturb us,’ he said to the commissar.

‘What more do you want?’ he looked back at him angrily. ‘Aren’t you bored with the whole thing yet?’

‘Very much so, that’s why I wish to speak to you. You are also bored with it, aren’t you?’

‘Of this kind of business, yes, I am.’

‘Well, that’s what I want to talk about.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘That we pass all this over to somebody else. There is a chance. You said it. You’ve talked to Újvidék a little while ago. Call them back, and tell them that our unit is moving on and that they should make some arrangements as soon as possible. The brigade commandantship could send into our place the guards from the detention camp in Járek. A group of Slovak partisan women have been assigned there. They are anyway bored to death, so they’ll welcome a little change in life.’

The commissar was silent; he fixed his gaze on something, but one could tell that he did not see anything. When he did that, he was not present, he became like a sleepwalker; one could talk to him but all he did was to stare in front of him.

‘Can you hear me?’ the captain shook him. ‘The Slovak girls from Járek hate the Hungarians and would be glad to engage in a massacre. Try to ring Újvidék again.’

The commissar dialled the numbers, listened, said hellos but they could not connect him with the Brigade Headquarters. There was no answer from Újvidék. The line was dead.

‘Later perhaps. I may have more luck through the field telephone, this bloody radio is just for decoration, I’ve had no use for it throughout the war. Not even good to call the cooks from the latrine to tell them that the dinner was too greasy and loosened my bowels!’

‘I would rather not leave this place with a guilty conscience. Can you remember Csortanovci? The death rattle of children? The nursery school full of blood?’

‘Don’t even mention it captain; I even see them in my dreams sometimes, and get tired of life. Don’t worry, go and lie down. You must be tired. And

the scene in the fire-equipment shed wasn't really cheering either. Have you arranged things with the courier? There's nothing else left to be done today.'

'Call him in,' the captain gave a deep sigh. 'And there's one other thing: Dušan should keep quiet about his duty tomorrow; he shouldn't enter this journey into his official diary. Do you understand?'

'I do, captain. There won't be any problem, he is a sensible fellow, this Dušan, it's easy to make him understand. You needn't worry at all over this problem.'

7.

Dušan Lazić, the motorized courier, was a stout man with a bushy moustache. His nose was slightly coppery, he loved booze and other kinds of pleasure, mostly women.

Now, having received his instructions, he was again off to his new woman acquaintance on his big DKW motor bike. She was István Kelemen's wife, the ruddy-cheeked Jolánka whom he met yesterday in Temerin. Though their meeting was short, the slightly dissolute young wife, whose husband disappeared in the war, had already invited him for supper. It was a strange coincidence that the husband had also been a motorist, doing his service in the Szolnok Regiment, and he was taken to the battle front on the river Don. That was where he lost his life.

Lazić was born in Becskerek, so he spoke Hungarian fairly well. Before the war he had a small motor mechanic's shop on the Bega River bank, but when the Germans overran Yugoslavia he ran away and went to join the partisans. He became a courier and served as a liaison between the Brigade Headquarters and the advancing units. This time he was given a confidential task: next morning he had to take a man from Temerin to Óbecse, then a second one from Óbecse to Bezdán, and then bring a third one back here from Zombor. He was to be back by the evening. This was not a long route but it was not pleasant to ride in such rainy and filthy weather.

He opened the gate and pushed his motorbike into the corridor. He felt like at home, he had already been here in the morning.

It was by chance that he met Jolánka in front of a bakery. The women had gathered round and they were complaining indignantly that they could not get bread because the army had impounded all the flour reserves in the mill. Dušan was eyeing up the women for a while until his eyes alighted on the red-cheeked, well-built Jolánka. With a sudden decision he made his way into the crowd and took her by the arm.

'What do you want from me?' she retreated from him a little confused and frightened. 'Leave me alone.'

‘Don’t panic, my dear. Just tell me where you live and I’ll bring you some bread.’

‘Really?’ She stared at him and willingly told him her address. And indeed, Dušan later offered her his own portion: half of an army loaf. She asked him to stay and have some potato goulash; Dušan accepted and reckoned that it was only his mother who could cook such good and tasty goulash way back in Beckserek.

Later he went back to Jolánka and took her about a kilo and a half of pork meat in his leather bag in which he used to take papers and orders to the commanders and political officers. It was the soldiers who had shot a pig in one of the pigsties and he was also given a chunk from it. Now, it was the stew Jolánka prepared from this meat that she had invited Dušan to share with her; this is why he was in a hurry.

He would have loved to sit down by her table an hour earlier but those in the parish hall found it hard to get on with things, as always when they were confronted with difficult tasks. There he was, lingering impatiently in the corridor, waiting to be called in at last.

He was still worked up about this waiting even when Jolánka had already put the big bowl of stew on the table, with “csipetke” or, as they called it here, “galushka”, that is, dumplings. There was even some wine to go with the dinner though it was a bit bitter and tasted slightly of the barrel.

‘It took you long to come, Duško,’ she said purring. ‘The sauce of the goulash has boiled away.’

Dušan murmured something and his face showed not only shades of vexation but also of the distrust that suddenly flared up in his heart. She could detect them right away.

She asked when she had cleared the table: ‘What was it that came to your mind?’

‘Something keeps bothering me,’ and then with an angry wave of his hand he added: ‘enough of that, you wouldn’t understand.’ And it was obvious that he wished to leave the problem at that. Later though, he himself reverted to the topic.

‘You know, so far I had to make a record of every route, time, minute and kilometre that I did, that was the order. And now the commissar told me not to note it down; “don’t even think of putting it down, Dušan!” that’s what he said. Hell, can you make any sense of it? I can’t. My God, as if it has to be concealed from somebody.’

‘Why bother yourself about it, if that was an order?’ she said pulling her chair closer. ‘Wouldn’t you rather sit on the sofa, it’s more comfortable? These chairs are so hard.’

‘A good, plush sofa. My mom in Nagybecskerek also had a sofa like this.’

Dad used to sleep on it after lunch. That was the best place to take a nap, he used to say. I was never allowed to sleep on it. Will you let me sleep on it?' he seized her by the waist and pulled her close.

'Sleeping was not in the deal! That's not what we agreed upon,' she protested laughing, and tried to free herself from his strong embrace.

'What was the deal then if not sleeping?'

'Dinner only. You brought the meat and I kindly prepared it for you. The wine was on me too. What else do you want?'

'You!' He cried out, folded his arms around her, and laid her down on the couch. She did not resist him much for she desired him. Until now she had not had anyone and it was two years since her husband was called up. He was killed in the meantime, they kept telling it to her, but she did not want to believe it. She went on expecting him to come back. But now that this podnarednik – that is the way they call a lance-sergeant – came with the partisans, her heart went out to him; perhaps, because his moustache was like István's. She gave into the strong arms, and then with a sudden movement untied her skirt and thrust it off. Then she turned the light off. Dušan was folding her into his arms wildly, almost devouring her. His kisses were almost choking her, and she felt delirious in his embrace.

When the storm of desire passed away, he dressed and tidied himself and turned on the light again.

'Shall I pour you some more wine?' She asked in a soft, motherly voice.

'I've had enough. I don't like it, when it goes into my head. I get upset and sleepy and wake up with a headache next morning. I can't stand pálinka either. This lot guzzle it like it was water.'

'You are also one of them. Tell me, why do you hate us, Magyars?' she asked, curling up next to him on the edge of the sofa while she was arranging her hair.

The lance-sergeant pursed his lips, and then shrugged his shoulders. One could see that he could not tell or that he did not have an opinion of his own. All he said, as if in defence, was:

'You Magyars don't like us either.'

'Where do you get that idea from? Who said it?'

'I know it; or rather feel it. You've set your heart on taking away our country.'

'And if I were to say the same thing? After all, this has always been Hungary. You came here fleeing from the Turks. You gained a home here. And now you wish to drive us out and exterminate us?'

'Do you know what? Let's not go into politics,' he said fending off with a flicker of motherly fondling. 'Let's leave it to hell; I've told you already that I'm not like them. I've always had Hungarian friends.'

'Yet you joined them.'

'Because I wished to fight for my country. This is my country! Come now, you don't understand this. You women see things differently. Better give me a little more wine to numb my senses. Dreadful things are happening around here,' he burst out while sipping his wine. 'I saw what went on in the fire-equipment shed of the parish hall. Even I found them monstrous after all the battles and horrible things I've seen in my life...'

Jolánka put her arm round his shoulder and clung close to him.

'Don't speak about it. Have another drink. Do you wish to stay for the night? I'll let you sleep on the sofa.'

'I'd rather go without it tonight. I'll get another chance to sleep and be here with you,' he said swinging his arm round her and kissing her vehemently on the mouth; then he suddenly jumped to his feet. He put the wine glass down on the colourful table cloth and started to put on his clothes. He pulled on his thick-soled German boots, adjusted his jacket in front of the mirror, and fastened the belt with the gun round his waist. 'I have to be off early in the morning, but I'll be back in the evening. Will you make supper for me?'

'Are you sure you will be back?' She shrank back. 'You may not even come back. Tell me, Dušan, if it is so. Don't let me wait for you in vain.'

'I will, of course I will; I have to be back by the evening with that chap from Zombor.'

'Whom are you fetching?'

Don't ask me anything. It's some secret ukaz, that is, an order, the hell with it; I'm to carry the comrades, doctors and barristers on the captain's order without having the slightest clue of what's behind it all. I fear nothing good will come of it. Look after yourself my little dove; it's better you don't go out into the street at all tomorrow and the day after. Promise? And lock the gate.'

She stood paralysed with fear in the middle of the room. She was completely taken aback so that she did not even see Dušan out to the gate. He left in a hurry. She could still hear the deep pounding of his motorbike when she threw a shawl on her shoulders, and headed off in the dark towards the other end of the village to take a message.

András Kelemen's son, who was collaterally related to the Kelemens, lived in that short street close to the fairgrounds, towards which Jolánka was hurrying. András had run away from the Border Guard Unit in Újvidék, and she wished to warn him to go and hide somewhere, for something bad was afoot.

She was moving quickly and quietly against the walls along the dark street, and when she reached the Kalmár restaurant a cart turned in from Kastély utca. A Serbian soldier was leading the horse. There was only one lamp lit in the square; they passed under it. Piled up on the cart, there were bloody

corpses thrown on top of each other, some still rattled in the throat. The men who had been beaten to death were being taken to the graveyard: Sanyi Elek, Pál Prókay, Cséváry, the soldier lad and others.

Those who were witnesses to this sombre procession recounted later: They had counted three carts taking dead bodies into previously dug mass graves in the cemetery. The number of the bodies was thirty. Later, at least forty corpses were found in ditches, dug wells and remote dirt roads. This was the first day of revenge in Temerin.

8.

The dawn was grey and dull; clouds were gathering up in the sky. The wind also rose; but it was not cold. András Molnár, wearing a thick sweater, was pushing out the dung from the cowshed.

He got up unusually early for he couldn't sleep. Veronika also looked out twice into the yard during the night. She seemed to hear some suspicious noises. The flock of geese moved uneasily from one place into another in the yard. Was there perhaps anyone around to disturb them? Yet the dog was quiet, not a single yap left his mouth.

First he fed the horses, then the cows; later he gave them water and put fresh litter down for the animals. Veronika could come now with the pail to milk the cows. While she was doing it he usually sneaked into the pantry where he had hidden a bottle of pálinka. He could drink from the bottle on the kitchen shelf, but Veronika kept a keen eye on it and she always checked how much was missing from it. She did not like him drinking; he on the other hand adored pálinka and could not even live without it any longer.

She poured some of the frothy fresh milk into the cats' bowl; they were there already, waiting for her on the steps leading to the corridor. Now and then the dog snarled at them. He did not get any of the milk. He preferred the thick part of the pigswill.

He was an old dog and only barked when it was really necessary or when he was put into rage. He hated men in uniforms; the only exception was the postman, as if he was aware that the house was expecting him to bring news from the young master. There had been no news for a long time now; the military post had not been coming to the Southern parts of Hungary for weeks.

Veronika put the pail down onto the corner of the table and then unbolted the small gate.

'Well?' said András when she pulled her head back from the street.

'No one. Shall I leave it open?'

'Hell, no!' he sniffed angrily. 'Let them bang – whoever wishes to come in.'

‘But what if it’s the postman?’ she started snivelling and wiping her eyes. ‘If he were to bring us a letter? My dear little son may not even be alive any more. If I knew that he had died I’d hang myself straight away.’

He muttered something and then put his arm round her shoulder.

‘Come to your senses. He will be back, you’ll see...’

‘I have such terrible dreams. The other day I dreamt that the horses ran away with the cart. That’s a bad omen.’

‘Come on now... Can you remember what grandpa used to say? A dream is always good. If it’s a bad one, then it’s good that it was only a dream. If it’s a good one, then it’s good that we had a good dream.’

‘But you see good things are also turning bad. How happy we were when the Magyars came back to us. Everybody kept saying that the Germans cannot be defeated. And here we are now...’

‘It’s not yet over Veronika.’

‘All’s gone to hell,’ she burst out and went briskly up to the outside corridor to pour the milk into jugs. Then she washed the pail and fetched the bread from the pantry. She also put a piece of bacon next to it. András washed his hands in the tub next to the well and sat down at the table. This moment the dog started barking angrily. The gate squeaked.

‘Didn’t you lock it after all?’ András jumped up, but by then a boy was standing by the stairs.

‘Good morning,’ he said politely. He was fair and dirty, perhaps not even ten years of age. He was skinny and his eyes shone with fear. His look was like a trapped fawn’s.

‘Who are you?’ András put down his pocket-knife. ‘What’s your name, my little boy?’

‘My name’s Jóska Bece. We are Székelys. We’ve been fleeing but the partisans captured us and put us into a detention camp. We’ve come from Istensegíts in Bukovina and would like to go to...’

‘Come on inside, my son,’ she pulled him up towards the corridor while András bolted up the small gate. ‘What brings you here?’

‘Please help us if you are Magyar. We’ve lost our parents, two of my little sisters are with me and they are hungry. The Serbs don’t give us any food.’

‘Come dear, I’ll give you to eat as much as you can take. Have you got some kind of a bag? You don’t? Never mind, I’ll find something.’

‘I’ll hide it under my shirt so that they don’t see it. Because they will harm you also for helping us, your kinsfolk.’

‘My God, that’s what I’d like to see!’ András grunted. ‘Come, drink some milk. Do you like milk Jóska? I’ll cut you a good slice of fresh bread. Veronka, bring out some more bacon from the pantry. Put some sausage in the bag too. So that the poor kids can eat. May God curse those filthy partisans! How

can they starve even kids? They don't have human hearts. All they have is their party. May God strike them! They'd let them poor kids starve to death just because they are Magyars! My God, the things they're capable of!

'We were just about to strip the corn when the messenger came to tell us to pack up fast because the dobrovoljci are coming back. And there they were right away, shooting, breaking down the gates and we had to run fast so that we wouldn't come to harm,' the words flowed from the boy's mouth as if he was re-living the horrors. 'We got somehow cut off from our parents, we don't know where they can be; perhaps, they are already at home in Hungary, aren't they? We were driven onto a meadow, it is enclosed, and that's the camp. We shall all die there, you'll see!'

'Oh no, you won't.' András fumed. 'The Magyars will be back, you'll see!'

'You think so?' the boy's face lit up with hope.

'I don't only think but I know it. They can't just leave us here like prey, can they?'

The small Székely boy must have found the comforting too slight for he had already lived through severe storms back in Bukovina, and his brow darkened. Hope was clinging to his heart by only a very thin thread.

A plane roared above the village; it was flying very low. A Hungarian plane perhaps? Or was it German? Who knows? No one shot at it. The boy suddenly said his good bye and set off, but Veronka stopped him.

'Not that way, not into the street. Go through the garden,' and she pointed to the garden gate.

András went ahead and the dog was trailing behind them. Through the back garden they could get out into the next street. Jóska went stumbling among the vine plants skilfully rounding the bushes, and then disappeared.

The same moment the pounding sound of the drum filled the village. István Horváth was the village drummer who usually went round the village on Thursdays, but today was a special day; it was obvious they wanted to inform the village people about something very important.

The small gates opened very cautiously.

'Notice is hereby given – sounded his sonorous voice – that every male resident make his appearance in the churchyard tomorrow morning, preferably with his cart and horses for reasons of doing communal work. Those who fail to turn up will be called to account by the military authority.'

He rattled his drums and went on to the next corner to repeat the order.

The men withdrew into their houses, locked the gates again and pulled down the curtains. These were the hours for self-examination since fear was gripping more and more upon them. Everybody was raking through their past as if with sharp clutches: what is it I could have done that I could be

called to account for? Have I attended gatherings where there was talk about the thousand years of Hungary, and the flags with the national colours were waving, and the National Anthem was sung resoundingly with eyes full of tears? And could anybody have made a note of these events? Has anyone made a list when in the pubs drinking wine spritzers they kept swearing that even at the price of their blood they would defend the land of their ancestors, the sacred soil in which their fathers were laid to their last rest? Which of them wore a cockade on March 15? Those who had such a cockade or a small flag hunted them out from the bottom of the wardrobe, kissed them once again and then buried them in the garden lest someone would find them; for people were being summoned for such things these days. And the person who was once taken away could scarcely be expected to get back home again.

‘What could they be up to?’ Molnár András brooded, bolting the small gate. ‘And why must we report with carts and horses?’

‘They are taking you to do some work; to dig trenches, probably. But why carts and horses? All one needs are spades. Yet there was no mention of them at all.’

They fretted about the matter for a long time, and András decided at the end that he would not go to the churchyard the next morning.

‘I’m going to hide somewhere,’ he said to his wife. ‘Or I could go out into the fields and not come back before night. They must be up to something. They may make us dig our own graves...’

‘Hush, don’t even think of such things. They can’t mean to butcher the whole village, can they? All the men in the village?’ Veronka’s eyes narrowed, and she shook her head in disapproval. ‘Even if you were willing, I wouldn’t let you go András,’ she said resolutely. ‘What can they do? There’s more of us here.’

‘Yeah, but they have the guns.’

‘True, but they can’t shoot the whole village.’

‘They are capable of anything...; believe me...’ he said crestfallen and secretly wiped his tears away.

András with his head down went back to the stable; later he looked round the garden but found nothing to engage himself in. He lingered under the walnut tree for a while stamping on the soft mound of soil. That was where he had dug in the wine lest they should find it in his cellar; for god help those where the soldiers burst in and got tanked up! They raped even the grandmothers. Then they picked up all the watches; the Russians were delighted with every watch, just like children when they got some knick-knackery. Some soldiers had as many as ten watches on their arms and went along with their plunder very proud, boasting and showing the watches to

everybody. They will become Somebody at home, no doubt, for they will have more watches than the rest of the villagers all together.

On his way back he headed in the direction of the pantry, for he remembered the pálinka which all of a sudden reminded him of the big flag with the national colours; he made it of silk when the Hungarian troops came in. It was now rolled up and leant against the beam in the attic. His stomach suddenly started to ache and he could not get his breath from fear. What if they found it?

He hurried up the attic staircase; the pounding sound of his steps brought Veronka out: 'what are you looking for up in the attic?'

'Not for a rope, though perhaps that would be the best: to hook a rope round my neck and hang myself. I want to bring the flag down and hide it.'

'Just rip the silk off; the pole can stay. I'll burn it in the oven.'

In a few minutes there he was holding the tricolour silk close to his breast; tears filled his eyes. He was staggering with it as if he were carrying the dead body of someone dear in his arms, taking it to the final resting place; from now on they would be able to see the Magyar tricolour only in a rainbow. Their soul was cast into mourning. András Molnár handed the silk over to his wife as if it was the Magyars he was putting into the grave. But first he kissed it. Veronka ran with it to the stove and threw it in. She would light the fire later; she wanted to make a griddle-cake anyway. That is what they were going to have for dinner: potato soup with sour cream and griddle-cake.

9.

She had just put the soup on the table when somebody rattled the gate. It was obvious that the person who wished to come in was impatient because he did not only bang on the gate with his fists but also kicked the plank. András pushed aside his plate and walked to the gate. Two men in uniforms burst in all at once with two Russians shouting "davaj" from behind them.

'What is it you want?' András would have liked to stand in their way.

'We've come for the wine, old chap,' one of the Russians said insolently and pushed him roughly out of his way. 'We heard that you have the best wine in the street. Pure Riesling.'

'Me, wine?' He smiled awkwardly. 'I haven't got any wine; you've been misinformed. I didn't get any wine this year; poor vintage. What little I had the Germans' took it all. The Nemecki. They robbed me all of it. If you don't believe me go and have a look in the cellar.'

'Šta kaže starac? What's the old man saying?' one of the partisans asked and waved to the Russians: 'Hajde!'

They headed straight towards the garden and did not bother about the cellar at all.

'The cellar is this way,' András wanted to intercept the soldiers and make them go into the cellar. 'Podrum.' He said the word for cellar in Serbian. 'Evo podrum.'

'Njet podrum,' one of the Soviet soldiers with Mongolian eyes laughed at him showing his broken teeth. 'Vino tam!' 'The wine is there,' and he pointed to the garden. András just stood there in the middle of the garden with his heart sinking.

'Go then and look for it' he said with resignation but only to himself. In the meantime Veronka came out of the kitchen; she saw the soldiers going into the garden and crossed herself. Well, they know exactly where the wine had been dug into the ground. Somebody must have informed on them. But who could it be? It must have been a neighbour. The old Csévári? They would never think that of him. Bujdosó? He wasn't that kind of a person either. He was a good Magyar.

In the meantime the armed men reached the garden and flung open the wire gate; they shouted for a spade and called out loud for the master.

'Hajde! Come! Bring a spade and a hoe, quick!' they ordered him strictly. 'We give you half an hour to dig out the wine. Unless you find it we'll bury you into the hole!'

András started digging; he was dripping with sweat. The two barrels were not deep down, all he needed were ten minutes to shovel off the soil from them. When the Russians caught sight of the barrels, they cried out for joy and joined forces to drag out the two barrels, hundred and twenty litres each, from the hole. They knocked out the bung from both barrels immediately and filled their containers letting more than half of the wine pour on the ground. András hoped at the beginning that they would leave at least a little for him as well, but his hopes were in vain. Other soldiers picked up the scent, and kept coming in from the street with mess-tins and water-bottles.

It broke his heart to see the wine disappear, so he left them and sat down in the open corridor. Veronka tried to set his heart at rest: lucky they didn't harm you; to hell with the wine.

András hummed. He felt like swearing but only gnashed his teeth. After some time he looked out through the rusty leaves of the wild vine and saw that a newcomer, a partisan with a Sam Browne belt together with the drunk Russian were pulling about the straw stack. As he could figure out from their rough, obscene swear words they were looking for pálinka because there was no more wine left, even the barrels were kicked to pieces.

The Serbian soldier staggered into the front yard and shouted for some food. Veronka ran down into the cellar and brought up the bread and cut up

some bacon. Two of the uninvited guests went into the flat. They found the bottle of pálinka on the kitchen shelf and handed it to each other back and forth. One of them, the Russian, noticed the master's boots in the corner; he immediately pulled off his shabby boots and exchanged them for the others.

Meanwhile the partisan went into the room and threw the bedclothes around. He might have been looking for money. He found nothing but he noticed the boy's photograph behind the bed. He kicked it and then smashed it.

'Who's this fascist, mum?' he croaked.

'Oh God, that's my son!' Veronka burst out crying.

'Where's he hiding?'

'He's a soldier, my poor boy.' I don't even know where he is.'

'A "nemecki", German soldier? A fascist, is he?'

'No way a fascist! My son is a Magyar Honvéd.'

The Serb jumped on the photograph and kept stamping and dancing on it shouting at the top of his voice: 'A fascist! A fascist!'

The Russian, who was until then looking for things around the kitchen, kicked the door open and with a gun in his hand looked wildly around trying to find the fascist or the enemy soldier, but when he could not find him anywhere he calmed down and went back into the kitchen; he ate the potato soup topped with sour cream and then stuffed the griddle-cake into his mouth with both hands.

Then he stumbled into the yard. His comrades surrounded him and then they all went out; they tottered along the street singing loud with their gun barrels pointed at the sky. András staggered to the gate, locked it and leant against the side-post.

'Jesus Christ!' he moaned in despair.

'Come on, don't bother yourself over it' Veronka tried to console him in a colourless voice. 'It's good that they have taken only the wine; and drank all that damned pálinka. I don't even mind it; there's some good in it, too: there's none left for you to drink.'

'Oh, but I do have some more!' he cried and went with bloodshot eyes towards the pantry. 'I would have loved to kill them; to the last one of them, them rotten beasts! They are playing big now; can you remember how small they were when the guns were in the hands of others?'

'Yeah, but the guns are in their hands now,' she snapped back at him; 'and it would do you good not to drink now. Come, have your dinner. They've left some soup; I'll warm it up for you.'

'Who the hell cares about the dinner now?' he muttered and angrily pushed in the pantry door with his knee. But he could not find the bottle that he kept hiding behind the sacks of flour... He looked all over and found it

finally behind the door. He took a good swig and then went into the kitchen. They spooned out the leftover potato soup cold. Midday had passed long ago. The afternoon brought them no excitement but the dusk awaited them with another surprise.

It was getting dark when someone banged on the gate again.

‘Otvori! Open up!’

The man who was banging on the gate was not in uniform for a change; a middle-aged civilian pushed himself in past András and clasped a pistol to his breast. Thrusting him ahead, he forced András into the kitchen.

9.

‘Don’t harm him for God’s sake, please, don’t harm him!’ Veronka implored. ‘Who are you? What do you want from us?’

‘Hajde’ the armed man waved his hand in the direction of the gate and a gipsy like youngster sneaked into the yard: the interpreter. It was to him that the man said in Serbian with a strong Šumadija accent: “Tell her that I’m going to kill her husband! His last hour has come. She ought to say a prayer for I’m going to finish him off. He has lived long enough!”

Hoarse from fear, the interpreter translated his words into Hungarian, to which Veronka started imploring him again.

‘Blessed Virgin Mary! What are you up to? Don’t you believe in God? Please don’t shoot him, I’m begging you!’

Alarmed, the gipsy translated her words but the man did not seem to be touched by her imploration. He grabbed András by the collar and thrust him against the wall a few times and then pushed him down onto a chair. He sat down next to him holding the pistol in his hands all the time, poking András in the chest now and then.

‘You’re sentenced to death! Do you understand?’

‘I’m innocent.’

‘You are a fascist. You’re all fascists. So is your son who’s fighting with the Germans.’

‘It’s not true. My son is a Magyar soldier; a Honvéd.’

‘That’s all the same. You have been fighting against the communists therefore you must all die. Do you understand?’

‘I’m not a fascist!’ András kept repeating it to him more and more frequently, scared to death. ‘I haven’t got a clue what fascism is. I’m a Magyar,’ he bristled up in protest but was sorry immediately when he saw Veronka staring at him with a deathly pale face. Veronka had the feeling that this shaggy Serb was capable of carrying out his threat and might shoot her

husband. Who could have sent him to them? Or could he have come here just by chance? Why here of all the places?

‘Come on now, take your farewell from your wife; I’ll let you do that at least,’ and he pointed at her with the pistol. ‘Come on, get on with it, I haven’t got much time!’

The gipsy boy faltered in his translation. It was obvious he would have loved to disappear. He did not know the armed man; he had seen him for the first time; all he knew of him was that he had come with the partisans. He had run into him at the Kalmár restaurant; the man had caught him by the collar and forced him to go with him and translate for him. The man had a note book with a list of names. The names of those to be executed. But no one was shot so far.

‘Oh Blessed Mother Mary,’ she went on imploring him. ‘You’re talking nonsense. You’re imagining things. Tell me what evil has my husband done? Aren’t you afraid of God?’

‘I don’t believe in God. I’m not afraid of anyone.’

‘Have mercy on us!’ She then fell to her knees at his feet.

‘There’s no mercy for the fascist,’ he said resolutely and full-cocked his gun. ‘I’m going to shoot this fascist swine right away.’

‘Please let him have a last snort of pálinka. He loves pálinka so much!’

The armed man pondered for a while, then nodded.

‘All right. He can have a snort. I don’t mind. But right now, for I’m expected in other places too.’

Veronka rushed to the pantry where she found the half bottle of spirit. She put two glasses next to the bottle.

‘You drink a glass too. Come,’ she entreated him and he didn’t have to be asked twice. Then she poured again and ran out to fetch some ham and bread.

‘Come, eat a little,’ she prompted the man. ‘A drink goes better after you’ve had a bite. I’d offer you some wine but it’s all gone...’

She stopped short. It is better she didn’t say what happened to the wine. She turned aside and noticed the big knife on the shelf; she had just cut a slice of bread with it. She thought she would hide it under her apron; and if the Serb shot András she would stab him to death from behind. God help her, but she’d stab the swine to death. Then she would shut herself in and set the house on fire.

But before she reached out for the knife the Serb put down his pistol, took out his pocket knife, cut a slice of ham and started eating with relish. He had a drink in between: took a good swig from the bottle twice. When he had enough, he put the pistol into his belt and lit a cigarette.

All of a sudden he jumped up and kicked the chair from under himself.

'I'll spare you, you old bitch of a swine,' he said in a slightly cheerful and playful voice to András who was trembling and waiting for a spout of rage, but it never came. Veronka needed no translation to understand him, and she plumped down on the kitchen floor in her happiness.

'God bless you,' she broke into tears. And then she offered the Serb more to eat. 'Eat, have more! Shall I pack up some for you? Or take the whole ham if you wish. Would you like to?'

'No! Give some to the boy,' he pointed to the gipsy. 'Let him have some. The ham's delicious.'

Then he turned to András and slapped him on the shoulder.

'Tell me man, who's your enemy? Let me know his name. I'll write it down in my note-book and I'll finish him off.'

'I don't have enemies. I don't bear a grudge against anybody,' he said trembling.

'Just tell me, and I'll go there and kill the filthy swine right away!'

András did not tell him a name; he had no name to tell. He just stood there in the middle of the kitchen next to the Serb. The Serb shook the bottle, swigged what was left in it and then staggered towards the gate.

Once the man had stepped out into the street, András leant his face against the wall and burst out sobbing.

He could hear Veronika praying the Ave Maria aloud in long drawn-out tones while kneeling on the kitchen floor.

10.

'Itt Amerika Hangja! This is the Voice of America!'

'Not so loud, for God's sake, turn it down. Somebody might hear it.' Veronka suddenly sat up in her bed; she had been shuddering with fear in silence under the eiderdown. They had too much excitement that day: first they broke in on them to get the wine, and then came that civilian with the pistol who wanted to shoot András. Who knows how many houses he visited; he may have even killed somebody. What else had fortune in store for them?

After he had been warned, András turned the sound down so much that she could hardly make out the words. Yet she was eager to hear the news from the battlefield. Where were battles going on? Could the Honvéds have also managed to take a firm stand somewhere?

'What are they saying?' she whispered while getting off with difficulty from the bed. She put on her slippers and went out into the yard. When she came back she lit a match to see the clock. It was a little after nine. Moonlight swept over the garden.

‘They’re not saying anything!’

‘Try Budapest.’

‘I’m no longer interested in Budapest,’ he said bitterly. ‘If only my son would come back! My dear son...’

Veronka started whimpering again in a thread-thin voice. Later she got out her beads and slipped under the eiderdown.

“The Soviet troops fighting alongside the units of the Yugoslav People’s Army have achieved further success; they have already liberated a part of Vojvodina; the withdrawing Fascist Army is involved in severe rear-guard fighting, giving strong resistance along the Danube line in order to hold the bridge-head. There are active air operations in the area...”

The sounds of fighting ceased at night and even the drunken partisans stopped firing their guns on the streets. Far away, in the direction of the Tisza River the sky was red; great fires must have been burning there. Or was it perhaps the light of flares that lit up the sky? The landscape looked like a moon crater in this light; it was like deadly slumber with the humming of far-away engines in the background.

The villages in Bácska were like some frightened flock of sheep: the houses huddled together and were shivering from the unknown spectre that had struck on them. Communism. The five-pointed star. The big coloured poster that the old regime had put up showing a red-starred Soviet soldier with a flaming torch in hand could be still seen on the walls of many houses.

Those who lived here felt that the nasty big hairy hand was now unceasingly battering the land: that was the thumping sound of the tank fire; that hand was directing the planes, the armoured troops and crushing completely the faith of people.

Who could tell how many terror-stricken women were praying in the small houses of Hungarian villages during this night of horror for the bitter hour to pass. All the windows were dark but in every house there was somebody sitting up in the blind night, and with an ear to the radio trying to find something to console them in the vast nothingness, hoping for the faint light of hope to ignite somewhere.

One word would be enough. A single word would be enough to raise their hopes but there was no comforting word uttered anywhere.

The retreating troops were still somewhere here at arm’s length, one could hear the banging of their weapons; yet they were a light-year away in reality.

The night was deadly and lustreless as if nature had also died. Only death can be this horrible and inconsolable. In the cemetery at Temerin the men had been digging a huge mass grave since dusk; the first cart with the bloody corpses arrived around nine o’clock. The victims were brought out on four carts all together; there were only three corpses left for the last one.

The butchers were mainly revenge-thirsty men herded here from the nearby villages but the partisans helped them too. There was a grey-templed, scar-faced partisan called Joco, who always struck the victims with a vine-prop. He cut a moaning old man's ear off and then whooping loud kept stamping on him.

All those who were brought into the fire-equipment shed left it dead. No one asked for their names, crimes or wrongdoings; they were met with clubs straight away. The revengers got intoxicated from the blood. They joined hands and danced the kolo in the yard after the well-executed job.

The ones who were feeding the altar of revenge and brought in the innocent people – former soldiers, well-known merchants, craftsmen and farmers with eyes full of fear – were going about the streets since early in the morning. The death-brigades worked in groups of five or six but there were also lone wolves among them. Antal Ámann, the bus owner, was smashed to pulp by chains so that his own mother wouldn't have recognized him (because the Jews were taken to the River Tisza on his bus). He was buried under a tree with two other unidentified bodies.

While the death brigades were working, partisan sentries patrolled the streets and fired without warning at anything moving. The Serb who had wanted to kill András Molnár shot four men without listening to them. He dragged two farmers into the stable and killed them there. He hung one of them with his own hands, and when the man was already on the rope he tugged him down by his feet. This man was said to be in his civilian job the accordion player in a tambura orchestra and sang sentimental or love songs beautifully. He loved folk music. He had just gone wild now.

Three corpses were already secretly taken out into the cemetery in the morning; those were buried in the graveyard ditch in unmarked graves.

But the night „consignment” was such an eerie sight that even the gravediggers shuddered when they were throwing off the cart the bloody corpses beaten up beyond recognition.

The burial that was to be performed in secret had a person in charge. He was a grey-haired partisan-corporal, a certain Dobrosavljević Gojko; he supervised, with an air of boredom, the burial of the victims. The story goes that when burying a group of five corpses, one of the victims stirred and cried out.

‘One is still alive,’ they warned him. ‘Let's not throw him into the grave.’

All he did was gesture to them with his hand to throw him in, not worry; and he added:

‘Just stamp a bit harder on the soil. He'll die.’

When the first cart with thirty victims arrived, the soldier sitting on the box asked for the commander. The caretaker of the cemetery stepped out and said:

'I humbly report, I'm the caretaker, the commander of the dead.'

'Right, take over the consignment. Bury them decently so that not a trace of them is left. Do you need any help? We'll leave you two armed men.'

The caretaker said nothing. He looked with horror at the bloody corpses of the victims. He even saw men that he knew. They were naked, only some had a few shreds left on them. None of them had any footwear on. Each partisan changed shoes or boots at such events. There were some that collected watches, others again picked up all the belts.

The cart-drivers perched silently on the boxes; they had been ordered by the partisans to go and transport the corpses. They couldn't wait to turn back with their bloodstained carts. One of the partisans counted the corpses. Then he lit a cigarette and drew aside with his mate; both of them left later. The caretaker together with the Hungarian men who had been ordered out to dig the graves dragged the bloody corpses into the graves.

'Oh my God!' One of them cried out when he noticed that the heap of corpses stirred. 'One of them is still alive! Come János, let's help him out!'

Three of the diggers jumped over and pulled Lajos Uracs out from the bottom of the heap. They all knew him well. He lived close to the cemetery; he was a day-labourer.

The bloody, naked man had a bewildering effect on them as he got to his knees and then with their help staggered to his feet. His whole body was shuddering. He stuttered something but could not utter an intelligible word. They put their arms around him and sat him down on the concrete frame of a tomb. They put a rug round his shoulder for he was trembling in the biting cold night air.

'What happens if they find out?' asked one of the men in the silence of the graveyard.

They all knew what he meant. What would happen if the murderers learnt that one of their victims had remained alive? They ought to hide him. But which of them dared to do it? Terror filled their hearts. This terror was even increased by the sight of the two partisans emerging from behind the chapel. They approached sniggering.

'Help me go behind the bush,' Uracs said. 'I'll wait there and see what happens. I don't want to get you into trouble. Just put me down there; but look, I don't even need help now. I've come to myself, there's nothing wrong with me.'

He hobbled over; his leg had been sprained when, as a corpse, he was thrown up onto the cart. He himself couldn't tell how he managed to stay alive. Three partisans were beating them with poles and chains; he lost his footing on the concrete floor slippery from blood and fell; they must have thought that they had done away with him. They were in a hurry for they had been promised some

rum once they finished with a party. Music was playing loud out in the yard on a record player: an accordion orchestra was playing kolos.

The two partisans were back.

'Have you finished? Was it large enough for them all? Come, count them Jovan!'

Jovan, the bearded partisan stopped by the uncovered pit and started counting the victims; he seemed not to find everything in order for he scratched his head and started counting anew.

'Don't say anyone is missing?' his mate said jokingly.

'That's right! I am missing; I'm alive!' Uracs said with the rug on his shoulders, unfolding the branches of the bush. 'You can see that I am innocent for I survived.'

The two partisans were terror stricken. They were so devastated by fear that they forgot to answer. They grabbed their guns only when Uracs jumped back behind the bush. The shots went past him although one of the partisans emptied the whole magazine on him. He managed to escape. He was familiar with the neighbourhood and knew the way; he ran to the adobe ditch, then to the left and climbed over a fence; from there he was almost out in the next street. No one has seen him in Temerin since.

Cursing, the partisans returned to the mass grave; the Hungarians had by then covered it with soil; they worked fast for they wished to get away as quickly as possible.

The caretaker told them lies: 'We didn't even see him. Who would've thought that any of them was still alive?'

'What was his name? Speak up.'

'We don't know him. He may not even be from Temerin. We've never seen him.' They denied knowing him, as Peter did Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. 'We don't know him.'

'Jovan, I'll stay here until they finish. You go and report the matter to the captain,' said the partisan who had some kind of a badge on his sleeve. He was probably a junior officer.

So he started off jogging, but once past the cemetery gate he slowed down. He walked leisurely in the direction of the parish hall where the windows were still brightly lit in the darkness of the night. He found captain Čubrilović in what used to be the notary's office; he was on the phone and gestured to him to get out while he was phoning. The captain did not like indiscipline. He bore himself like a soldier, and demanded that everybody should keep to the rules; he even remarked when somebody left his jacket unbuttoned. Unfortunately, the discipline began to become lax as the fighting went on: now they broke in on him without knocking when he was on the phone.

He was talking to the headquarters and received orders that in the course of the next day already he should go with his unit further north and join the Soviet troops near Csantavér and then proceed in the direction of Kelebia; possibly, he might even be given a mission.

This pleased him greatly. What pleased him most was that he needn't take part in this cleaning for in his opinion this was a task unworthy of a soldier. A soldier can kill mercilessly in battle, but to torture civilians was not worthy of the Liberation Army.

'What d'you want?' he shouted towards the door when he put the phone down.

'I'm looking for the commander.'

'Why? Has anything happened? You look shattered.'

'One of the dead men ran away!' said the partisan in a trembling, unsoldierly voice.

'Damn you! A dead man ran away? And you want to report this to me? How on earth did it happen?'

'We took the corpses to the cemetery. One of them was still alive. And there he ran away.'

'He must have been treated too softly.'

'That wasn't our task! We only saw the consignment to the cemetery.'

'All right, you can go now.' said the captain angrily. 'Report it in writing to captain Rubric tomorrow morning. He will take over the command at midnight.'

The soldier went out, and lance-sergeant Lazić entered immediately. He was dusty and tired, and came to report that he had carried out his task.

'I took Doctor Treder to Óbecse, Doctor Klein from Óbecse to Zombor and I brought Dezső Róth here to Temerin.'

'Where is he now?'

'Discussing things with Ribarić and the party secretary. When am I to take them back?'

'Never. It's no longer your task; we're moving on tomorrow. Your task was confidential so I'm not asking for a written report. You may go. We're leaving at seven in the morning.'

Dušan kick-started the motorbike; it was a BMW seized from the Germans, and five minutes later he was banging on Jolánka's window.

'Who is it?' the frightened woman cried out.

'Ja sam! It's me, Dušan. Let me in,' he said in a stifled voice, and when he stepped into the room he looked around suspiciously. 'Were you not expecting me?'

'What are you squinting around for? Of course I was not expecting you. You said you'd be on duty all day long,' she said sulkily.

‘So I was. I’ve just come back from Bezdán. Have you got anything to eat?’

‘Yeah. Bacon and sausages. You can have some, but the bread’s no longer fresh.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Have you got any pálinka? I haven’t had a drink all day long.’

‘How far is that Bezdán? she asked, bringing in the bacon and the sausage on a plate. Do Magyars live there too?’

‘The whole village is Hungarian. Come and look,’ and he took a map out of his bag and threw it on the sofa. ‘Óbecse you know, and I crossed over from there in the direction of Zombor, and from there I took the advocate to Bezdán.’

She bent over the map.

‘It’s quite far away,’ she said looking into his eyes. ‘Is there anything the matter? You look strange.’

The lance-sergeant said nothing; he just reached out for the bottle.

11.

There was something terribly frightening when the village drummer rattled his drum in the streets of Bezdán. First he stopped in front of the artesian well and then he went to the next corner. “Notice is hereby given!” – This was how the notification started, and it was followed by “I command!”

It was the previous afternoon that the first units of the Yugoslav Liberation Army had turned up on the streets; they were somewhat tattered, shabby, and unshaven, perhaps even boozed. A tall, plank-straight Montenegrin was the first one that they saw; he had a gun on his shoulder. A bearded Bosnian carried an ammunition box behind him. They came from the direction of Zombor.

Later the soldiers kept coming through the gardens; some of them crossed through the meadows. Then a battered lorry rushed along the main street; a red flag with a star fluttered on it. This gave the inhabitants an even greater tremor than the soldiers. This red fluttering rent their hearts.

“I command that no one shall step outside into the street!” This was the first order. The inhabitants only now and then peeped out above the fences or through the holes in the gates into the empty streets.

In the morning there were still some Hungarian troops in the village; a field canteen for the Honvéds was set up in the square before the cinema. Suddenly they packed up and were gone; the infiltration of the partisans started immediately after.

All of a sudden music sounded loudly. Somebody had connected a record player to a loudspeaker and kolos roared unceasingly until late at night. But

from the Danube the thundering sound of the tanks increased, and at dusk fighter planes zoomed in hedge-hopping flight above the village. Merciless fighting was going on at the Batina bridge-head; the ground trembled as if someone was thumping at it with his huge fist in immense pain. The German troops were still holding the bridge head; Soviet troops were also put into action against them; the Batina Hills, those lovely vine hills, flared up and were in flames. The whole village was awake all the night, children were crying clutching to their mothers' skirts; the men were sitting in defiant silence; the bottles of pálinka were brought out by anyone who still had some.

The kolos went on well into the night; somebody was diligently changing the records and by now it was obvious: the old life had come back again. Today it was the red-starred soldiers that had arrived, and tomorrow in their footsteps were to follow the dobrovoljci who had been forced to leave and the former Serbian officials; the signboards would be exchanged back again for those with Cyrillic letters.

The whole village kept awake all night, listening to the increasing or decreasing sounds of the cannonade. It was about to dawn when the kolos stopped; suddenly it was very quiet; it was a hollow, deaf and giddy silence. It did not last for long though; a hoarse voice sounded, screeching above the village, first in Serbian and then in Hungarian saying that every man between the ages of twenty and forty must come to the sportsground with spades or shovels under the threat of severe punishment. Assembly tomorrow in the early morning hours.

The curfew was lifted but no one dared go out into the street for some time. Only the gates were unlocked and the curtains were pulled aside. A few brave-hearted women took their bags and went to the store hoping they could buy something, but the shops were all closed. The baker did not make bread for the morning either.

The silence did not last for long; Serbian folk-songs followed: sevdalinkas, sentimental Slav melodies. A cold autumn rain started sifting down. It was like sorrow: it blurred the windows; the village houses stood sulking. The dogs were let off their chains; there were some who stood by the wicket gates in search of company, for loneliness and incertitude were terrible to bear.

It may have been ten o'clock already when commotion stirred in the street. A small girl ran along the street sobbing bitterly. She was running barefoot, just as she got out of bed; tears melted away on her grimy face.

'Oh my God, granddad has hanged himself!' she kept crying out, her face distorted.

She was János Kiskároly's granddaughter; the grandfather was bringing her up, since her parents had died. The father was killed in the Bend of the Don; and then the mother died of grief.

The old Kiskároly had been a navy all his life; he was a thin sinewy man of few words but he was full-heartedly Magyar. He was always the first one to start singing the Anthem in front of the congregation.

This morning he still got out of bed and tended the animals; then he sat down at the end of the open corridor and just gazed in front of himself. He heard the Slav songs drifting from the loudspeakers and this made him sicker and sicker at heart. He made breakfast for the little girl and then went up to the attic and hanged himself.

Marika waited for him to come down; she even called up to him: "Granddad! Granddad!" Since she did not get an answer she went up after him to find out what he was up to. It was then that she saw his body dangling from the rope.

It was Rozi Nagypál that ran out into the street when she heard the infernal yelling of a child; she took the little orphan by the hand, and led her into the yard.

'Come my little girl,' she said, and caressed her hair.

But Marika couldn't be consoled. She adored her grandfather. It was about the tenth time she was telling them with a choke in her voice how she had gone up onto the attic after him, how she had found him and how she had called out in vain to the already dead man.

The neighbours went over when they heard her terrible yelling and cut granddad off the rope; but it was already too late. Jóska Zséli, a neighbour, brought down the thin old man in his arms, put him down on the bench in the corridor and tried to revive him but with no success. It was only then that they ran for the doctor, but the door of the consulting door was locked and so was the gate of the house where he lived. He might have fled with the Hungarians.

'Don't cry my poor little orphan!' Aunt Rozi and the other women tried to console her. Mrs Morvai, the fair haired Ilus, would have also liked to hold the girl's hand and take her home but Rozi did not let her go near the girl.

'Leave her alone. Marika will stay with me. She'll be fine with us; after all, God hasn't given us any children!' she started whimpering and took the child onto her lap. It crossed the bigmouthed Mrs. Morvai's mind immediately that, well, she was doing it for the property. For Marika was going to inherit the house and the cattle after her grandfather. There was also a milking cow in the shed and some four or five porkers.

The same thoughts were occupying Rozi's mind, so she quickly drove away the prying people gathered into her yard. Then she put a scarf on her head, took the girl by the hand and set off to Kiskároly's house.

'Come my darling! We'll go and get your clothes. And I'll feed the animals, too, while we're there.'

They were already coming back with a bundle of clothes and the keys of the house – Rozi made sure she locked it up carefully – when the soul-bell started ringing in the church tower. Uncle Pista, the bell-ringer, when he heard about the tragic death, jumped on his bike and went to pull the bell-ropes for the salvation of the old man. The parish priest might even scold him for doing so, because the Catholic faith treats those who commit suicide rather cruelly. It was likely that the priest would not even bury him.

The small bell resounded and hurried ahead to the Lord so as to make way for the tormented János Kiskároly for whom only God knows what it was that compelled him to this fatal move. Perhaps it was fear; or was it bitterness due to grief that he would not be able to sing the Magyar Anthem in the church? But it was also possible that he had done something; for he was always speaking his mind. He might have cursed the old regime or abused the Serbs who had, you see, come back gasping for revenge; but it was also possible that the old man had gone crazy.

But had everybody gone crazy this day? There must have been a reason for it. The news spread fast that Imre Berec had also hung himself. Somewhat later the old aunt Panna, the widow of Huszkai drank caustic lye.

No one has made statistics on how many Hungarians took their own lives on that day in Bácska. But there is an approximate estimate on how many victims fell prey to the revenge. Several tens of thousands of Magyars are missing from this region.

The soul-bell went on ringing in Bezdán: first for the grandfather, then for Jóska Berec and at the end it mourned Mrs Huszkai. The men took their hats off; many started packing up; others locked themselves into their houses.

Partisan lieutenant Milorad had enough of the continuous ringing.

‘Dorđe!’ He shouted at the top of his voice to which a hairy head appeared in the doorway. He could not answer for his mouth was full. He was eating sausages seized from the locals. They were very tasty; he had never before tasted such good sausages as these here in Bezdán: fresh and slightly smoked; it was obvious that many had slaughtered their pigs due to the war activities.

‘Go and find out why the bells are ringing. Stop them right away and bring that son of a bitch bell-ringer to me!’

The sergeant was on his way immediately taking two other soldiers with him. The church was just opposite and its door was wide open. Some women that had come with their prayer books and beads to tell a prayer for the salvation of the departed souls were huddling in the benches. They had come to church, for in these dreadful hours of fear they had nowhere else to go; this was the one and only place where they could find consolation and soothing for their aching souls.

‘Majku ti mađarsku! Fuckin’ Magyars!’ The sergeant bellowed and poured a shower of curses on the bell-ringer who, overcome by fear, let go of the rope. After a few more tolls the bell stopped; only the dirty swearwords were resounding in the cupola. The sergeant gave a nasty backhanded slap in the bell-ringer’s face. He was hit in the nose and it began to bleed. He fell onto his knees sobbing. ‘Why the hell are you pulling that bloody bell?’ he bawled out at him.

‘I’m ringing out the deceased.’

‘What deceased, you rotten scum?’ he said, bashing again the nose of the bell-ringer who managed to get to his feet and was trying to stop the blood running. The blow made him stagger and he fell against the organ; the two soldiers who had come with the sergeant got hold of him and pushed him down the narrow, winding staircase. They took him over to the parish hall straight in front of the lieutenant.

‘Are you sending a word to the Magyars with this bell ringing?’ he asked him wildly, hitting the table with his fists. ‘I’ll hang you on that rope, you swine! Why the hell are you ringing that bell without stopping?’

‘For the deceased,’ he answered, petrified with fear. ‘Three people died today. It’s for them that I’m ringing the bell.’

‘I forbid the ringing of the bells. Lock up the church, there’s no need for it. Do you understand? You are not allowed to ring without my consent; tell that to your priest as well. D’you understand? Lock up the church and bring me the keys.’

‘But the parish priest...’

‘To hell with your parish priest!’ the lieutenant interrupted. ‘Lock it up and finished. There’s no need for God any longer; from now on live without a God; it may even turn out for the better. It’s communism now. Stalin is the God! D’you understand?’

The bell-ringer nodded his understanding. Then he staggered outside and walked straight across to the church to obey the strange order. He didn’t need to make the women leave; they had already gone home; they sneaked out in a hurry to continue telling their beads at home. The bell-ringer locked up the church and took the key to the residence of the parish priest. He could not get in for the gate was locked. He rattled on the gate but got no answer. Could it be that the priest had left his parishioners just as God did? Could it be that the partisan was right and that from now on Stalin and Tito were the Gods?

He banged on the gate for a while and then he trudged home. He sat down in the kitchen next to the stove; potatoes were cooking in a pot, the water was already boiling. He did not pull the pot aside but let the water boil over and keep lifting the lid. This was going to be both his lunch and his

dinner since there was no meat at the butcher's and there were no chicken left in the yard; bell-ringer József Kalmár was a widower and lived alone. But was it worth living on this earth where even the bells were not allowed to ring free? It would be best if he, too, went up to the attic and looked for the washing line...

Lorries, laden with ammunition, were rumbling and heading for the Danube. Planes were flying low above the houses and the windows were jarring to the grumbling sounds of the motors; and mingling together with all these sounds there was the red ribbon of the kolos hovering above the village like the rope of the hanged men.

The bell-ringer looked out of the window and started towards the attic. He already missed seeing the man in a leather jacket turning towards the parish hall on his motorbike. It was Dušan bringing Dr Klein from Óbecse; he was to go back right away to take comrade Róth, the well-known communist official in the cheese factory, from Zombor to Temerin. They were the ones to supervise the execution of the secret order in the military zone. Nobody knew them in these places, they had no sentimental attachments to the locals and there was no need to be afraid of being called to account for the time being.

The rain stopped; a cold wind was drying the soil; the clouds were low in the sky. The military government was in all the places ready to implement the confidential order: punish the Hungarian population and carry out the bloody revenge. The lists were ready in Mohol, Ada and Horgos; people were herded together in Szabadka, Topolya, Péterréve and Óbecse; the partisans had already had a taste of blood in Temerin where the first mass grave was already full and there were three more graves to be dug; and terror hovered above Bezdán where the bells had been silenced.

It was Saturday. The male population was to report on the sportsground the next morning.

The Hour of Revenge

1.

A black day of mourning dawned on Bezdán. Daylight was hardly breaking but the voice of the loudspeaker was already resounding; gates were opened, smoke rose from the chimneys, breakfasts were being made. Some were frying bacon, others baking a cake, for the men were told to take some food with them. Food for two days was packed and the more careful also rolled up a blanket because the nights were already chilly. They got out the rucksacks, shopping bags or shoulder baskets that in the old days the women used to carry full of eggs, cheese and butter to sell at the market in Zombor.

The men sharpened the edges of the hoes and spades; some even thought of putting some lard on their lace-up boots. The old Somogyi was the first one to set off. He was not yet forty but with his great big moustache he looked sixty. They might even send him back: he was too old.

At half past seven the dewy green of the sportsground was already black from the throng of people. There must have been about two hundred of them. Six partisans encircled them and turned with them back to the parish hall to put them on a list. There was a civilian in front of the hall who entered their names; who he was, they did not know. He arrived the previous night from Óbecse. He was the person in charge of things and busied himself with great zest. When he was finished with the list, he beckoned; the partisans surrounded the men and started driving them in the direction of Isterbác.

Isterbác is a few kilometres away from Bezdán. It used to be a washland earlier; it got its name from the River Ister, that is, the Danube. There must have been an old settlement here a long time ago; by now there were only a few houses by the road, a sheep pen, a bull-shed, the herdsman's home and one or two farmsteads.

As soon as they were out of the village, the partisans urged the procession to start singing; they were allowed to sing in Hungarian too, as long as they sang loudly and cheerfully. The men's bad mood was gradually passing and the tension in them was beginning to ease. They were no longer filled with anguish, and they believed that they were being taken to some work. The rain also stopped, and the faint autumn sun began to shine. Their singing sounded cheerful.

A few among the Hungarians could speak Serbian, and they wished to find out things from the soldiers escorting them. But they did not answer back; what is more, some of them turned short-tempered and swore profanely. This was not reassuring at all; if they were taking them to work why were they so secretive?

And anyway, there was no kind of work to be done in this direction since there was no need to dig up the lawn, and there could be no regulation of waterways either; so, where could they be taking them? The acquaintances tried to get close to each other so as to be able to exchange a few words or looks at least, trying to find some kind of alliance and understanding.

The singing that rose merrily a little while ago, faltered and dropped suddenly at their feet like a bird shot from an ambush.

‘Šta je, what is it?’ They were admonished by Žarko, the handsome non-commissioned officer, who was the commander of the detachment. ‘Why did you stop singing?’

The men were walking with their heads down; the tools were clattering on their backs. Jóska Balassi pulled at his neighbour’s coat sleeve and motioned with a twist of his head to the cornfields. A lot of the corn-stalks were still standing in the fields.

They looked like a man-high, deep forest. If the two of them were to break out from the group and shot off into the cornfield many others might also get a good head start. It’s true, the partisans would use their arms, the non-commissioned officer had an automatic rifle as well, but by the time he got it off from around his neck and uncocked it, the two hundred men would be clattering far away. What could the guards do? There were only six of them.

The vision that swirled in their minds did not ripen into reality; it only soared in front of them like a dissipating desire or the sole hope that they could still cling to. The partisans may have sensed something of their intentions because the non-commissioned officer took the rifle into his hands. Then he ordered them to sing again. What followed sounded more like moaning; somebody started singing in the front but stopped immediately.

Later on even the armed men stopped urging them to sing; the small troop of men from Bezdán trudged along towards death, puffing and cursing. What had been only a terrible intuition was growing more and more vivid in their minds, and all their hopes perished by the time they reached Isterbác.

The stables, sheep pens and sties were all empty; the owners had driven the animals home days ago. The caretaker’s home was also locked up; only a single hen lingered around, cackling on the lawn of the wide yard. The Danube was not far from here. There were a line of weeping willows brooding on its bank, and the wind that was blowing from the river made them shudder. It was an autumn wind; it was bitter and brought along the smell of the water. The men were looking about themselves: why were they brought here? To build a dike? Then they listened to the far away sounds. They could hear the booming sounds of the battle; shots were fired endlessly, the ground

was rumbling. The southern wing of the bridge-head must have been just around there. They kept throwing glances in that direction for it was only from there that they could hope for some help. But who from?

Reality crushed heavily on their shoulders. Fear seemed to be strangling them; they could hardly breathe. They were numb and weary but they were still able to imagine a miracle, for by now that was their only hope: a miracle. The miracle that the troops on the other side, the Hungarians and the Germans would start coming with armoured troops and fighter planes; they would be arriving with a terrible power, and crash down on the intruders like torrential waves; tanks would bang happy messages, machine guns would sing and would send the enemy fleeing; them, the murderers. That's what they were: murderers. By now they were aware of it; only they dared not yet utter it.

'Put down the tools, everybody, on a heap next to the well,' the order came in Serbian. Those who did not understand saw from the others what they were meant to do. They threw down the shovels and the spades; only István Oláh stood a second longer with his hand on the axe; then he snatched it off his shoulder and brandished it. He did this half jokingly for he was thinking about what might happen if he smashed down with it with a terrible force. Then with the same swing he threw the sharp tool far away. One of the armed men misunderstood his movement; perhaps he feared an attack, for he snatched his rifle from his shoulder and shot him. Oláh's whole body convulsed, then slacking, he fell to his knees. He turned to the shooting soldier, they could see that he wished to say something but instead of words it was blood that spurted out of his mouth. Two of his neighbours jumped next to him and embraced his limp body; they laid him down on the lawn but he was already dead.

The shot left no doubt why they had been escorted here. But even before this knowledge had reached their minds, the six men had pushed them back pressing them into the sheep pen, and locked the door on them. The guards held their weapons ready to shoot.

All this happened within a few minutes.

'Good Lord, we've been caught in a trap!' cried out the hot-tempered Bozóki, who was always the fugleman among the navvies. 'They are going to massacre us!'

'We ought to send a message to the village!' A hoarse voice called out with hope. 'Let's ask for help!'

'Who from?' another faltering voice called out.

Silence fell, a frightening, almost deadly silence. Who was left behind that they could seek help from? The intimidated women that they had left at home? It is possible that the women would also be driven after them to this

very same place in order to be done away with too. Had they, perhaps, been also herded together by now?

'We should break out! After all there are only six of them,' suggested a trembling broken voice without much confidence. The idea did not pluck up courage; they had all been to the army and knew that six armed men reinforced with a machine gun could massacre them all in a few minutes. They ought to do something else. Send, perhaps, somebody home to rouse the whole village or to Zombor to ask for help from there; after all, they were not criminals or murderers. They were just Magyars.

The hour of revenge had struck. Retaliation for Újvidék; and for Zsablya. There were some who started crying; it was a soft, whimpering cry with only their shoulders writhing. Others fell dumbfounded onto the stinking litter. They fell as if they were suddenly struck by lightning. And they just sat there staring rigidly in front of them.

The non-commissioned officer with his machine gun in hand walked attentively round the sheep pen that they were using now as a holding cell and took a good look around. It was at the parish hall that they chose this place for the massacre. Now he was beginning to have doubts and he tried in vain to recall the exact few words of the command he was given. He did not get a written order about how to carry out the task; he was given free hand and that worried him. Someone would, quite possibly, have to face the music for the way the order was executed since there had been no official sentence passed. It would not be a bad thing to get something in writing from Ljubica, the partisan woman, who was the military commander of the parish.

Ljubica was a blond with slightly slanted eyes and had a captain's rank. At the beginning she fought together with her husband but he was killed in action in the battle at Sutjeska. She was a stout woman with a vengeful character; those who knew her well said that she was brutal, too. She was known to have shot the wounded Germans in the head with her own gun.

'Stevo,' the lance-sergeant beckoned to the young Bosnian. 'Go back and get a distinct written order from Ljubica about what we are to do with these people. Is that clear?'

'To Ljubica?' the Bosnian jerked up his head; he was a young partisan with a childish face, more or less a stripling; he had been fighting with the partisans for a year and a half now. 'Wouldn't you like me, perhaps, to ask for something else as well?' he winked taking liberties.

'Do, if you want to have your bollocks shot at, you ass!'

'Yes sir!' he jumped to attention. 'How do I go? On foot? Isn't there perhaps some horse around?'

'I saw a bike next to the wall a while ago; jump on it and off you go.'

The Bosnian came back in a short while crestfallen.

'I can't find that rotten bike.'

'I saw it some ten minutes ago. It was leant against the wall; or were my eyes playing a trick on me? Or are you just being stupid?'

He walked round the yard angrily but could not see the bike anywhere. It was obvious: somebody must have taken it.

This somebody was Dávid, the man who looked after the animals. When he saw the troops coming, he hid behind the hay stack. Later he seized an opportunity and jumped on the bike. No one noticed him. Driving along farm tracks, he rushed to tell everybody he met about the news: the horror and awe he had witnessed. 'They're massacring all the Magyars from Bezdán to the last one of them!' He had seen it with his own eyes; Isterbác is going to be their grave. 'They're exterminating the Magyars!'

By the time the Bosnian partisan reached the village on foot and reported at the parish hall to captain Ljubica to ask her for orders concerning the fate of the men in detention, the village was already in a turmoil of horror. The news spread like fire. 'They are killing the men at Isterbác!'

Ljubica was screaming at the soldier.

'What is it you want? A written order from me? Have you gone completely crazy? Has Žarko also become shitless scared? I'll send out Miladin to replace him; he won't need a written order. You can wipe your arse with a written order. Is it really beyond you to grasp that the order is highly confidential? Damn blockhead you are! And how has the village learnt that you drove the men out there? Did they hear it from you on the way here?'

'Me? Of course not! But it was Žarko who asked for the paper; he told me to come to you,' and he looked at her with his big uncomprehending eyes.

'Miladin's going back with you. He'll take the command over from Žarko. I'll find the way to deal with that idiot, too. Get out now and wait outside; I'll call you.'

When the soldier went out, she called over the man from Óbecse, who was lingering in the next room, and asked him, would it not be better if he himself went out to the place.

'This Isterbác was your invention. Where did you get your orders from?' She looked at him surlily. She disliked this Dr Klein. In spite of the fact that she hated the Hungarians, even she was not in favour of such mass executions.

She hated, in fact, every other nation that was not Serbian. She did not like the Croats either but she showed no signs of her dislike. Why did you choose Isterbác of all the places?' she asked somewhat nervously.

Dr Klein shrugged his shoulders. He himself could not answer why he thought that Isterbác was the right place for the massacre. He had looked on the map and just saw the place. He had never been to the outskirts of Bezdán.

He shrugged his shoulders once more, and lit a cigarette.

Captain Ljubica waved him off; she did not wish to discuss things with him any further. She was boiling with fury. She knew nothing of the confidential order until last night; she herself had already organized the revenge: she would have all the men taken away for labour. They were to report in the morning on the sportsground; this, what happened in the morning, was out of ordinary and was organized without her previous knowledge; this was the reason why she was reluctant to give out a paper; nobody should ask her later to account for it. The blame for anything unlawful is always put on the innocent. Miladin can go and get the men from Bezdán massacred; he was a wild brute, capable of anything. And let that Dr Klein be responsible for the whole thing. She had no idea anyway who he was.

Miladin turned up to report. He was ranked a sergeant; he carried his cap next to the pistol case in his belt. He had big brown eyes. They lit up when he saw Ljubica. He wanted to have her, and the captain with her feminine instinct was aware of this and tried to display herself to the best effect.

‘You’ll go to Isterbác now and take that wimp civilian with you.’

‘I haven’t got the slightest clue where Isterbác is,’ he said taking a map out from his bag. He spread it out on the table and bent over it. Ljubica stepped next to him, and their heads met. Her hair was full of scent, she had washed it the night before when they came to Bezdán. She even had a bath in a tub and poured some Russian patchouli on her body. Miladin found it a heavenly scent. He was also freshly shaven: in her honour. The two of them had been exchanging glances for a long time but the difference in their ranks was so great that there could be no question of any closer relations between them. Miladin had been put forward for the rank of lieutenant twice already, but so far they had forgotten to promote him. Miladin was a tinsmith born in the village of Kovin. He had served as a regular in the Royal Army and he made it to the rank of corporal. In the autumn of nineteen forty he joined the partisans.

‘I’ll shoot them all to the last one of them!’ he said light-heartedly. Ljubica pursed her lips. Then she secretly took out a small mirror from her holster and turning to the window, looked at herself; she smoothed her hair with her palm. She was not beautiful but she had a splendid body. She was a desirable woman; the soldiers adored her and were ready to go through fire and water for her.

‘Go out there and take with you that gentleman that they’d planted on us. I don’t want him loafing around here or I won’t answer for myself.’

‘You’re adorable Ljubica! Give me a kiss!’

‘Have you gone mad? You want to kiss here in the commander’s office? You’ve gone completely crazy!’

'I can't do without you any longer. I'll slip into your bed tonight!'

'You'll get a bullet up your arse and that'll stop you from romping around with women! Wait until the war ends. It won't be long now. Our company may not even take part in any further battles.'

'Are you sure you won't change your mind?' the sergeant looked at her cravngly.

'If I do, I'll let you know. Off with you now!'

'I'm not taking this half-witted civilian with me!'

'I don't give a damn whether you are or not.'

The sergeant saluted her stiffly; this stopped her from being suspicious or on watch, so Miladin after turning round suddenly jumped next to her and, with his arms around her, laid her on the table and started gripping her thighs. The commander slapped him across the face and pulled out her revolver.

'D'you want to be court-martialled, you bloody fool?'

He looked at her with eyes dazed from desire and then clattered out of the room.

2.

The village was by then like a big, sore, open wound. The news that the caretaker had brought threw people into derangement. Those whose husbands or sons had been taken to Isterbác were running around yelling, and trying to get some help. Veszelka, the village trader, jumped onto his bicycle and headed for Zombor straight away, hoping to bring help from there to save the innocent men. He was pressing hard on the pedals, fearing he might come back with the help too late.

He was back in an hour and was surrounded immediately; he almost fainted off his bicycle. The women almost ripped him apart. He only stammered, gasped for air but there was nothing consoling that he could tell them.

'Who did you go to? Who did you speak to?'

'I went to see Grga Vukovich, the Croatian representative, but he had already fled; his gate was locked up. Then I went to Leo Deák, the Lord Lieutenant, but he had been arrested and thrown into prison. I went to Skenderović, the parish priest, but he refused to have a word with me. What can we do now?'

Then it occurred to someone that Sándor Bosnyák might be able to help. Sándor Bosnyák was a reserve officer in the Yugoslav army; he had graduated from the gymnasium and worked as a clerk. At times he ran his father's farm. He was liked in Bezdán.

'Come women, let's go to Sanyi Bosnyák!' somebody cried out.

They had just set off when the two partisans on the motorbike drove past them on the way to Isterbác.

The women dispersed and, so as not to attract attention, they went through the gardens to the Bosnyáks' house. They did not have to go into details for he had already heard about the dreadful event. Without a word he went to his wardrobe, opened its door, looked for his old uniform behind the clothes and quickly put it on. He was supposed to have reported and joined his corps in this uniform on 9th April 1941 when the Germans attacked Yugoslavia. As a good Hungarian patriot he did not do so; after all, he could not go and fight against his own nation since Horthy had also given out his orders: Go forward to the thousand year old borders!

He thought that the uniform might have some beneficial effect. He looked at himself in the mirror and saluted his image. He looked so convincing that the women began to hope again.

The villagers found him a rickety bicycle and he started off for Isterbác in the tracks of the motorbike.

3.

At Isterbác all the preparations for the execution of what was called the X action were ready. "Destkovati odmah, pri ulazku sve fašističke elemente, naročito nemaca i mađjara... Decimate immediately after entry all the fascist elements, especially the German and Hungarian population..." Only the German population had already taken to their heels, they were nowhere to be seen. It was only the innocent Hungarians who stayed in their homes thinking that they had nothing to be afraid of.

It was genocide organized in advance; a devilish order in the name of communism.

They made these unfortunate people believe that they were being taken to some work; they had food on them for two days and they would be back the day after tomorrow; their anxious families were expecting them back to the warmth of their homes. They did not know, or did not even suspect, that they were never to come back again.

Miladin arrived on the motor bike. He scolded Žarko first, and then brought out a stool from the caretaker's kitchen, and placed it in the middle of the yard. He put it next to the well and set the old horned gramophone that he found in the room onto the stool.

'A festive performance or the last parade,' he said roaring with laughter, because at the bottom of his heart he was not only brutal but evil as well.

Were there indeed few among the partisans who had any decency or compassion left in their souls? They had become indifferent by now; they had seen so much blood and horror that human life meant nothing to them any longer. And hatred fed the fire of revenge in them.

Miladin put a record on the turntable. This was the caretaker's favourite record; a throaty, syphilitic voice was singing crick-cracking "Csak egy kislány van a világon." There's only one girl in this world. A plaintive melody. The sky had clouded over again, and the wind was getting cold.

'Hajd, da počnemo! Let's get on with it. I haven't got much time, I have to be back in the village. Is everything ready Žarko?'

'Did you bring a written order?' Žarko asked cautiously.

'I brought you your mother's arse. Ljubica said she will scrunch your balls and send you to Batina tomorrow. That's where they need courageous men like you. Or are you not as much courageous as you are stupid?'

The music sounded as if it were coming from the other world, yet it had a certain humour. Miladin sat down on the well-side, lit a cigarette and waved his hand for the others to start. He was going to sit there as if in a theatre box and watch the massacre like a Roman lord. It was long ago that he had the chance to enjoy himself so much.

The singer started on a new song in the meantime. He disliked the song. He took the record off and put on a march: the Rákóczi March. This had dynamics. The first group could come now.

The young Bosnian had been up to the attic in the meantime to get a look around, and came down with a bundle of used electric wires.

'Oh, that'll do neatly,' the sergeant was pleased. 'Bring them out in fives and do away with them behind the house.'

'Should we not make them dig their graves first?' Žarko asked.

'There's no time for that. Somebody will bury them later.'

'Comrade Sergeant, may I change the record? This is a Hungarian march,' said one of the soldiers who was getting in their way. 'I'll find something Bosnian.'

'Find anything you like as long as it is loud enough. Let no one say that we didn't give them a funeral parade. We're giving them the last tribute of respect!' he laughed. 'It's time we began. String them up five by five. Start working, partisans. Death to Fascism –Freedom to the people!'

The two armed partisans kicked in the door of the sheep pen at the same time. They looked into the eyes of the terrified men.

‘Five of you, here!’ cried out one of them who looked like Serbian ‘Komitadji’. Three hand grenades hung from his belt. No one moved first but after a short scuffle and use of gun-butts, the first five men were on their way out. They were all tied together at their wrists by electric wires. Mihály Miovácz fought back and tried to rip the wire off his hands but the partisan struck him in the stomach; blood started running in the corner of his mouth. The old Kálózi’s trousers were wet. He was pissing with fear.

Fejes, Osztrogonác, Miovácz, Kálózi and Pista Libis were the first victims. Fejes’ hat fell off his head while he was grappling because he did not want to go; he bent down to pick it up but one of the partisans kicked him from behind and he came down on his nose. He tried to scramble on his hands and knees through the legs but they hauled him and thrust him back into the group and dragged him like he was a log. The wire loosened on his wrist and in a spur of the moment it occurred to him to try freeing himself and run away for by now he had no doubts about what was to befall them.

A bearded partisan urged them with kicks and blows with the gun butt to go behind the caretaker’s small house. Kosztics, foaming at the mouth, was cursing and swearing, he was abusing the Serbs’ mothers, the whole world and the Holy Father who did not make the sky collapse on these butchers. Then he cried out for his wife. Kálózi’s trousers were wet; he had pissed in his pants. Miszlei tried to reach his hat in vain because the wire with which they were tied together was too short.

‘May God damn you all!’ he said hoarsely. Ivanics cried at the top of his voice: ‘I’m innocent! Let me go home. My grandfather was a Serb, too. My name is Ivanics.’

They were pushed against the wall and then the shots went off. They were not shot all at once on command, because the shots came one after the other as when they shoot encircled rabbits: rat-tat-tat.

After the shots the air was filled with the nauseating acrid smell of gunpowder and silence; a great silence rendered apart by the despairing cries. The silence was so great that it even had weight. It was interrupted by the crackling sound of the gramophone; somebody had again put on the “Csak egy kislány van a világon” record.

The Hungarians crammed in the pen, started shouting; they were desperately shaking the padlocked door, broke the window and were tearing at each other. The guards smashed down on the hands thrust through the broken glass, knuckles cracked, everybody became entangled and would

have fled but there was nowhere to go. In reality it was just now that the brutal truth reached through to them: there was no mercy for them.

The door opened again; a partisan beckoned and the bearded man came in and grabbed five men from the crowd. A hoarse voice demanded a judge and mentioned the law, but it was stifled by the frantic outcries. Some were on their knees praying in the corner of the pen, others were calling their mothers but the partisans just kept taking them out five by five; the pen was turning more and more quiet. By now it was only sounds of whimpering that sifted out.

And then silence fell again. Somebody stopped the music. Sándor Bosnyák sub-lieutenant arrived on his bike and went straight to the sergeant sitting on the well-side. He pushed away the bicycle; his face showed indignation. He had witnessed the execution of the last group. He knew everybody in it.

Before he could open his mouth the sergeant snapped at him.

‘Who the hell are you, a spectre from the past? Are you perhaps Karadjordje’s envoy? And you dare come to me in this fascist uniform?’

Bosnyák was a brave man. He did not shrink back. He straightened his back and introduced himself. He saluted and then firmly demanded the partisans to stop the massacre or else he would report it to the higher authorities because such a thing was against the law. He quoted military paragraphs.

‘Šališ se? Are you joking?’ he asked and laughed into his face. ‘Or are you really serious about this hodge-podge? Have you forgotten that there’s a war and it’s communism now? Or that you Hungarians are Fascists? It’s better for you not to stick your nose into our affairs. Where was your uniform when the freedom of the country was at stake? You were hiding it at the bottom of your wardrobe, weren’t you? You were a Magyar then, weren’t you? Why did you not go and stand in front of the Hungarian officers and ask them not to execute the innocent Serbian population? Instead of it you made speeches, and sang the Hungarian Anthem. Therefore, just shut up now. Or do you think that the king has come back? No my friend; you don’t have a say any longer.’

‘Nobody has the right to execute innocent people without a court sentence,’ Sándor Bosnyák repeated firmly. ‘If I have to I’ll go even to Tito. I certainly will.’

The sergeant’s face distorted with rage to this threat. ‘No you won’t. You won’t go even to Bezdán any more. In this life you’ll not go anywhere except perhaps to your God Almighty if he wishes to see you or to the bottom of Hell together with your Hungarians!’ and pointing at him he said,

‘Take him! Stand him next to his friends and finish him off. He’s a bigmouth.’

Two partisans grabbed him immediately and all his kicking and striking

were in vain; he was shoved behind the house next to the five men that had just been taken out there. Before he could utter a word the shots were fired and his body sagged down beside the other bloody corpses.

'You shouldn't have done this,' lance-sergeant Žarko said quietly, standing behind the sergeant. 'Will this not bring us trouble?'

'If you shut your mouth then it won't. D'you understand? Hurry up, my patience has come to an end. Get them out by tens. You'd like to have fun here till the evening. Just finish them off in the pen. Eh, you with the beard, what's your name? Throw in a hand-grenade among them. And if any of them is still alive strike them to death. I'm leaving you now. I want everything to go in order!'

He took out his revolver and aimed a shot at the silent record player.

'Pity,' Žarko said. 'It had a pretty good sound. I've always wished to have a record player. I've had my eye on one just like this one.'

'Shouldn't we put the house on fire together with them?' asked the young Bosnian, trying to be very compliant.

'The fire can be seen a long way away. Beat them to death rather with the butt.'

'What about their clothes?'

'You can pull them off. The big-mouthed royal officer had fairly good boots.'

Suddenly he pressed the gas pedal and turned out of the yard. The young Bosnian went immediately to the heap of corpses; he was disappointed to find that someone had got there ahead of him: Royal sub-lieutenant Sándor Bosnyák was laying there barefoot, looking up with glassy eyes into the gathering dark clouds in the sky.

5.

The revenge of biblical brutality scorched through all the Magyar villages along the River Tisza and from there the flames swept across to the Topolya region and also reached Szabadka where the Hungarian victims were dragged out to the Zentai út cemetery.

The end of the day was not the end of revenge in Bezdán either; it continued early next morning when Ljubica, the commander of the partisan unit, ordered all the population to be driven out onto the football ground. Armed men walked the streets and banged on every gate; every person had to stop doing things around the house and hurry or run with everybody else; the village looked like a swarming beehive. The dark shadow of Isterbác was hanging above the houses and sank into their hearts.

Bosnyák Sándor's mother was wailing and cursing along the street. She

was bewailing her son. Dishevelled, she knocked at every gate:

'Don't believe a word they say! They've killed my son!' she went on crying out to everybody. A partisan took her by the arm and dragged her into the parish hall. The others were driven out to the sportsground. Women covered in mud came in howling from the outskirts. They had been to Isterbác; they had been to see their dead. A noisy group of them went to the parish hall seeking permission to bury their dead. Ljubica refused to give them the permission. She gave orders to the soldiers to keep back everybody from seeing the corpses at Isterbác; no one was allowed there – if necessary, they were told to use their weapons.

Frightened people were gathering on the sportsground. But many hid in the attics, chaff-sheds, closets or cellars; others again escaped through the gardens and went out of the village into the cornfields like some outlaws. They did not believe the rattling of the drum; they all knew of Isterbác by now; there were eyewitnesses to tell the story: shepherd boys told about the things they had seen hiding in the cornfields and behind the sties. The things they experienced were monstrous; they were able only to stutter about them.

They told that many of the victims did not die immediately; when they regained their consciousness they tried to drag themselves away, back to life, but none of them got further than the well or the haystacks because the guards went after them and struck them to death with their butts.

They spared no one; one of the men fell to his knees, implored them and called out to God, but there was no mercy. Sándor Bosnyák was hit by several bullets, and he rattled in his throat for long before he passed away.

Those who were standing on the sportsground surrounded by ready positioned heavy machine guns had given up all hope. What else could be waiting for them but another, perhaps even more terrible, Isterbác?

The weather was also depressing; it rained continually, the soil of the sportsground turned into mud and people were squelching in it. They looked frequently at the sky with lips moving; some were praying, others were muttering curses between their teeth since they had already lost their faith. The gun-barrels were looking straight into their eyes.

There must have been about five hundred of them in the field. Ljubica arrived dressed in a raincoat and with a pistol in her hand; she looked very aggressive. On her orders people were divided into three groups: men capable of work were put into the first one, the elderly ones into the second and the women into the third group. This last group was immediately driven out of the field and directed towards the border; they were forbidden to return to their homes for twenty four hours.

As soon as the women reached the first cornfield they scattered in every direction. Rozi Nagypál had lost Marika in the alarmed turmoil and shouting desperately she was now trying to find her. Her voice turned hoarse from crying when she finally found her. Marika had lost her way when she wanted to go back to the village to her grandfather whom they were supposed to bury that day; but there was no one to organize the funeral; the dead were left unburied; when the relatives urged her on, Ljubica said: 'Fascists do not deserve to be buried decently.'

After the women had left and the men were being driven out from the sportsground, there broke out some commotion and Tamás Liszkai, one of the Hungarians with a distorted face and fiery eyes, set off into the opposite direction and wanted to jump over the fence. One of the guards shot him.

At the same time the machineguns went off; they sounded like barking dogs. The bullets whistled above the heads of the men and then, when they lowered the rear sight of the guns, chipped the wooden planks of the fence. This resulted in the desired effect; the men stopped shouting and everybody sank into themselves. They looked like a frightened flock of sheep. Ljubica eyed them scornfully. 'Are these the supposedly wild Magyars?'

The procession started moving; the spades and shovels clattered and the bags were hanging loosely on their shoulders. One of the men took off his coat and covered Liszkai's bloody corpse; then, with shining face, he went off in shirtsleeves in the rain. Anxiety gripped their hearts: 'Oh Lord! As long as his wife doesn't learn about it!' She had already left with the group of women and was no witness to the tragedy. And indeed, she did not hear about it; it was only about an hour later that the terrible news reached her. Then she tore herself away from the arms of her minders, rushed back and picked up her husband's dead body in her arms, and singing along the way carried him home. She sang huskily some holy songs and cried out her curses in between them. She was a scrawny woman, just like a dry stalk, but she carried all alone the heavy body of her corpulent man, refusing any kind of help.

At home she put the body down in the corridor and lit a candle next to his head; she was sitting motionless beside him until next morning. The women that came back from the fields took her into their care. One of them went to the church to toll the soul bell but the church door was locked. Somebody found a ladder and thus managed to crawl in through the window onto the choir and pull the bell ropes. The metallic sounds of the bells cried out loud.

The bells were tolling for the whole village and for all the passing souls: those killed at Isterbác and those that were buried in other places by the bloody angels of revenge. Corpses were found later in dug wells in the pastures, others were unearthed from under dunghills; some were badly mutilated, others had their eyes gouged out. Units of the Bulgarian army

that followed the partisans exhumed the corpses en masse; they found many that had soil in their windpipes. Those had been buried alive.

The angels of revenge clad in military uniforms were cruel and bloodthirsty; they were worse than the biblical angels that came with swords to the land of Egypt only in defence of the Jews. They gave permission for the burial of the dead, and that without funeral rites, only when their corpses were already putrescent. A more terrible and heart-wrenching funeral can hardly be imagined; the whole place around Isterbác was filled with the moans of women. Weak female hands were dragging the bloody corpses of their relatives: husbands, fathers or brothers; they were going along dirt roads in between the cornfields; some put the dead bodies onto pushcarts or wheelbarrows in order to push them home more easily, some sat them on bicycles and pushed with their arms around them; others again carried them back on cow-drawn carts. But all this only three days later.

This sad burial took place without men. The men had been driven away. After the football field their fear-stricken groups were gathered on the road to Zombor; there were about two hundred of them. They were first beaten up, hit by gun-butts and kicked by boots; and then driven off to Zombor.

Some two hundred men trailed along the road humiliated, maltreated, spat on, limping, with their backs sore and blood running from their noses; they had thrown away the spades, shovels and pick-axes a long time ago. Their eyes were cloudy, their hearts hollow and burnt out.

‘Who are these men?’ people in Zombor asked when they arrived in the town. ‘Fascists,’ was the indifferent answer. ‘Magyars.’

28th and 29th October 1944: these were the most tragic days in the history of the Hungarians living in this area. They can be, perhaps, compared to the events in nineteen-forty-eight when the Serbs surrounded the Hungarian villages, among others Temerin, and set fire to the houses, driving out and slaughtering the residents. The autumn of nineteen-forty-four was the time of revenge; from Bezdán to Horgos thousands, tens of thousands of innocently mocked and killed men lined the bloody roads of history. The events that happened in those late October days flutter like a black mourning veil above Bácska. In every Hungarian place mass graves serve as landmarks of the savage revenge, and the tremble of fear continues to live in the hearts. When people speak about the victims, they do it in a whisper and with tears in their eyes because they were not allowed to speak of them for fifty years.

For longer than a lifetime, even after fifty years, those who had lived through those dreadful days still seem to hear shots from machine guns going off at dusk and the crying out for help. In many places one mass grave was not sufficient; more had to be dug like in Temerin; the number of the victims was that great.

Burial at Temerin

1.

‘Veronka, I’ve decided to go after all. Lock up the gate behind me and don’t let anyone in while I’m away.’ With these words András Molnár was taking farewell from his wife.

She went with him to the gate; her face was clouded over with anxiety but when she saw that Jani Fejes from across the road was also about to go and Sándor Varga was already standing in the street puffing out clouds of smoke, she calmed down.

It was a gloomy October morning; the old András Csévári decided all of a sudden to drive his cow out to the pasture. He was walking behind with his staff dangling from his hand. He was in slippers for he always wore slippers. His protruding moustaches looked like a cow’s horns ready to butt. Jani Fejes greeted him and then came over to join the other two men. He shook hands with Molnár.

‘Well?’ he asked, searching Molnár’s face inquisitively. He wished to know whether he had heard anything interesting on the radio for he had the biggest set in the street with a high aerial on the roof. He could get any station on it.

‘Szálasi’s men have taken over. We won’t have peace after all.’

‘It would have come too late for us anyway’ Fejes said ruminatively; he was a navvy, a landless pauper who lived from day to day. He never kept his lips sealed and he abused the discredited system wherever he got the chance to do so. He was not a true communist, but he was thought of as a leftist; they called people like him “soshalists”. The thing that hurt him most was that, though a Hungarian, he had not been given the smallest stretch of land. The land taken back from the dobroljci was distributed among the Csángós.

‘That’s the end of the Magyar world in our life. The whole system was rotten, my mate! The only problem is that we’ll have to pay the piper for everything.’

A bitter smile crossed András Molnár’s face; he wanted to say something and dismiss his anxiety with a joke but changed his mind.

He looked back from the middle of the street. Veronika was still standing in the gate, shading her face with her hand on the eyebrows. This was how she usually looked after him. The dog had come out and sat next to her in the meantime.

All this stayed embedded in his memory like a photograph. As he walked towards the corner, bad presentiments rose in him. He had a feeling – or was it perhaps just a glimpse in his mind? – that this day somehow differed from other days. One can feel these things sometimes.

He turned at the corner to look back once more. Veronka was no longer in the gate. The street was completely empty. The white houses were standing next to each other like frightened children holding hands.

The shopkeeper at the corner had already closed his shop. There was no clang of hammer against the anvil at Mayer's blacksmith shop; the Mayers had fled; all the Germans had fled a week ago already. The Gussmann shop across the road, run by a certain König, also had its shutters down. Following the Gussmanns' execution, all the other Jews were also butchered – the grocer's shop went over to König, a German apprentice, but he, too, decided not to wait for the partisans to come.

'Not a streak of decency's left in these people,' Fejes said while he slowed down to let Sándor Varga catch up with them; he was partly a farmer and partly a tradesman. Namely, he worked as a barber while also tilling his land. Diligently, he had collected forty customers in the village whom he visited and shaved at their homes twice a week: one group on Sunday mornings and Thursdays, and the other one on Saturdays and Wednesday afternoons. On Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays he worked in the fields like all the other farmers.

He was paid for the shaving on a yearly basis, a quintal and a half per head. Like this he gathered some sixty quintals; that was the yield of about five to six acres of land. He went round the village with his barber's bag on his bicycle; he emptied the shaving foam from a tin dish with a lid with a big clatter in the street. The dogs always barked at him; they disliked him.

Earlier the three of them would have chewed over on this remark of Fejes' and exchanged bad news too, but now they did not feel up to it; anxiety was weighing on them.

They were burdened by some bad feeling; they would have at the same time liked and not liked to go. They were ashamed of their weaknesses and fears even among each other, so András Molnár went on talking big that the end of the war had not yet come. Of course, he himself did not believe the things that he was saying, for no one could have changed the present situation any longer. The barber, blowing out cigar smoke, – for he was constantly smoking a cigar – even remarked, 'Don't say you believe in the wonder weapon, do you? If there is such a thing, it's sure to be on the other side. But I don't believe in it. Look how many people are obeying the order! The street seems full all at once! Some are coming with their carts. No need to be afraid, there's going to be a lot of us...'

His voice faltered; he was so terrified that he turned utterly pale. He drew deep on his cigar, swallowed the smoke, coughed and threw away the stub.

'To hell with it. I swore yesterday that if the Magyars come back once more, I'll give up smoking for good.'

‘In our life this can only be a fond hope,’ Fejes said very quietly; he read the papers every day. He was a subscriber to the daily paper *Délvidék* published in Zombor. Earlier, in the Serbian times, he had subscribed to the *Új Hírek*.

‘Have you had any news from your son?’ he turned to Molnár with honest anxiety in his face.

‘No, nothing. Veronka prays for him all through the night.’

‘Well, it’s better that he isn’t here now.’

He lowered his voice and looked around. This was a gesture from the old days, from the days of the Kingdom when they lived in a state of subjection to the Serbs. They never dared speak openly. Then from nineteen forty-one they had been able to say freely and without fear that they were Magyars; but now, they had a feeling that the old times were coming back again: those days of fear and the bitterness of humiliation, when in the offices Hungarians were not regarded as human beings. Or would it now perhaps be different to the way things were in that old royal world of the Karadorđević family? Had Tito perhaps brought freedom to them as well?

‘That’s something I just can’t believe. The saying goes: “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” I don’t believe this lot. What do you say Sándor? I’m right, aren’t I?’

Varga, who was called Kisvarga – that is Little-Varga – by the villagers just nodded. (There were so many Vargas in the village that it was necessary to differentiate between them; so there was a Feathery-Varga, a Rich-Varga, a Big-Varga, a Piping-Varga and some twenty more Vargas). Fejes, bending close to him, whispered into his ear the news of the previous night’s terrible events. Who knows how, or along what routes, but the news reached everybody during the same night. It might have been the wind that spread the word like it spreads pollen-dust. They learned that Pali Prókay had died or that Little-Elek was beaten to death and that Dr Treder had returned home. Apparently he had said: “I demand the life of a hundred Hungarians for the death of my mother and my brother.” Well, actually nobody heard him say it. They also knew of the thirty men put into the grave last night; and of the one that managed to run away.

Molnár suddenly stopped, thunderstruck, and said, ‘They aren’t summoning us to the churchyard for the same reasons, are they?’ They looked at each other. They could still go home, all three of them. If not home, then out of the village into the cornfields; nobody could find them there. They could wait for the rage of these wild men to die down.

They looked at each other searchingly; their inquisitive looks met and then they calmed down. There won’t be any problems – that was what their eyes were trying to convince each other. But why, then, the whole village had

been ordered to go? It had never happened earlier that the whole village was called up.

The street around the church was already dark from the crowd. Those who came with their carts stopped under the trees; they unharnessed the horses and tied them up to, the forage racks. Gathered into groups, trying to breathe courage into each other, the men lingered about for a while. Matyi Kovács, who was a groom's man at almost every wedding, had a sprig of rosemary tucked into his hat, and this had a soothing effect on everybody.

Many were waiting in the schoolyard opposite the church. The girls' school, the convent, was closed; so was the residence of the parish priest. A woman was desperately banging on the gate; she wished to call the priest, the grey-haired Gáspár Kopping, to a dying person, but although the battering was pretty loud nobody opened the gate.

'Who is ill?' somebody asked.

'Old Mrs Panna Verebélyi. She fell off the attic, poor thing.'

'Well, she hasn't got many sins; she can die without a priest.'

The woman who had come to fetch the priest was stubborn enough to go on banging. Then she gave up and went away. No one bothered about old aunt Panna dying; everybody was occupied with his own anxiety. And fear became like a spread out sheet hung up high; it gleamed and fluttered above them flapping its non-existent wings.

The horses neighed because they got tangled up around one or two forage racks terrified from the noise and the shots that were fired now and then. Serbs arrived on motor bicycles and horseback from the nearby Goszpogyinci and they lined up morosely by the wall. Like people who did not belong together with the others, they formed a little island. One of them hurried into the parish hall. No official person had come out from there yet. No one knew what was to come, why the whole village had been summoned. Were they really taking them away for work? This seemed more and more unlikely for tools were nowhere to be seen in the whole churchyard.

They had to be up to something completely different. Their intentions were getting to be more and more obvious for they had placed two armed men by the gates. The person who went in could not come out any more. Moreover, two partisans showed up at the back fence by the teacher's yard. They had machine guns. This meant that there was no way for free escape left that way either. There was only one route left for breaking out and returning to life again: through the gate of the convent and then the gardens; but the gate was locked. The church door was also locked. Anyway, the church was no longer to be considered as a place of refuge. Those who read the papers were familiar with the terrible massacres that happened in Croatia: Serbs driven to the church were shot into a pile inside by the Ustashe.

All these things came to the minds of people but they tried to brush aside these torturing thoughts. Uneasiness increased in them when the Slovak partisan unit that was ordered to guard the camp in Járek arrived on a battered lorry; there were six blond, filthy-haired women among them. They thrust themselves on the fence with hatred in their eyes and shouted foul words; one of them shook her fist and spat towards the church.

Miska Zóni, the bell-ringer and sacristan, wanted to go into the church because aunt Panna had died in the meantime before receiving the extreme unction, and he wished to ring the soul bell. One of the partisans pushed him away and to make things clear even hit him with the gun-butt. The old bell-ringer started pushing his bicycle limping on his leg and wished to go out but one of the guards thrust him back. He grabbed the bike rudely from the bell-ringer's hands and threw it aside. Zóni tried to explain to him in vain that he was the bell-ringer; the other probably did not understand him and therefore did not let him out.

Zóni seemed as if he had accepted his fate and limped back to the groups of men. He listened to one and then another group and in the meantime tried to get to the other side of the church. He had the key to the sacristy on himself. If he were able to get there and open the door, then he could sneak into the church. And he succeeded, since no one bothered about him. He locked the door on himself from behind and then went cautiously up onto the choir and from there to the tower; looking down from the small window under the clock, he witnessed with his eyes and ears the hellish events of the morning. He was able to watch as from a theatre box how the men that were sent to death had been selected.

2.

It was about nine o'clock when Nyiszom showed up in the company of two partisans. The party secretary wished to look very official, and his face reflected inaccessible gravity; he felt as if he were somebody in the village now. So far nobody took notice of a "soshalist" like him who was hardly trusted even by his own fellowmen.

'Here comes Nyiszom!' somebody called out, and at this the men looked up suddenly. It occurred to many of them that the world had gone to the dogs if even Nyiszom could be somebody in it. Nyiszom of all people!

And this Nyiszom had a list in his hand. He fluttered it with official severity and returned nobody's greetings. The two armed men walked behind him, emphasizing in this way his power and stressing the importance of his personality. The men exchanged glances.

Some smiled at this officiousness but the majority brooded over it suspecting something bad. The question: 'Have I ever done something bad against Nyiszom?' cropped up in all of them. There were those who were pleased to see him since they had worked together with him. One other person had had a drink together with him, had even paid for his drink since Nyiszom never had any money.

Outside the fence, in front of the school, there was an untidy row of carts with horses tied to the forage racks. The men looked that way when they heard the throbbing sound of a motorbike; Dušan Lazić arrived racing the engine of his motor; he got off and peeped into the churchyard. One of the partisans following Nyiszom called out something funny to him; some laughed at it. They were talking about some pálinka. The partisan shook hands with Lazić; they were homefolks.

'We're leaving this afternoon Dušan. Are you coming with us?'

'Don't know. I've just come back from Zombor. I brought that measly looking fellow standing by the entrance. What's happening here, do you know?'

'A roll-call,' the other one laughed, and patted Dušan on his back. 'Could you perhaps get some rakija? The bastards have hidden all their pálinka away from us.'

'I'll drop in on you later. I still have half a bottle of grape-residue brandy; I'll give it to you.'

'Come, we'll have a drink together. At least you'll tell me where you have been.'

'I can't tell you about that. It was a confidential mission. Can you see that man with the glasses? May his guts rot!'

In the meantime the men were lined up in the churchyard. They stood in line by twos; that used to be the regular form of lining up in the old army. Zóni, the sacristan, noticed that some of them tried even to line up in order of height. All of them were ex-servicemen and there were hardly any young ones among them. Only the Kálmán boy had not yet done army service though he had been enlisted. He came here instead of his father because the old Jóska Kálmán went out to his field to harvest the corn-cobs. They had agreed that he would replace his father as soon as he got away from here. The kid had brought a shovel with him. It was taken away from him and he was standing now empty handed together with the others; a rigid smile had frozen onto his face. He only had a jacket on and some thin summer clothes – now he was shivering; perhaps not just with cold.

When the men lined up – there were some four hundred of them – they all stood unintentionally stiffly to attention; as if they were listening to a higher command, while the men from Gospogyinci, Zsablya, Csurog, and to finish the procession the dobrovoljci that had come back home to Szirig,

walked past their line. They were like dogs prying and snooping; they looked with piercing eyes into each face sizing up everybody; they were looking for men guilty of crime.

András Molnár felt his heart throbbing in his throat when they were approaching him. My dear God, don't let them pin something on him! How could he defend himself against any kind of suspicion, for this was not a court; this was a witch trial. It was enough for a Serb full of hatred to poke his finger at him and he would be dragged out of the line. He had just witnessed a case like that.

'Ovaj je bio! It was him!' a Serb shouted at the top of his voice and pointed furiously and explicitly at the old Hévízi; even his moustaches grew stiff with terror.

'It's not true!' He shouted back desperately but his protesting was in vain; he was drawn out of the line and sent next to the church wall. 'I did nothing! I don't even know this man!' Mátyás Hévízi, the day-labourer from Újsor utca, shouted bitterly in a distorted voice. 'I've never been to Goszopgyinci or Csurog in my life!'

'It was him!' The Serb insisted. 'It was him, I'm absolutely sure. I swear on my mother's life and to God that it was him! Bogami!'

There was no mention of what Hévízi's offence was; nobody had even asked him about it. It was enough for someone to point at him. Hévízi András was followed by Verebélyi next to the church wall. The men in the line looked stiffly at the two of them; the whole thing was like a vision in a dream; it seemed unbelievable and yet it was plain reality. Those set aside were shouting now and yelling to which one of the guards went up to them and silenced them using his gun-butt. Hévízi fell to his knees and then slumped down on the lawn. He stayed in this position, sitting and gazing with bloody face at the sky. As if he were asking from those above: "Is this possible? What has happened, my God?"

The third man was on the way in the meantime, András Zsúnyi, who had a cocky walk; he was followed by János Kalapáti and then the Hevér boy who had just recently married. He did not seem to take the thing seriously for he was smiling. But only his face. The smile was just a rigid mask that gradually grew into wry hatred. Flustered, he looked around as if trying to find a way out. But was there any way out? The armed man felled him also to the lawn; and he was very satisfied with himself for he even laughed at the man writhing on the ground. Then holding his gun ready to fire he drew back among his fellows. Reinforcement arrived in the church yard in the form of two Slovak girls who had just arrived from Járek. They had new boots; they must have got them in the past few days. It is likely that they had pulled them off some corpses.

The clock tower struck ten. It seemed to take very long for it to ring out the hours. The whole yard echoed with the sound. Zóni was crouching below the bells witnessing everything; he was terrified. His whole body was shaking. He knew if anyone noticed him he would be thrust against the wall; he certainly would, though nobody yet knew what standing next to the wall meant in fact. Death?

The lanky, slightly drunk partisan with bloodshot eyes got to Molnár this moment. Molnár shut his eyes but only for a second. Then he looked back into his face with desperate courage; the other searched his face bending a bit backwards and then again forwards. Did he know this face? He could not remember seeing it before.

Their facing each other did not last longer than half a minute but to Molnár it seemed an eternity. His throat stiffened, he could not breathe, his face grew scarlet, he felt dizzy, his ears were tingling and he felt like being pushed under water and not being able to make his way up to the surface again. He could see his son's face and then Veronka's; then the house and then the open corridor with the wild vine.

The Serb made a step and stopped in front of András' neighbour and then went further along the line. He seemed to be one of the more decent ones for he did not point to anybody. But the one following him, the one from Csurog was like the angel of revenge himself. His glance also slid off András and stopped on Károly Ternovác. Ternovác had been a cattle dealer and going from one market to another all his life; his face was weather-beaten from getting up early and from drinking much. He had been to many places, mainly in the neighbouring villages. Thus, obviously, he had been to Csurog and Zsablya too, where they always had a lot of cattle for sale because there was no Serbian peasant without two or three cows. They had good milking, speckled cows, and mainly home bread. His was a familiar face in the villages, if from nowhere else then from the livestock markets. It could have happened that Ternovác had cheated on some of them; but then, after all, which broker did not cheat? That was the thing that those going to markets lived off: selling poor quality for good money and buying good quality for little money.

One of the Serbs must have recognized him for he dragged him out of the line. He walked like a beaten dog to the others by the church wall; the 'chosen ones' were over twenty by now.

But it was too early for the others to rejoice. The roll-call was still about to come. Who the list was put together by has not come to light until the present day. Nyiszom was entrusted to read it. This was his first public role as the party secretary. Even the mention of his name calls up mournful memories in the village.

The names were not listed in alphabetical order perhaps for reasons that they wished to keep people flustered all the way through. Many of the names were called out in vain, no one answered them. Those who stood there shivering and sweating with mortal fear were thinking of the absent ones with utter hatred. Why! How clever they were! Cautiousness saved their necks from the noose. The repugnance of those in anguish here turned against them.

‘János Hornyik.’

Not a sound was heard. Somebody at the end of the line – how nasty of him – kept nagging, encouraging: „Hornyik! Can’t you hear man, it’s you they are calling!” He could not hear; well, he was not there.

‘István Kamenyák!’

There was no answer again. Somebody asked then:

‘Which one? There are three of them.’

Nobody said anything. A moment’s waiting, and the reading continued.

‘András Molnár!’

His knee gave way as if he had been suddenly struck by lightning. He could not utter a sound; he did not have the strength to answer back. He stood there petrified. Perhaps they would have gone on reading the list had the small Pali Hajdú not cried out like mad.

‘Uncle András, it’s you they have called!’

Tottering, András started towards the group by the church wall. Everything became a blur before his eyes. He thought again of his son and then saw Veronka in front of him. He cursed himself. Had he listened to his wife then he could be sitting in peace at home now. Or he could have gone out of the village into the cornfields with food for a few days in a bag. Nobody would have looked for him. But he had come here as a decent citizen and was now looking around in vain; help was nowhere to be found. Or could there still be some hope left?

András was not alone for long. This group was also growing. When the coppers far-flung sound of the clock struck eleven there were some sixty men around him.

‘János Varga!’ Nyiszom called out.

‘Which one? There’re two of them,’ was the jittering answer.

‘Well then, let’s have both of them,’ cried one of the partisans with sarcastic laughter. The heckler might have expected the others to start laughing aloud at his remark but no one did. There was absolute silence and then half a minute later two men stepped out almost simultaneously: the two János Vargas.

One of them, a peasant of about thirty years of age was bare-headed; nobody knew what had happened to his hat, since the peasants in Temerin

were never hatless, not even in the heat of the summer. He was dishevelled, disorderly and his open shirt at the neck revealed his Adam's apple. He was as pale as death, almost chalk-white. Nobody knew him. He must have come from the Prekosz part of the village; that was where those navvies lived who were often away from the village for weeks and came back only on Saturdays.

'Go to the church wall,' and he was pushed there by two of the partisans. One of them tried to kick him angrily but failed to get him, lost his balance and fell. Nobody laughed at him.

The other Varga was the one from Gyepsor utca. He was jostled next to the fence. Claspings his hands behind his back, a civilian with glasses walked up and down among the men in the church yard; he took a good look at everyone and later he, too, took out a screwed up list from his pocket. He read out a few names in hoarse voice from it; they were put next to András. András was not pleased for he did not know his new companions. They seemed to be fairly well off for they had fur coats and boots on. One of the armed men must have taken a liking to their boots because he went two times around them. He even put his foot next to one of them; he probably tried to measure the size of the boots. His movement resembled a death sentence.

Nyiszom, the party secretary, aware of his personal importance, was all over the place; he either hurried to the man who wore glasses and nobody seemed to know, whispering something into his ear or else discussing something with the political officer, or again showing himself off in front of the partisans, but they only spat at him.

Then he paraded in front of the lined up men and next had a good look at the group by the church wall. That was when he noticed András Molnár.

'How did you get here?' his eyebrow slid up in surprise. Even his breath was cut short at seeing him in that group. The two of them had known each other for a long time; once they used to go roaming together; Nyiszom had also made advances toward Veronka as a young man. The two of them had the brass band play for them and one night they even gave serenade to Veronka.

Nyiszom was poor and worked as a farm hand; at a time he worked for András's uncle. One summer when the families joined hands the two of them competed in cutting swaths. They quite liked each other. In those days Nyiszom did not yet bother about leftist ideas; it was only later that he became a communist.

This also happened by chance. Gussmann's eldest son, Jóska, who had been expelled from Zagreb and summoned to court for Communist agitation, brought back with him a leaflet and a few leftist books. He lent them to

Neustädter, the shoemaker, and they somehow ended up with Nyiszom. The Serbian Police detected them and they were all summoned to court. Nyiszom was found guilty in the third degree and was sentenced to six months imprisonment. This was what turned him into a true communist, even though he was ignorant of the theory of Marxism. It was the bitterness of his own life that made him stand aside defiantly. He hated the rich, the gentle, the privileged class, and the sole basis of his Communist creed were his personal reduced circumstances and his poverty.

They had not met for a long time; Nyiszom would have been pleased to see Molnár – one could see that on his face – had fate not brought them together under these circumstances. He looked around and murmured,

‘You’re not standing in a good place, András.’

Molnár turned pale and could not let a sound out of his throat. His legs felt very heavy suddenly and he could not have made a single step now. The armed partisan drew closer to hear what they were talking about. He did not know Nyiszom; all he knew was that he must be someone with authority.

‘This man’s standing in the wrong place,’ Nyiszom, who spoke good Serbian, said to the partisan. In the old days he had worked as a farm-hand on farms owned by Serbs in Csurog.

‘I’ve got nothing to do with this,’ the soldier shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’m taking him over to the other group,’ Nyiszom said. Molnár did not understand a single word of this.

‘But then you must bring somebody over here instead of him for they are keeping the evidence,’ and he pointed to the man with glasses who was still gripping the list.

‘I’ll bring two of them, willingly!’ he called out lightly on the way to the other group.

‘Not two!’ the partisan yelled soberly after him. ‘Just one, and take this one with you!’

Nyiszom ran back, got hold of Molnár by the arm and started dragging him over while jabbering to him,

‘Come old friend, you’ll be better off over there. I think that they’re going to finish these ones off. You’re not standing in a good place. My God, how on earth did you end up among them?’

When they reached the other group he pushed András in and caught the man nearest to him and dragged him over by the wall to replace András.

‘Leave me alone! Stop dragging me! What do you want with me? I didn’t do anything. I’m innocent, don’t you understand? Who are you, anyway?’

‘Stop yelling!’ Nyiszom tried to calm his victim whom he did not know. ‘Come, your place is over there!’

‘Who are you? Let me go home. I have a family. Damn you all!’

Then came turmoil in the street. Two of the horses got tangled up and turned over; one of the horses must have broken a leg for he was neighing painfully; someone shot him later.

3.

András Molnár calmed down at last. He felt as if he had a heavy stone rolled away from his heart. He did not feel so awful in the group where he was standing now. It was all the same to him where they would take him and even what they would do to him as long as they were not going to kill him. He would be willing to take on the hardest captivity in exchange for life. The hours of hardship and revenge would come to an end and something would turn out eventually. If the communists did not take away his land then he would be able to live without difficulties. The one thing he dreaded was – and that thing upset him perhaps even more than the thought of dying – that they might take away his land. Under Communism nobody owns land; it all belongs to the state. He had already heard or read about that. And what was life without land?

Now that he had calmed down a little bit and his heart was throbbing more quietly he looked around attentively to see what was going on. The men from Csurog, Zsablya and Goszpozgyinci put their heads together, discussed things and then searched again for familiar faces in the hope they might find more of them. They were not yet satisfied with the result. The kind invitation had gathered some five hundred men in the churchyard of whom they found only less than a hundred guilty; so they went on looking for some more among the deathly pale, shivering men; they even propped up the heads of some to get a better look into their eyes. Who were they looking for? Perhaps they themselves did not know. What was the great sin of the Temerin people that they had to pay such penalty for? No one had given an answer to this question. On confidential orders all the power was placed into the hands of the armed men; they carried out the retaliatory resolution of the AVNOJ II session. They were given free hands.

The impeachment was meant to be for those guilty of crime but Captain Ribarić who came to Temerin from Újvidék that morning without kicking up a fuss gave way to the vengeance-seeking population of the nearby Serbian villages, and had the innocent Hungarians executed without even passing a sentence.

The rain started drizzling. It was a cold, thin autumn rain. Those who had not brought warmer clothes with them started feeling the chill. András had so far not noticed the change in weather; the fear of dying had taken his

mind off it but now that he felt slightly more secure he started shivering. If he could have seen somebody around, he would have asked him to run off to Veronka to get a sweater from her, but then he immediately gave up this hopeless idea; there was no way one could even get close to the street front. The civilian who had been brought here on the motor bike was gone now. Was this perhaps the end of the reckoning of accounts?

One of the men from Csurog grabbed a fair, short man with a childlike expression of fear in his face.

‘Hajde ti! Poznajem ja tebe! Pa ti si fašista!’ he shouted at the top of his voice. ‘Come here! I know you well! You are a Fascist!’

‘No, I’m not. I’m István Horváth, the town crier; I’m the village drummer. What the hell do you want from me? I don’t know you!’

His remonstrance had no effect; he had to go over into the smaller group. The drummer seemed to calm down a bit and started cursing the whole world, naturally, in Hungarian. It was striking that he showed no fear.

This raised András’s suspicion and fear. Could he have got into the wrong group? What if the other one where the drummer was standing was the right one and the one that he was in was the one condemned to die? He tiptoed and tried to find Nyiszom, the party secretary, in the confused mass of people but he could not see him anywhere. The communist leaders, the Serbian peasants and the soldiers – all in a cluster – were discussing over something important and kept pointing towards the priest’s house.

One of them went over and shook the gate but it was locked. Then he went round to the window and banged on it. No movement was to be seen from inside. Was perhaps the parish priest not at home?

‘Break in the door,’ somebody suggested, but there was no one yet ready to do it. The bell-ringer up in the tower heard everything and put his head out of the small window. He could see into the yard and perhaps he saw the old priest as well. That must have been the reason why he started waving like mad; fortunately those below had not noticed him. They were focusing their attention onto the gate. It was exactly midday when they forced it open. Two armed men rushed in cursing wildly and, in no time, they were already dragging out the parish priest holding him by his arm; he was frightened to death.

When the men of Temerin saw their grey-headed priest in between the two red-starred partisans they were aghast. But nobody opened his mouth to say something and, true, nobody went up to help him either. They knew that it would have been all in vain. It would have been a senseless thing to do. These were people capable of anything dreadful.

When they went into Járek, the neighbouring village, the day before yesterday they tied a wire loop round the steeple and pulled the tower to the ground by a tractor. Then they danced a kolo round the ruins and then

carried away the bricks. In a day's time the Evangelical church had disappeared; after all there was no need for it any longer; the Swabian population had all fled and the newcomers that had come from Bosnia were all either non-believers, or else Muslims to whom the church was a thorn in the flesh.

When Zóni in the tower saw the priest being pushed out into the yard, he started shouting. He might have pulled the bells, too, had the partisans not sent a few shots towards him. True, he was not hit but he got such a fright that he stumbled down and opening the church door ran to the priest and fell to his knees in front of him.

4.

It was midday, a strange midday: the bells did not toll announcing to the succeeding generations the great victory at Nándorfehérvár. The present victory needed no bell ringing. It was not won in the name of God.

The village fell into silence; the streets were quiet, the gates remained locked. Only the neighing of the restless, entangled horses was getting more and more impatient. The Slovak partisan women and their companions got drunk in the pub at the corner where they had disappeared one by one. Somebody must have called them for they were arriving in a hurry, screaming and shouting in foul language.

The old priest was shoved next to András Molnár. András jumped towards him and helped him up. He could hardly stand on his feet; he breathed with his mouth open and rolled his eyes beseechingly. His lips were in constant motion, he might have been praying. But the one he was praying to had long forgotten to listen to the prayers sent up to him.

'Otvorite kapije! Open the gate!' sounded the command.

It was first the larger groups that had been arranged into lines of four and were directed out onto the stony road; they were facing the railway station. It was among them that both András and the priest were jostling, entangled with others. There were some four hundred of them. In the smaller group there were about hundred and twenty men. They were immediately surrounded by the Slovak partisan girls. A male partisan was scraping a melody next to them; he was screeching to it what must have been lascivious words because the girls neighed to it now and then. Their dishevelled dirty hair fell across their foreheads and twisted onto their necks. Some of them had not seen washing water for days.

When this group reached the stony road, they were given various tools from a lorry. Spades, shovels and pick-axes were thrown off and they were told to pick them up, for they would need them later.

András who witnessed all this was caught again by fear; could it be that those were the ones that would go to work and his group to the place of execution? They were given tools; his group did not get any, for they would not need them any longer. Others had noticed this too, and started shouting; some were wailing. The smaller group now in possession of the tools stood in the road in the drifting rain somewhat relieved, with almost a serene expression on their faces. The only thing they could not grasp was why those squalid partisan girls were surrounding their group.

‘Start going!’ the command sounded, and Nyiszom turned up again. András waved to him but the party secretary did not see him. The old parish priest started praying aloud and asked God to give him strength to bear the sufferings. Then he started the prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven...”

It could have happened in the very same minute that eighty kilometres north from here the Catholic parish priest in Horgos was dragged out from his home, but he was knocked off his feet and rolled about on the ground; then they tramped and jumped on him until he showed signs of life.

Gáspár Kopping was not executed in such a cruel way. He was separated from the group in Újvidék. He was made to work as a furnace man and tormented as long as he could bear it.

‘Start going’ sounded again, to which the larger group started. The men were filled with terror. They calmed down a bit only once they had passed the first crossroads and left the parish hall behind. They kept turning back and saw that the smaller group behind them – that is, those hundred and ten men with spades, shovels and pick-axes – were turned off the main road at the Grisza mill before the railway station. At the Kolter store they turned right, then at the next corner right again, and thus reached the street leading to the cemetery.

This moment the bells pealed out from the tower. Zóni had managed to sneak back and trudge up the tower; first he pulled the rope of the big bell and then of the small ones ringing them one after the other. The tolling of the bells sent out terrified, crying and wailing sounds and the bell tongues stammered horrors; their bronze, metallic ding-dongs bewailed the ones trailing on their death walk.

Then the bells fell silent; the large bell sounded longest because Zóni was clinging onto it: the partisans beat him with the gun-butt until he collapsed unconscious.

After this event the bells were silent for a whole week in Temerin; but even now when they start ringing they still mourn that dreadful day.

5.

What terrible and shocking documents would have been left for the future generations had someone taken shots of those days in Bácska from the air! They would have recorded terrified Székely settlers fleeing on the roads, groups of men in the streets being driven to the cemeteries and fresh mass graves in the graveyards. Who cared about them in those days? The bloody fighting at the war fronts had not yet ceased, yet the main battle was already over; the scattered troops of the Hungarian Army together with the German units were retreating according to plan.

The war activities had already stopped around Óbecse, and the units of the Red Army were heading north bypassing the city of Szeged; everywhere along the Tisza line shabby units of the Peoples' Liberation Army were crossing over, many of them paddling across the river on rafts others in small boats; they were shooting in Kanizsa, had entered Zenta, flooded Ada, Mohol and Péterréve and were joining the units that were emerging from the directions of Újvidék, Temerin and Bácsföldvár. Fighting was beginning to cease in the area of Topolya, Kishegyes and Feketics. There was no decisive leadership in the Hungarian Army; some remained loyal to their oaths given to the governor, others – the majority - were waiting for Szálasi, and they were ready to go on fighting although by then this was utterly senseless, and was leading to a blind alley.

The radio station in Budapest was taken over by the Arrow Cross party and it exhorted people to continue fighting, giving them now and then a flash of hope by claiming that the military situation might change and then things would turn to the better, that is, all would stay as it used to be. The seeds of believing in victory were planted into the most sensitive soil of people's souls and there was no denying that it felt great to believe in victory in those terrible days of bloodshed and the hours of downfall.

Nobody made any shots from the air of the roads lined by trees shedding their autumn clothes. The picture depicting the reality of this blood-drenched soil fell into a piece only many years later. Only very few had knowledge of what the connections were between the events at the moment of their happening; they were all well directed from the military headquarters that engineered things, including the genocide that was to be denied and of which all authentic data were still missing. The few that were left here and there, had also become obliterated in the same way as the corpses were buried, or rather, just shoved under the ground into nameless, unmarked graves. That was how it suited the regime.

Photographs were not taken; perhaps the angels saw what was going on; if there were any, then they were able to follow with attention the monstrosities

from behind the clouds. God did not look down. The clouds were low, the rain was drizzling now and then, and cold wind was plucking at the yellow leaves.

The sorrowful, disorderly group of the men from Temerin, some three hundred of them, were already walking beyond Járek on the road to Újvidék. Some were in moccasins and wore grafter work trousers and torn sweaters, some in fur-lined short overcoats, boots and fur caps, while others walked supporting themselves by walking sticks like the old Faragó who was past sixty. There was no need for him to report in the church yard, but curiosity made him go. He wished to see what the Serbs wanted from the Hungarian population of Temerin. He went there with calm conscience since no sins had weighed upon him. He was trudging here now with the others.

Armed partisans were guarding them, not many, perhaps seven of them. It occurred to András Molnár as it probably did to others: what would happen if they charged upon the armed men all of a sudden? They would overcome the seven of them in no time.

And what then? What would happen afterwards? Would they wrench away their arms and try to break through with their disorderly, frightened company and go so far as to reach the retreating Hungarian units? Or perhaps go home and stir up the village, bang on each gate and drive out the intruders with scythes and hoes? And then fall to the ground kissing the soil and holding onto it, never to give it away again. This was holy soil!

It was elevating and terribly beautiful to think this over. But what would happen next? András Molnár remembered his son and his palms started sweating. He was at home in his thoughts. He was not thinking of his home country or of his nation, but of his house in Temerin: the garden and the yard where Veronka might be feeding the poultry right now. This was what he was thinking about and his heart began to ache.

There was nothing they could really do. This was the end of the home country or the nation; what was there that these poor Magyars could achieve by playing the hero? They could not count on help from anybody. The retreating Hungarian Army, shredded by enemy combatants, had other problems to worry about. They could not go home either, even if they rushed over their guards, nor would they be able to free the other group that was directed towards the graveyard by the Slovak partisan girls escorted by the partisan who was playing his accordion.

Where did this enormous hatred against the Hungarians spring from? Fear clutched his throat, fear that was swelling in him because it struck him suddenly that they might be taken to the camp at Járek. That was the place where the Székelys straggling along the road, the Germans lagging behind and lost children were taken. This was from where the Székely kids were stealing out to beg, because the captives were not fed at all. When after a few

days the unfortunate people were given some watery bran, one of the mad partisan women had ground glass mixed into it.

To their surprise they were driven past the primitive concentration camp and continued in the direction of Újvidék; it was a forced march, to use the military term. Sometimes they were forced to run. They were forbidden to stop. Many of them relieved themselves while marching.

It was getting dark when they reached the railway junction at Római Sándok. They called this place the Iron Gate in Hungarian. This was where the railway lines from Óbecse and Titel intersected.

‘Come on, start singing you Fascist lot!’ the order came.

The men went on trudging with their heads down as if they had heard nothing; some of them were tottering from exhaustion; some were apathetic or ready to die, others were looking around all the time hoping for a chance to escape.

There could have been only one way for breaking out: joining forces and acting together; but the will for cooperation and the initiative was missing from them. They just walked like baffled sheep. Acquaintances and neighbours gathered together, forming small groups, and the solitary were left behind; but none of them was willing to sing.

It occurred to András that a processional song would suit the occasion; to beseech the Blessed Virgin Mary with a song – if the Virgin Mary existed in that crazy world. Or perhaps they ought to sing the song “Boldogasszony anyánk, égi jó patrónánk” with their full lungs, so that it went up to the skies and made her remember her poor Magyars. They would no longer pray to her for victory; this beaten up, humiliated and wretched army of Temerin men would only pray to her to protect them from evil and, if possible, lead them back to their homes.

‘Well? What’s it gonna be?’ the partisan cried out again in a hoarse voice. ‘Are you going to sing or am I going to make you run?’

None of them felt like running or had the strength to run. They would rather sing. It was Vince Kocsicska who started singing – he was a choir-leader in the church; he began in a metallic voice:

‘Kossuth Lajos azt üzente, elfogyott a regimentje..., Lajos Kossuth sent the message, that his regiment is wanting...’

The others were first taken aback, but then one by one joined in. They sang at the top of their voice, full-heartedly and with holy fervour: “Ha még egyszer azt üzeni, mindnyájunknak el kell menni! Éljen a haza...If he sends that message again, all of us must go! Long live the homeland...”

None of the partisans knew any Hungarian so they had no idea what the men were singing nor of who Lajos Kossuth was. The men sang with despair and their bitter tears rolled down their cheeks. The rain started again and their clothes were drenched. Those who had no hats had put on handkerchiefs

to protect their heads. They tied knots in the corners of the handkerchief in order to give it a holding. This was an old invention of the peasant mind; they did not invent it just for the occasion. But many of them did not have handkerchiefs either.

By the time they reached Újvidék the weather took mercy upon them; it stopped raining. It was not cold either. The wind that blew from the Káty pastures dried their clothes. The bridge across the canal and Temerini út were paved with yellow ceramic bricks: they had an eerie shine. The houses were mucky from the rain. It was getting dark. It gets dark early in November. They could not see light in any window. Street lights were very scarce in those days. There was no traffic in the streets; they did not meet a single cart, car or even a passer by. It was also possible that those who noticed the rolling of the singing and tottering procession got out of their way.

They went along Temerini út, turned right at the Búza tér, walked along the old Plevna utca, past the Matica Srpska, and then, at the Serbian Episcopal Church, turned into Duna utca. They did not go along the so-called boulevard as far as the Catholic Church; this caused doubts rising in them again. When they reached the bank of the Danube one of the non-commissioned officers halted them and quickly lined them up again on the bank. In the murky night, in the dim light, they could make out the outlines of Pétervárad with its stubby tower on which a clock showed the time. The road bridge and the railway bridge had both been blown up during the war in order to stop the advancement of the Peoples Liberation Army; reputedly, the Germans had undermined them and when their last units had passed over from Szerémség they destroyed the bridges. Now a temporary pontoon bridge served the traffic; it was built by the Soviet Army; advancing and endlessly streaming armoured troops were clattering across it.

The men from Temerin were lined up in two lines and they were told not to dare turn back. The partisans were obviously planning something. Another unit joined the partisans that were guarding them, but they were also few: six armed men with submachine guns. They went aside for a short while and argued about something; nothing happened in the meantime. Later two gunmen faced them and directed their guns onto them. They heard the breech bolt click behind them. Its specific sound gave away that the submachine guns were set up. They could also hear the magazines being replaced. They could expect their deathly firing any second now.

These were nerve grinding seconds and minutes: they were standing for a good half an hour petrified and ready to die while shivering in the cold of the breaking day. A cold wind from the Danube cut into their face.

‘Empty your pockets!’ came the order that broke the rigid silence.

Those who did not understand were told by their neighbours that they

had to take out everything they had in their pockets. They had to throw pocket knives, cigarettes, handkerchiefs and lighters or whatever their pockets were hiding onto the ground.

András took out his lighter and secretly slid it into his boot-leg. He also stuck three cigarettes next to it. He did not throw away his handkerchief either. After some hesitation he decided to keep his pocket knife too. Come what may. If he must die he should come to an end together with these things. No one was to inherit anything from him.

‘My dear son!’ he murmured soundlessly. ‘You will never see your father again. Revenge me my dear boy. The filthy pigs...’ His eyes filled with tears. His body was shaking with sobbing from inside him. The line wavered: almost everybody was crying. Perhaps it was still not too late to try and escape; make a run into the Danube; the machine guns would not be able to massacre them all. But where can they flee? Into which direction? The other side was also Yugoslavia. It was impossible to run away from here; it was too late now; they ought to have done it much earlier. Together with those who followed in their fears the retreating soldiers and hurried with their small belongings, fleeing along the army roads.

Every minute seemed like hours in this tense awaiting. The men had lost their feeling for time; many pissed in their trousers, others relieved themselves while standing there, for they were not allowed to stir. They were waiting for death.

And then came the increasing hum of an engine. Two military lorries wobbled over across the pontoon bridge with a jeep ahead of them. Going past the Hungarians lined up for execution they were turning onto the road leading into the town. The jeep suddenly stopped; somebody shouted in Russian for the commander. Was he asking for directions? No, he did not need any. What he wanted to know was why those civilians were lined up facing the river? What was, in fact, going on there?

‘We’re executing them,’ was the laconic answer, loud enough for everybody to hear. They were no longer left in any doubt as to why they had been lined up there.

‘Who are they?’ was the next question, that not only seemed to inquire but also to call to responsibility. ‘What’s their crime?’

‘They are Hungarians, Hungarians from Temerin!’

The Russian officer did not understand why that was a crime and, jumping off from the jeep, asked very firmly:

‘Which unit do you belong to? And who sentenced these men to death?’

‘They are fascists, each one of them.’

The Soviet officer switched on his torch and turned the light on the men; he walked past their shivering line. What he saw did not convince him that they were all fascists. He saw trembling peasants, Hungarians with honest faces.

‘Which court has passed their death sentence? Where is the judge’s verdict?’

The question and the calling to task sounded strange there in the morning dusk; after all, in Stalin’s time the Russians themselves committed such crimes; they exterminated millions without court sentences by shooting them in the back of their necks. This officer must have been law-abiding, or perhaps he was an idealist or a victim of tyranny, whose family or relatives had already been buried by the father of communism. Or perhaps he wished to redeem his own felony now when it was not a Soviet action in question and he dared to intervene, simply to confirm the superiority of the Soviet Army; who knows what his reasons were? The fact remains that he saved the lives of the men from Temerin.

‘There will be no execution!’ this was his clear-cut and unmistakable order. ‘I’m going to report this instance to the Headquarters of the Yugoslav Liberation Army. Do you understand? Take the men to work. Malinki robot!’

They stood there facing the river for another half an hour, but now the dawn looked magnificent above the water and life seemed great; they did not feel the cold, and pleasant warmth ran through their bodies; they felt like singing and their guards had not even had to ask them now; they broke into singing as they were crossing the pontoon bridge.

They noticed that they were no longer followed by the same guards. The lot that had driven them out of their village stayed on the other side, in Újvidék. Later they went back to Temerin, joined their units and went further the same day.

The ones to whom they had been handed over to drove them along the narrow path by the Danube without food or water. These soldiers wore the same red stars but they were more humane.

It was getting onto midnight when the dusty, tired and still singing group reached Tekija, a place of pilgrimage. There they swarmed about the church stretching themselves out at full length to regain some strength; many prayed kneeling next to the tree with the bulky trunk. That was supposed to be the tree that the Turkish Vezir made his horse kick on that August dawn when the Turkish army froze in this place. There was a mark on the trunk of the tree, a healed mark caused by a horseshoe; the picture of the Virgin Mary was hung above it, for it was thanks to her help that Christianity was saved. The Turks turned back from here as a defeated army. Tekija has been a place of pilgrimage ever since.

They ate some raw beets as they dug them out of the ground. There was sugar beet on the mountain slope; this was all that was left; everything that grew above ground had been torn off, tramped on or devoured by the passing troops.

There was a dug well in a farmyard; they drew up some water in a pail; some even washed in it, others went behind the straw stacks to relieve or

tidy themselves. The soldiers who were there to guard them did not bother about them; anyone could have escaped.

These were totally different partisans; they were Serbs from Montenegro: territorials, moustached, elderly and straight-backed. They had not even asked why their group had been collected. They were tolerant and less wild, though they swore profanely. Swearing was to them like saying good day in the Hungarian villages. It was part of their everyday speech.

They had the decency to let the worn-out people rest in a meadow. They were put up in an empty schoolroom for the night; they slept on top of each other without blankets; there was nothing underneath them either for they could not find straw anywhere around.

Their guards lit a fire in the schoolyard and sat around it. They took out bacon, sausages and tins; but they did not offer any of it to them, not even bread.

Early in the morning they set off again; there was no more singing; the high spirits that they were in when their lives were saved in Újvidék had by now evaporated; all they were aware of was suffering, hunger, cold and blighted prospects. They had asked several times where they were being taken but did not get an answer.

Then the next evening the procession of wobbling, hardly trudging men was stopped at Csortanovci.

‘We have arrived!’

There were many that just collapsed and lay unconscious on the ground for hours. Their strength lasted this far but no longer. There were some other groups already in the large schoolyard. There were some Serbs and Ustashe Croats. Now and then they could hear some German. They emptied two school rooms for the men from Temerin. The more astute, among them András Molnár, immediately took to making their “confines” cosier: they took in some bundles of hay from a nearby stack. The others followed his example and they laid down the hay knee-deep. Onto this came the worn out military rugs full of lice that were handed out to them later when they took stock of them. A clerk-like young Serbian civilian was helping out; he drew up a list, writing the names in alphabetical order and adding their age in brackets.

They asked for voluntary cooks; some twenty men came forward and then uncle István Kispéter and Dávid Jani were selected to organize the kitchen. They cooked every day dinner and supper from the meanly given material. They were given nothing but warm water for breakfast and uncle Jani boiled some dry leaves in it. They drank it like tea without sugar. It was bitter and tasted horrible; but at least it was warm.

They got hold of a big cauldron and hung it on an iron chain and lit a big fire beneath it. They collected everything that could be burned.

András Molnár was chosen as the confines’ commander with acclamation; it

was his duty to keep the schoolroom tidy. They had a person in charge of the yard, the old Uncle Matyi Hornyik; the rest of them went to build the railway lines and to clear the ruins. The railway station at Csortanovci was in ruins. This was the main track of the Belgrade railway line; it was from here that the lines branched out to Zagreb through Pazova, so it was urgent to get it repaired.

6.

The partisan heading the procession raised his arm and they halted for a moment. Those ahead of them went on along the road that led to the railway station.

Suddenly hope flared up in István Horváth and his hundred and ten companions; could it be that they would not be driven out of the village and that the partisans were really taking them for forced labour? What else would they need the pick-axes for, and the spades that they had shared out among them?

The rain drizzled on them in thick drops; this was not really rain but thickened fog; they could feel the shivering coolness of clothes on their skin. Later the drizzling stopped and the sun also came out from behind the clouds trembling as if it were afraid of what it was going to see.

Pointing to the right, the partisan showed them to change direction. Fear pierced their hearts; what was to their right? The football ground? The market place? And the graveyard. The realization of the latter cut through the men like alarming, sore reality. Horváth, the village crier, and obviously some others too, wishing to find hope, clung to the fact that if they were taking them to the graveyard they could have made them turn already at the previous corner; that was, after all, the shorter way to the graveyard. Like this, they could reach the graveyard only by a short byway. But why would they be going to the cemetery? Oh God Almighty, have mercy on us!

The wavering lasted only but a second. Those in the front turned obediently into the direction pointed out to them and continued walking towards the cemetery, that is, not yet the cemetery but the soccer-field to make another half-turn there towards the cemetery.

The street was quiet. It felt as if life had stopped. But the curtains quivered now and then, their corners fluttered, and behind them inquiring eyes were on the lookout to witness the last walk of the disorderly group of men heading toward their death.

Horses were neighing, and they heard shots fire behind them and the clattering of carts running at full speed along the main road; the Serbs from the neighbouring villages were going back home like men who had done a

good job. Well, they had good reason to be satisfied with themselves. Those who had come to Temerin for the judgement on foot or on bicycle were able now to find a cart with tangled up horses, free the terrified animals from the entwined harnesses and drive home. No one was ever to look for the carts, horses, cows and whatever else they had taken; the owners remained silent either because they were quietened for good or, in case they stayed alive, fear tightened their throats and paralysed their tongues.

These were hours of fear; the angel of justice was flying above the villages of Bácska and the words of the Bible – the Revelation of St John the Divine, Chapter 18, Verse 6 – seemed to have come to life: “Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double onto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled fill to her double...”

It was as if the highly confidential order on decimating the Hungarians because of Újvidék had been based on this biblical prediction. But this biblical curse was overfulfilled; there was no mercy and no reprieve to anybody that was Hungarian. To be Magyar in those days in Bácska meant absolute horror, as if the writer of the Anthem had a presentiment or had seen these days as prophecy when he wrote that the Hungarian people had expiated both for the past and the future; the future that was coming to fulfilment now.

The men from Temerin reached the gates of the cemetery in wet, drenched clothes as a flock of terrified sheep.

7.

István Horváth had celebrated his thirty-fourth birthday a week earlier. A year after the entry of the Hungarian Army he was also called up for retraining and was ranked as lance corporal. Since the time he was a young man he had been employed at the parish hall as the village crier and drummer and this was what saved him from being called up into the army later. The majority of his age group was taken to the front and most of them had never come back.

Now he was cursing himself for showing up in the churchyard. It was he who announced by beat of drum that it was compulsory to report. He could have asked the partisan Captain Ribarić to exempt him; he had done the captain some favours when they arrived in Temerin. He got him some bread that morning and took him as a present some new wine and grapes, too. But it had not occurred to him that reporting might cost him his life.

The procession was going past the Tényi pub. He saw for a second Tényi's red-haired, freckled son, Bandi, flash up at the window. Perhaps he ought to shout or ask help from him. If the boy were to go, run to the Captain at the parish hall he could still have time to take measures and save him.

‘Bandi’ he burst out in a rough and hoarse voice from fear.

The Tényi boy heard him but this had a reverse effect on him. He became panic-stricken and quickly closed the window and pulled in the curtains.

But Horváth still got an answer: one of the partisan women hurried up to him and gave him a good kick from behind.

‘What the hell are you shouting for, you dirty swine?’

The mind of the pursued, terrified man worked fast. It simply was not possible for them not to meet anybody they knew before they reached the cemetery. It was also unlikely that there was nobody responsible for these over a hundred men. It was not possible for such a terrible injustice to happen. It was not some kind of a miracle that he counted on but something palpable that he could firmly and securely hold onto; and naturally, onto his innocence, too. But then again, he was thinking bitterly, who cared in these days of bloodshed about the innocence of Hungarians? Even more: the innocence of the Magyar nation?

Was there no choice left for him then? Was he to bend his head like cattle on the halter and let the revenging butchers take him to the slaughterhouse?

He watched the partisan girls walking beside the procession and they spoiled his appetite for women for good. Who were they? Where did they come from? What was it that made the flame of revenge flare in them? How was it possible for a human being to demean herself so much?

István Horváth realized with his peasant mind the relations between things, and he was also aware of what the trigger of the revenge was. And yet, there had been a period in his life when he believed in the victory of the Magyar weapons, which also meant victory of Magyar justice as he used to say, but this was dictated not by his sober mind, but by his desire. His heart craved for the Hungarians to remain here. After all, the ancestors of this region were Magyars.

He did not carry a tool, for there were not enough spades or shovels for everybody. He tried to slow down his pace so that he could get to the back lines. He might be able to carry out the escape he was planning. After they had left the Tényi pub, it occurred to him that he should just run into a house. There was a chance that the shots the partisan girls would fire might not get him; after all, they could miss their target. By the time they recovered from surprise and uncocked their machine-guns, he might get a good head start.

The circumstances did not make his escape possible; two of the partisans, with guns resting nonchalantly on their shoulders, followed them at the end of the column; one of them had a rank. The other one, bored, was smoking a cigarette and was laughing as if he were going to the market somewhere back home around Kragujevac and was talking about the weather with a friend who had brought potatoes or eggs to the market.

He did not dare drop too much behind for he could still feel the stitch in his side; he was threatened twice already and if he went on being troublesome they might even shoot him with no qualms.

So he kept pacing, now in the last line now a bit ahead, helping some of the others. István Kasza in a wide-brimmed hat walked next to him; at every step the hat toppled on his head because it was too big for him. It crossed Horváth's mind that perhaps it was not his hat at all and he had just put it on in his great hurry. The old man staggered now and then, he must have found walking difficult because of his age or perhaps his legs hurt. He looked back at him gratefully with his watery eyes; he was like a shaggy, hungry stray dog. Whom did István Kasza ever cause any harm? He would not hurt a fly; he was a simple minded, uneducated man; he might not even be able to give account of what was happening around him in the world. He was a day labourer and lived at Prekosz; he had raised six children under very hard conditions. He taught them to be Magyars, respectable, honest people and here he was now being escorted to the cemetery to dig his own grave.

The village crier took a better look at who his companions were and looked around himself in desperation to try and find allies. But everybody was occupied with his own problems, misery and fear and did not bother about the others.

Szilveszter Faragó was a head taller than everyone else; he was walking straight as a ramrod without looking to the right or to the left as if he was seeing a sign to follow ahead of him. Pilgrims used to follow the sacred flag like this, singing hymns to the Blessed Mary. Imre Pálincás tottered along, limping and cursing; he was very foul mouthed. The small Szilveszter Zavarkó whom everybody just called Vizster was chewing his moustache; he was quiet and withdrawn. He might have been praying.

Did these men know where they were being driven? Or were they just walking with no feelings at all, since by now nothing mattered to them any longer? Were they thinking of their families, wives, sons or mothers? Or of that sacred and wonderful moment when they noticed the first Magyar soldier and started sobbing with delight?

A partisan caught up with them on his bike and with wild gestures said something to the non-commissioned officer accompanying their group; he halted the line. They argued about something with vivid movements of their arms but not loud enough for Horváth to be able to figure out what it was all about. Were they about to turn them back? Or perhaps they would still make them do some work on the soccer-field? Namely, they had just reached the soccer-field and if they were to turn left now then they would be on the marked green pitch; perhaps they would make them fill in something there – this was that he and all the others were hoping for. Those who had lit a

cigarette made use of the short rest. There were a few louder calls as well; acquaintances tried to find each other.

‘János, are you here? János Komenda?’

They were pleased to see each other and felt to be more secure if they found a companion or acquaintance in this hour of fear.

The man on the bike turned back and the partisan ordered them to go on.

‘Hajde, napred: Off you go! Aim for the graveyard!’ he cried out somewhat sarcastically. ‘That’s what the final goal of life is, anyway!’ He was trying to say smart things.

As if they did not hear him the men turned into the soccer-field. The non-commissioned officer cursed them and ordered them back.

‘Where are you going? Don’t you understand words? The graveyard I said. What the hell’s up with you? You don’t expect to play a soccer match, do you? On you go or else I’m going to shoot you!’

Had they had any doubts until now, this made them understand that there was no mercy for them. It might have been the man on the bicycle that came with the order to annihilate them. But who could give such an order and on what basis? This was nothing else but plain murder!

The man on the bike did bring their death sentence indeed; it was short; Likvidirati! Annihilate them! That was all it was.

Retaliation worked in the Peoples’ Liberation Army – the name that the partisans called themselves officially – with the thoroughness and brutality that they had learned from the Germans. They needed no court sentence, they could stand their enemy next to a wall anywhere and at any time; the soldiers never had to answer for their deeds to anybody.

Was anyone troubled by the fact that the peasants in Temerin could not to be reckoned as enemy? There was a case of organized assassination just as it was in Bezdán, Óbecse, Horgos, Topolya and the other places in Southern Hungary. In accordance with higher orders the Hungarians were to be punished by death, and that before the civil administration was introduced.

Sekulić was the name of the non-commissioned officer who was in charge of the handful of the escorting troop; he was from Kragujevac and had joined the partisans three years earlier. This was not the first time he took part in something of this kind. He himself had executed people before; last time they were Croatian Ustasha and he shot them in the back of their necks, but he had shot German SS Soldiers and Wehrmacht soldiers too; it made no difference to him who they were; he exterminated everybody wherever he had the chance. In the same way as his people were annihilated. He had witnessed the dreadful executions at Kragujevac for which the blame falls on the Germans.

The Germans drove the upper classes of the gymnasium out to the place of execution and to this their teachers, ready to die together with their

students, stood of their own will into the lines of those to be executed. He saw a German soldier throw away his weapon in his utter shock and join the line of those to be killed, for he had come to loathe his own nation.

He was steeled: whimpering, wailing and imploration did not bother him; it happened several times that men had fallen to their knees in front of him but this did not soften his heart. The enemy is to be destroyed! And these people were obviously enemy; they were fascists to the last one of them, for what else could they be if they were Hungarians. He loathed the Hungarians.

He was escorting them to the cemetery to make them dig a common grave. Let these impenitent fascists be finished off! He took out from the pocket of his jacket the watch that his father had given him for his birthday a long time ago. It was two o'clock. This reminded him that his men had not yet had lunch. It would be difficult now to have any before the completion of their task. The captain ought to have sent some food or something good to drink rather than orders. He knew well enough what he had to do; he had been a partisan for three years already.

'Hajde pesmu!' he cried out, and he was pleased with the morbid idea of making the men on their death walk sing. But nobody started singing; actually, some of them threw away the tools that they were given.

'Stop!' he halted the men. 'Pick up the tools! And if I see anything else of this kind, you're going to bite the dust in this place here!'

The procession of men, who were beside themselves for fear of dying, turned onto the road that led to the cemetery entrance; it was unpaved and therefore slushy and muddy from the frequent rain. Leaves were falling from the frost-bitten trees. Some of the barns that looked onto the street were already full of corn; in front of a house a cartful of pumpkins waited to be taken into the yard. The farmer must have forgotten about them or perhaps he too was walking in one of the processions. The gate of the house was open though, and a pussy cat was sitting outside the gate and looking around sleepily.

Zelenka, walking in the front line, threw his spade far away. The others followed his example; the tools fell about with a clatter and curses were uttered at the same time. Dark, foul words spattered about in towering rage but the command of the non-commissioned officer rose above them.

'Stop!' he bellowed and snatched off the submachine gun from his neck. He fired a burst into the air above the heads of the submissive men. They could hear clearly the rattling like hail on the wall of the nearest house.

'Pick up all the tools!' sounded the firm order but nobody moved. The partisan women were running around them with their hair streaming. They were cursing, too, with dirty mouths. Their language was worse than the men's.

'You rotten bastards, do you expect us to dig your graves?!' one of them was screaming hysterically and kicking with her boots the tools thrown onto

the ground. One of the men started crying almost idiotically and bent down to pick up a pick-axe.

‘Hajde!’ the non-commissioned officer urged the frightened Hungarians. ‘Pick up a tool, each of you, and off you go to the cemetery! It won’t take much longer now, you rotten fascists...’

‘Unless the German wonder weapon saves you,’ said one of the partisans mockingly. ‘Or Horthy, the sailor on horseback,’ interjected the dirty haired Slovak girl with the pock-marked face. ‘You can fuck his white horse!’

‘Off you go now. Head for eternity!’

‘No need to be afraid, Hungarians. Resurrection will come! But certainly not for you! You bastards will all rot here!’

‘Have mercy on me!’ a middle-aged man who looked to be a day labourer fell to his knees. He was Sándor Pálinkás with a face covered in three-day-long prickly stubble. He left three children to raise and a sick wife at home. ‘Have mercy on me, I’ve done nothing wrong. I like the Serbs!’

One of the partisans started kicking him. One kick went to his chin; he spat three of his teeth out and fell flat into the mud. He was dragged up onto his feet, kicked again and then they thrust a spade into his hand.

‘You’ll be the headman among the gravediggers, my fellow! Stand at the head of the column. Walk singing into death. Come on, let’s hear you sing, damn it!’

Nobody sang. The men stood there trembling. Some had already bent down and picked up the tools; others were still stubborn. The non-commissioned officer – whom the others called Stojan and who was in command of this sad procession and had at this moment absolute control over life and death – picked up one of the shovels with a muddy handle that had been thrown away and put it into István Horváth’s hand. Then he had a good look at him. He searched the face of the trembling man.

‘I seem to know you. What’s your name?’

He told him. He could not recognize his own voice. It already sounded otherworldly.

His name meant nothing to the partisan who had another good look at him and studied his features for long; then he waved his hand. It made no difference now. Nothing made any difference to these people any more. Guilty or not there was no mercy for anyone. They were all going to die. That was the directive he received. They were to make them dig a common grave and then they were to shoot all to the last man into the pit. The girls would see to that; they were primitively bloodthirsty. He was fed up by now and had more than enough of the war. He would have most liked to leave the whole thing; let them carry the order out without him; it was of no importance that he was in command.

It did not occur to him, not even for a second, that in fact, they were sending these Hungarians to death without a sentence. All he knew was that the same thing was going on all over Vojvodina where there was a Hungarian or German population. These people were paying the toll for Újvidék; the Serbian people did not forget; their hearts were seething with wild revenge; the ancestral blood feud went on living in their souls; the Balkans had not yet grown up to Europe and backwardness was still writhing in the dark abysses of passion.

Passing through the cemetery gate István Horváth was aware of the fact that his destiny was sealed. He ought not to be among these people; he had gone to the churchyard of his own will, obeying his own drumming, even though he could have stayed at home and then he would have nothing to worry about now; he could have gone away and hidden in the cornfields for weeks or he could have fled to Hungary; but he did neither because he had not committed any crimes except declaring himself to be Hungarian all his life.

He could not even say that he had the pleasure of reciting a Magyar poem on 15th March or 20th August since he had grown out of that age. He never even expressed his opinion to anybody because he was just a servant. True, he believed that the Hungarians would win the war and Bácska would remain part of Hungary for good. He sang the National Anthem with tears in his eyes in the church at the end of the service. That is, may be, what they ought to sing now. After all, Stojan podnarednik ordered them to sing; let the sounds of the Anthem rise, for the last time in their lives. It might be easier then. He started at the top of his voice,

”Isten áldd meg a magyart, jó kedvvel, bőséggel... God, bless the Magyars with good cheer and prosperity...”

‘Stoj! God damn you!’ the gunstock cracked down on him but by then no one could stop the prayer-like singing; everybody was singing with tears in their eyes and their faces turned up to the sky. This was the only thing left for them to hold onto, there was no other way of escaping; this remained their only consolation or desperate supplication; this was their last prayer to God. God, bless the Magyars! Bless this handful of them here in the cemetery gate at Temerin now. Save them my God if thou art in Heaven so that they could believe in you. You had thrust so much misfortune on them, why don’t you save now this handful of desperate men who are innocent? Would you let them fall prey to the ignominy of revenge? Look down here now onto this land that had suffered so much, onto this Magyar village; look how desperate, broken-down and humiliated they are in their integrity and Magyar identity!

‘Shut up!’ the commander shouted once more, but when they still went on singing he just uttered a curse. He, in fact, did not understand the words

but he knew that they were singing the Anthem. He had heard the melody before, so it was familiar to him from somewhere. Just as he knew the Serbian Anthem, *Bože pravde*, God of Justice; but they were not allowed to sing it now; the partisans had a different Anthem. That old one was the royal Anthem, but theirs was the Anthem of the proletariat or of internationalism and it was based on the song *Hej Sloveni!* But the melody of the other one still trembled inside him, the one that he had sung at school at the time when Yugoslavia was a kingdom. He was feeling a bit nostalgic now; the old times were still different.

He lifted his arm signalling them to continue marching. The Hungarians started now without any opposition; the tools that they had picked up were on their shoulders and they were singing the Anthem at the top of their voices.

Once the gladiators must have walked like this to the place of their execution: to the circus arena. These men were, however, no gladiators and they were not bold or despising death; they were just poor, broken-down and innocent people, the victims of a mad retribution. They were martyrs; martyrs that would be forgotten in a few decades.

Their names would not be engraved into stone; their next of kin would have to keep quiet about them; their children would have to bear the awful seal of intimidation and humiliation on their foreheads. There would be no crosses on their graves. They would just have soil thrown upon them and weeds would grow on top of them. Now and then someone would covertly light a candle above them, and mothers would bring their children secretly and murmur the Lord's prayer. Someone might say one day: "He lost his life for his country". "Which country?" the child would ask who studies in Serbian at school, writes in the Cyrillic alphabet and knows that Yugoslavia is officially his country. For Hungary? A country that he does not know and has never seen? A country that does not even stick up for him even just to console him as if it was ashamed of the fact that people of the same blood live in fear outside its borders?

The home country had forgotten about them; yet it had sent them onto the battlefield and expected them to recite patriotic verses on March the fifteenth, and to put out the flags with the national colours on holidays and then it left them in the lurch. The Magyar Honvéds marched in with promises on the eleventh of April in nineteen-forty-one and had left without a word surrendering them here to the retaliation of the enemy. Yet they were not responsible for what had happened in Újvidék. That was the old home.

'Stoj' the non-commissioned officer stopped them again. The Anthem went silent and the singing faltered for a second; but a hoarse voice broke into another song: "Boldogasszony Anyánk, Our Blessed Mother" (the former Anthem up to 1844).

The Blessed Virgin Mary might help them! They were now clinging to the power and goodwill of the Holy Virgin, expecting her to show herself suddenly as a wonderful apparition, and as the patron saint of Hungary and hoping that she would intervene. This hope was what they were cherishing while singing to her.

Some cried out and shook their fists to the sky: „My dear Virgin Mary, help the poor Magyars!” Yet they were aware that she would not help them. These Magyars condemned to death were aware of this and so were the partisans. Let them go on singing; it was not going to save them.

They stopped the column in front of the chapel. Stojan looked around. There was a clearing surrounded by cornfields by the road. That would be right for a mass grave. He pointed to the place.

“Tamo kopajte! Start digging over there!”

But no one moved. They were just standing with eyes full of tears and looks turned to the sky. The singing ceased like a shot-down, clip-winged bird that had fallen into the mud at their feet. It wriggled and withered there and then turned into nothing; it perished for ever.

They were digging, turning, scraping and shovelling the soil without any vigour. They were making hardly any progress. They could still hear from the village the neighing of the ownerless horses. Otherwise all was silent. This was the silence of the cemetery. The Slovak partisan girls eyeing Stojan uttered sniggers now and then; they must have taken a liking to him. They made no secret of it. They would have been willing to lie down with him even here among the graves. They craved for males even though they were not short of them.

The accordion player started squeaking his instrument; he was playing with full variations and flourishes. ‘One feels like dancing,’ Stojan thought but the place and the occasion were not really suitable. He ought to have stopped the accordion player from joining them. They did not need music and these people going to die would not be consoled or cheered up by the song.

He smashed down now and then with the gun-butt and urged the victims: go on, dig faster! He would have liked to go back to the barracks; tomorrow they would probably go further and complete the tasks they were entrusted with. Damn it, if only that hole would get deeper! He snatched a spade from a man’s hand and helped them dig.

‘Ovako!’ he thundered at them. ‘This is the way to do it!’

But no one could be angry with them for not doing it the right way, or for not hurrying to dig their own grave. To those going to die, every minute is precious; it is only now that they realize what values and beauties life has. He heard once, his comrades told him about a man who was condemned to death and asked the commander of the partisans to let him be the last one to stand

in front of the gun barrel. There were some twenty of those to be killed. The commander nodded his approval: let him see how the others wither and die.

When his turn came he went up to the commander, fell to his knees and kissed his hand in thanking him to have allowed him to live three minutes longer.

Oh my God, what price he had to pay for these dreadful three minutes! Could it have been worth it? Who knows, he himself might have done the same thing.

He turned all bitter and his mouth felt dry.

‘Dosta je!’ he shouted at the accordion player. ‘Stop it and clear away! This isn’t a wedding! To hell with you!’

All the looks were directed at him; this had upset him and he adjusted his waist-belt and his pistol, and sat down next to the nearest cross. A locust tree was shedding its yellow, coin-like leaves. One of the partisans started again goading on the terrified group of Hungarians digging their own grave.

8.

While he was digging István Horváth looked secretly around. He was weighing the possibilities for escape. He could run to the cornfield but that was at least thirty steps away. That would take a hell of a lot of time; the armed guards leaning indifferently with their backs against the locust tree but watching them alertly would mow him down ten times before he reached the cornfield. That seemed the only way for escape unless he shot off into the forest of crosses on the graves.

When urged, he bent down and picked up one of the spades thrown away and started deepening the pit. They were digging down a meter and a half deep; the spade threw out sandy soil. Underneath the sand was clay which turned off the shiny spade like slices of bacon. This was more difficult to dig and there was no space for them to move.

Horváth, the village crier, was not used to this kind of work; it was his wife Rozika who usually dug even their garden. He himself was the son of a peasant; his father owned three acres of land that he tilled but he also went to work by the day or rented land on a fifty-fifty basis. As a child he, then called the small Pisti, used to go with his father and later, as a farm-hand, he entered the service of Zelenka, the large farmer, but he could not stand this menial position for long. He said he would rather run away than stay a servant.

His godfather, Morvai, the village mayor’s counsellor had put in a word for him and this was how the boy became employed as a general servant at the parish hall. He swept the yard, tidied the rooms and washed the windows. He did not get good wages and was not even put onto the pay list; he was

told that he could become a municipal employee if he learnt to speak Serbian and completed his service in the army.

He had learnt Serbian and had been a soldier, too. In nineteen-thirty-five he already figured on the pay list as a regular assistant and two years later he was employed as the drummer in the status of town crier, and became a public servant; next to a modest salary he was supplied with clothes, too. That was when he got married. Following his father's death he moved into his house in the Gyepsor street. If he did not have to drum then he worked as a delivery-man helping the other town criers. There were four of them altogether; three of them were rather old, as Yugoslavia had inherited them from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. They did not even speak Serbian. This was the reason why somebody was needed for the post who could speak the language of the State. This person was István Horváth with whom everybody was satisfied.

He was polite, obliging, and had self-respect; he shaved every second day and his clothes, hair and shoes always looked tidy. It was him that they sent over to the Kalmár restaurant when the clerks, scribes or the town clerk felt like a drink, food or ice in the summer months.

When in April nineteen forty-one, on Good Friday, the Hungarians came back to Temerin he was the one who managed to find a tricolour and put it out onto the church tower to announce that they were in Hungary again.

Could this be the reason for his being here now? But who knew that he had put out the flag? Admittedly, later, during the Hungarian times – by when the body of representatives had promoted him to be the main town crier – he often talked about this, making it sound a deed of valour. The thing did not really need a heroic act since hardly any Serbs lived in Temerin. And the population of the dobroljci in Sirig had been driven away. Only a few loitering men were picked up later by the police and they locked them into the municipal prison; but they were not maltreated there at all. He was their translator. Was this the reason perhaps for his being here? he wondered while wiping the sweat off his forelock.

The beads of perspiration on his forehead were cold as ice. This was the perspiration of death. And his whole inner body was trembling. He kept looking into the direction of the village in vain, hoping that the messenger would turn up hot-footed, like in fairy tales, waving a white kerchief as a sign of their being pardoned. He knew that he could not count on being pardoned. This group of partisans was not here to pardon them but to kill them. They were here to destroy and retaliate. And the Slovak women were no different; they hated the Hungarians even more than the partisans.

What crimes did he commit? And the others, what were their offences? What misdeed did the two Árvai boys do, for instance, who had been

Hungarian soldiers but could do nothing about that, then Jancsi Nagyidei who was looking around himself at a loss and was trembling just like himself or any of the others? Old ones and young ones, all of them Magyars tormented and worn-out by work who had never harmed anybody.

The old Hévízi knelt down by a heap of soil and prayed with trembling lips and his face turned to the sky. He was praying silently in himself.

‘Dubre jedno! You scum!’ one of the guards kicked him in his kidney, the man with the partisan star, named Grubišić; he lived as a dobrovoljac just outside Temerin and knew well almost everyone in the village. ‘You dirty bastard! We’ve had enough of your ostentatious display of piety. You’ll all croak here. We’ll exterminate every Hungarian; we’ve had enough of you, you rotten fascists!’ and to give more emphasis to his words he struck him with his gun butt sending him flat on the ground.

Hévízi collapsed with his head covered in blood; he fell unconscious and had to be dragged aside by his feet because he was in the way of those working round the grave. They pulled him under the locust tree and left him there; no one bothered about him any longer. István Horváth looked at him enviously, thinking of what a wonderful chance for the old man that was to get away. Had he been in his place he would know what he should do. The old Hévízi, of course, was not thinking of that because he was unconscious, perhaps even dead by now since the blow on his nape had been terrible.

His case made the others move around a bit faster. None of them wished to meet his fate. There was still a tiny sparkle of hope left in all of them: all this might just be intimidation, and once they had finished with the common grave then they would be let home again. Or they might even make them bury the pit so that no traces were left of this terrible unlawful act. But who would call these men to responsibility? They were the winners. And the winners are free to do anything.

The wheel of the time was turning fast as if death was in a hurry: the pit was already deeper than a metre; and it was a metre and a half wide. A few more minutes and they would have finished it, and then.... No, they must not think of it; town crier István Horváth would have liked to howl even at the thought of it. They ought to ask for help. He remembered again the song that they had sung a little while ago about the Goddess of the Magyars who is the patron of all the Hungarians.

Why did she not send her angels down to set them free? One with a flaming sword would suffice to frighten away these infidels who had death implanted into their soul because they had seen nothing but the horrors of death and inhumanity and now each particle of them was gasping for revenge.

‘My dear Blessed Mary!’ he heaved in himself and repeated the words of the hymn but the angel did not come down from the heavens; the sky

remained tin grey and indifferent. A bird started singing on the locust tree and this was their only consolation. The sulky accordion player kept silent, overwhelmed with shame; he had put down his instrument; the Slovak girls' urging him to play was futile because he was afraid of the lance-sergeant. 'To hell with such sentimental idiots' he thought to himself and only shrugged his shoulders to the girls' egging him on.

'Ne svira mi se. I don't feel like playing,' he kept repeating and throwing berries from a privet bush at the men digging the common grave.

Finally they finished the job and Stojan lined up their staggering, deranged group. He had them drag the unconscious Hévizi among them; let him share the fate of the others. They were lined up at the brink of the pit.

'Undress!' Stojan ordered. 'Take off all your clothes; clothes, shoes, everything.' They were to stand stripped to the skin at the edge of the grave. They would not need clothes any more. 'You won't need any clothes there where you are going!' he sneered meanly at which all the others gained courage and roared with laughter; one of them ran to the men waiting to be killed and started kicking them among storms of abuses.

'That was enough!' Stojan stopped him. 'Off with your clothes, quickly! We haven't got time. It'll be dark in no time.'

Indeed, evening was nearing; a misty greyness loured over the graveyard and fog was sifting. The small bird had fallen silent on the locust tree as if it had been frightened of the things it had seen.

Getting their clothes off went with difficulties; some had their legs tangled into the trouser legs, lost their balance and fell to their knees. Finally the clothes were towering in a heap: moccasins, boots and worn down shoes; socks, filthy and smelly foot-rags, shirts, underwear that they had already wetted in fear; sweaters, knitted jackets, shabby coats, fur-jackets all in one heap.

The partisans started grubbing among them; some chose a better pair of shoes; the trousers they threw to the side but they fought over the knitted jackets. Once Christ's clothes were divided like that and the angel did not appear from the sky to help them either. These were the thoughts of the town crier, and with a great sigh he resigned himself to his fate.

His resignation, however, lasted only for half a minute. His instinct for life flared up again. He mustn't die! He must survive! And he put all his trust into this. But how could he escape? Which way should he run? It was all the same now. If he stayed here he would also be shot into the ditch together with the others. If he ran the bullet would still reach him. But it was better to die while trying to escape; even if there was just a slightest grain of hope he must try it.

'Istvánka, my darling little son,' said a riven voice. Outcries followed this as if the barrage of silence had been burst: 'Blessed Virgin Mary, help us!

Mária, my darling! Mother dear, help me!’ Names, the names of loved ones were uttered for the last time, sighs and prayers came that the rattling of guns tried to suppress.

First the guards fired at the ones closest to them, and then the machine guns started firing in the girls’ hands. They were shooting amid bouts of laughter; it was obvious that they took great delight in killing. Stojan shot the old Hévízi with his pistol at the back of the neck and then kicked him into the pit which was already half full. Horror floated in the air, the odour of blood was spreading and the bitter smell of gunpowder stung the eyes.

Horváth fainted into the grave which was already sodden with human blood. A corpse fell onto him; he managed to crawl out from underneath it and hoist himself over the brink of the grave and then with a mighty leap sprang out of the pit.

The guard that was closest to him shrank back to see him. It must have been horrendous: a man covered in blood jumps out from among the corpses, he is howling something with his face distorted, and runs like a billy-goat, hopping and zigzagging among the crosses on the graves. When he recovered he fired his gun. But by then the girls’ machine guns were also rattling and the ricochet bullets kept bouncing off the stone crosses.

The town crier escaping stripped naked was running at incredible speed; he stumbled and jumped up again, then went on running panting and breathless, exerting himself to the utmost. His life was at stake and this enhanced his strength. Fear gave him strength. The bullets sizzled around him; some of the rounds thrashed the soil in front of his feet but none of the bullets hit him. He attached himself to good fortune. This was to happen so, perhaps, for the reason that a witness was left to tell the tale of the horrendous and ghastly mass murder.

His running among the crosses and tombstones that lasted hardly longer than a minute seemed like years to him. They did not run after him; they did not chase him but they emptied their full magazines of bullets after him. Then the shots ceased; his pursuers could no longer see in the thickening darkness the escaping naked man and their attention turned back to the ones still alive. There must have been some ten of them kneeling and imploring at the edge of the grave which was already full with bloody, rattling, dying bodies, writhing with agony.

They were mowed down; the sounds of the kolo neighed up on the accordion at once and bottles of pálinka appeared. The girls smelt of sweat and stank; their greasy, unkempt hair hung to their necks in wisps; they were arguing holding close together: who was going to draw the soil over the massacred men, for they could not leave unclosed the bloody grave in which some men were still alive; they could hear them moaning.

At the end Stojan summoned the three partisan men and he himself picked up a shovel to cover the dead. The moaning stopped only when there was a thick layer of earth on top of the bloody corpses.

Ferenc K., who lived right next to the cemetery, was fourteen at the time. He was sick in bed at home. He kept his eyes on the hour hands. The machine guns rattled for twenty minutes in the cemetery.

The Eyewitness

1.

The world dimmed before his eyes; all he could see were burning red spots; his throat had dried out and everything turned into a blur. Then he ran into a hedge. This was the end of the cemetery. He climbed up on the top and threw himself over.

He plopped down into an unfamiliar yard. A line of houses had been put up by the cemetery reaching as far out as the market-place. It was one of these houses that town crier István Horváth ended up in.

He landed so unfortunately that he sprained his left ankle. He raised himself to his feet with great difficulty. He was aware that he must not stay even a minute lying down there in spite of the fact that he would have welcomed a rest. They might come after him, and try to find him in the neighbourhood, and then they would come across him easily in this spot. He must hide somewhere for he had no strength left to run any further. He was cold, too. While he was fleeing he could not feel the wet cold and the end of October evening that stuck to his skin because he had been overheated with excitement; but now he started shivering.

He looked around but although he knew the whole village he could not tell whose house he was in. As the town crier he had access to every house; but now he was not able to see the house: the heaps of corn-stalk and the huge straw-stack hid it from his eyes. He could clearly hear a dog barking angrily in the first yard. It was wildly scratching at the fence that separated the back yard; it could feel that there was a stranger in the stack yard.

He would have liked to hush the dog but he was scared to go any further. If the dog went on barking like that it would raise the attention of its master, and he did not know who the man was; he might be someone who would run and report him to the partisans and that would be the end of him. He must disappear for a while. But where to? Where should he go unclothed as he was?

He was getting colder and decided all of a sudden to climb into the straw-stack. If he managed to bury himself deep into it he would be well protected and also, perhaps his pursuers would not find him there. If he was pursued at all. He could see no signs of it so far. He had heard the round of shots fired after him, but then there was silence and the sound of the accordion also seemed to come from far away. Now this noise also seemed to have ceased. He was surrounded by the silence of the graveyard.

The village also became quiet with only the dogs barking in far away yards. The silence made him shiver. He pulled and tore at the straw and then pressed himself into the loosened hole. At first he went in head first but he

did not feel good in this posture and crawled out to enter it backwards. Then he tidied the stack around his head so that it would not catch the eye.

In half an hour's time he fell asleep. He woke up to the dog barking. The watch-dog was standing right next to the straw-stack, barking persistently. It felt that a stranger had entrenched himself into the yard. The owner woke with a start to the restless barking, and came out with a lamp in his hand to look around the yard at about midnight; he looked even under the shed but could not detect anything suspicious.

'Hush Bobi!' he said trying to calm the dog but now that his master was round it seemed to have gained more courage and went on barking vehemently. 'Is there anyone around?' the man asked in a stifled voice. Since nobody answered, he went round the yard, looked behind the corn-stalk heaps, into the stable, into the sty and then went back to bed.

But Bobi could not calm down and would not move away from beside the straw-stack. It began barking even more desperately, it was almost rattling and would run to the kitchen door now and then to try and wake his master again with his yelping, and ask him to come and help. Finally all the dogs in the neighbouring yards also started barking, and soon the whole village grew restless from the yapping dogs.

If only the partisans did not notice this terrible barking. If he were in their place and were looking for somebody, the town crier thought to himself, then these restless dogs would make it easy for him to find the trail. But these partisans, intoxicated with pálinka and blood, were resting on their lairs with clear conscience. They did what they had been ordered to do; they revenged themselves on the innocent Hungarians, and now that their vengeance had been satisfied they could sleep peacefully. Was history, perhaps, to call them to responsibility one day?

The master, Kálmán Máté, was too anxious to go back to sleep, so he decided to come out into the yard once more. This time he did not bring a lamp with him but came clasping a pitch-fork in his hand. He stopped by the straw-stack for he had noticed some straw scattered about that he had not given any importance to at the first time.

'Is there anybody here?' he asked in a calm, stifled voice. 'I'm going to thrust the fork into the stack!' he said threateningly.

'It's me,' whimpered the terrified town crier in a voice that was hardly audible.

'Who's that me?' said Kálmán kneeling down by the stack and searching into it. Their hands met.

'István Horváth, the town crier. You know me, don't you?'

Kálmán grumbled something. He stood up and walked around the yard wanting to know for sure whether there was anyone else near by. It was

possible that somebody wished to deceive him. Not for a second would he put the fork down from his hand.

When he was back, he asked,

‘How did you get here, Pista?’

‘I ran away from the graveyard. From the common grave. Sorry, but I don’t even know whose yard this is where I’m sheltering? Who are you?’

‘Kálmán Máté; your father and I were pals. You know me, don’t you?’

‘How on earth would I not know you, uncle Kálmán! For God’s sake help me, please. Hide me somewhere. They wanted to execute me. All the others were shot dead. There were over a hundred of us driven out to the cemetery. I managed to get away. I’m chilled to the bone here. I’m all naked.’

‘Quiet!’ whispered the old man because he heard some noise. A motorbike went puffing down the street. When the sounds died away he said,

‘I’ll be back straight away.’

He went into the house and came back shortly with a rug over his arm. He had a lamp as well this time. He opened the stable door, took the rug inside and then helped Horváth out of the straw hole.

‘Run into the stable and wrap yourself into the rug for it’s very cold. Are you hungry?’

‘Thirsty rather. If you’d happen to have some pálinka in the house.’

‘I’ll bring some. You just go in. And you, you shut up now! We’ve had enough of your barking!’ he said to the dog bustling about him with a yelp now and then, after which it shut up.

Town crier Horváth wrapped himself into the rug and then stretched out on the plank-bed. It was nice and warm in the stable where the two horses and a cow were upset by the appearance of the night guest. Uncle Kálmán came with the pálinka in a green-bellied bottle; both of them took a good swig from it.

Máté was in his sixties. He too had heard the rattling of the machine-guns from the cemetery; well, his house was next to it, but he did not put his head out from the attic where he was hiding all day long. He did not have the courage to go to the churchyard where all the men were summoned so he went up and stayed by the chimney. Aunt Róza, his wife, spent the day sitting on the bench by the oven praying over her rosary and asking for the terrible threat to pass from over their heads. Pista Újlaki, the neighbour, thumped on the small gate twice, even shouted for her husband to go but uncle Kálmán did not even stir up in the attic. He had made up his mind not to go anywhere. If they wanted to kill him they should come and fetch him; he might as well die here in his own place. In the house of his ancestors.

‘Did you see Újlaki?’ he asked, his moustache trembling.

‘He was shot into the pit next to me.’

‘Tell me...How awful.’

'I can't talk about it. Look how I'm shaking with cold. And I've already wrapped myself into the rug. It's from horror that I have the shivers. I can't talk about it. I may never be able to tell about the things that happened. They may not even be true; maybe I just dreamt them, and I'd just woken up now...'

'Who else was there with you?'

'I don't even know any longer, uncle Kálmán. Let me have a bit more of that pálinka. I'll drink myself dead to forget all about it. Shh!' he startled, and horror flared up in his eyes. 'Didn't you hear? The small gate snapping? Somebody 's coming, perhaps...'

With his face deathly-pale, he was staring at the stable door. The old man went up to it, unbolted it, looked outside, then looked around the yard but he did not see anything. The dog was peacefully sleeping in front of the entrance guarding the locked gate.

'No one has been here,' uncle Kálmán said. 'Lie down and have a good sleep, Pista.'

'Can't you hear it? I can hear it again. Steps, as if somebody was approaching.'

Kálmán grabbed the fork. That was the only weapon he had. Their eyes, numbed with fear, were fixed on the door. The town crier started shivering again. Shuffling steps were approaching and then they stopped in front of the door; the lock clicked and squeaking, the door opened slowly.

Kálmán put the fork down with a great relief. It was Rozi, his wife, standing in the door in a long shirt and a shawl over her shoulders.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, and then she looked suddenly aside when she noticed István Horváth's nakedness that showed even though he was wrapped up in the rug.

'Come inside and shut the door,' her husband stretched out his hands and grabbing her firmly pulled her inside the stable. The dog also sneaked in next to her feet.

'Jesus Christ! Blessed Mary!' she started wailing, rolling her eyes.

'Stop lamenting! Someone might hear you.'

'Who's that man?' she pointed to the town crier who was beginning to feel a bit warmer.

'He ran away from the cemetery. From the grave. The partisans had driven the village folk out there and shot them; he, too, was among them. He is Pista Horváth. You know, don't you, the town crier?'

'Oh, my God, Pista! Is that really you? I wouldn't have even recognised you. Oh, Holy Spirit, have mercy on us!'

'Stop this, now! You'd better go and make some tea. I'll go and get some old clothes for him to put on. And then we'll see. We ought to get a word to his wife. You will go to her in the morning. And now, go and get some tea.'

Overcome with fear she did as she was told. Her husband and the town crier were sitting on the plank-bed silently. There was nothing they could talk about. There are moments in a man's life when it is better not to speak. This must have been one of these moments. One of the most difficult and most terrible things that could befall a man.

In the suffocating, almost choking smoke they felt like in a void, as if they had been plundered. Kálmán was smoking shag; he himself cut the leaves – those that he had hidden from the eyes of the exciseman – with a kitchen knife on the small chair. The tobacco was still slightly wet and for this reason choking as if it were a rough brand. They washed down the bitter smoke with pálinka whose strength ran right through them and numbed their feelings that kept gushing forth. It felt like taking a pain killer. But the pain remained, and they felt as if their plundered selves were jugs with a hole in them that had no longer any function left in life; no delight and no consolation either.

It was just now that they had grasped the fact that they had lost the war. Not the two of them or the people in Temerin but the Magyars; the country, the sacred land that every single fibre of their being was attached to. It was now that they realized that their whole life had suddenly become meaningless: empty and useless. The massacre today and things that would befall them, when they become burdened by oppression again, were only consequences of the lost war.

They were drinking and crying quietly. In the half-light István Horváth, the town crier, broke the silence in a snivelling voice while tears were coursing down his cheeks.

'I've never known until now what a sweet feeling it is to be Magyar. I had only been dreaming about what it means to be really a Magyar. I was born here, I went to school here. I'd never even been to Hungary. I'd only heard tales about it. And then one day the Magyars came to me also. The home country came to fetch me. I'd rather have lost one arm or been disabled if only the mother country had stayed here with me for ever. Or I had rather died; together with the others. How can I go on living now? And why should I go on living, what for? If I'd only died there together with them in the pit... For that is the only thing that remains for us: the graveyard ditch!'

'We must go on hoping,' Kálmán groaned, and his voice revealed that he, too, was fighting down his tears.

Aunt Rozi pushed in the stable door noiselessly with her knee, and entered through the narrow opening with a big mug of tea. She went up to the town crier who took the mug from her with trembling, shivering hands. He smelt it first and then tried it. It was hot, so he drank it in small gulps, and this warmed up his whole body.

She did not go back to the kitchen, and the dog also stayed with them in the stable. There was a long silence.

Then suddenly they were caught by fear. It was the dog that started trembling first. It ran to the door and gave a howl.

‘Turn off the lamp!’ Kálmán signalled firmly to his wife and she, having kicked off her slippers, ran to the lamp and blew it out. They could smell the stink of the petroleum and the smoking wick. One of the cows uttered a grown and let out from his bowels what was left of the food with a big splash. The pungent stench of this spread about the whole stable.

Rozi groped her way back to the plank-bed. Máté, puffing heavily, was feeling around himself till he found the pitch-fork. They waited. The dog had calmed down and started scratching the door; he wanted to go out into the yard. Máté opened the door a wee bit, and it squeezed out and ran around the whole house barking loudly. Then it came back like Noah’s dove with the news and the green olive leaf: there’s nobody in the yard and there’s no stranger lurking around beyond the garden.

‘Shall I light it again?’ and her hands felt for the matches on the windowsill.

‘Please do, or did you get cold feet?’ Máté chuckled hoarsely but when in the light they searched each others’ faces they realized that all three of them were pale with lips trembling. It was the pálinka that calmed them down again.

‘Well, let’s not sit up all night. After all, you’re not dead, thank God!’ said Máté burping. ‘Have a good sleep, and the world will look different to you too, tomorrow!’

‘If there is a world that is worth living in for us Magyars!’ Horváth grew desperate again; suddenly he broke out sobbing inarticulately and blubbering.

‘You go inside!’ Máté told his wife and Rozi slipped out quietly. ‘You too!’ and he kicked towards the dog. Then he bolted the door again and leaned with his back against it. ‘Good Lord! Oh, good Lord!’ he burst out. ‘What have you done to us?’

3.

Early in the morning, just after dawn, Máté went around the yard first; he looked distrustfully under the shed, and went out even to the garden to have a good look around, and then threw a handful of corn to the pigs – they would get the pig-wash from Rozi later –, and only then went up to the stable door and knocked on it with his fist; but more quietly than he would normally do.

‘Who is it?’ Horváth asked in a muffled voice.

‘Well, who do you think it is? You suppose that they’ve come to get you, do you?’ he tried to joke but his face was wry and his voice grated with fear.

After Horváth let him in, he fastened the bolt again and asked,

‘Have you heard any news?’

‘Nothing,’ he shrugged his shoulders. ‘When I’ve fed the animals I’ll go to the shop and sniff around a bit. Until then just set your mind at rest. There’s no one looking for you. Do you hear what I’m saying? Shall I send a word to your wife?’

‘Oh thanks, God will bless you for it! Let her know that I’m alive. She might have hung herself in her grief since yesterday. She has no idea where I could be. She could also send me some decent clothes to put on. Some warm things. I can’t go on wearing yours. Look how I look in them!’ And he turned around comically in front of Máté.

‘Don’t play the clown, Pista. You were struck with dismay yesterday!’

‘Please don’t be angry with me; I think I’ve gone nuts! How can one sanely bear all this?’

‘Don’t torture yourself, rather help me with the bedding. I’ll take the manure to the dunghill; and while I’m at it, I’ll keep the gate to the street locked. Don’t worry, no stranger will come in here.’

He shut up suddenly because the door screeched open, and Rozi slipped in; she had some bacon and a slice of bread under her apron.

‘I’ve brought you some breakfast. I’ll make some tea later. Where’s the mug? We forgot it here last night.’

She took the empty mug and Máté pushed out the manure while the town crier spread the fresh bedding under the animals. When he finished the things he was asked to do, he started eating. He got some tea as well. When Máté left, he shut the stable door carefully.

‘Bolt the door from the inside; I’ll knock when I’m back. Don’t let even the dog inside, Pista!’

Horváth put his ear against the door. He listened intently for a while. He heard the small gate creak: Máté was on his way to the village to take the news to his wife and to have a look around; and if possible, to bring some news and sum up the situation. It occurred to him while he was walking to the market place in his fur-lined winter coat and fur hat that all the things that Horváth had told him about the mass execution were just a nightmare. He could go now and have a look around; all he had to do was turn left at the first corner and he would get straight to the graveyard. But he dared not go in that direction.

At the Brachtl inn he stopped and lingered for a while thinking whether he should go in; but he shook the door handle in vain; it was locked. So he went on, and as he looked around, he realized that he was just about all by

himself in the street. Every gate was locked. Had the whole village died out? Or could it be that the partisan weapons had been killing people not just in the cemetery but in the houses too? Great fear struck him. Losing his breath, he reached the main street and stopped in front of Péter's small-ware mercery. There was nothing to look at in the shop-window for it was quite empty, but he was just standing there because the reflections of any kind of movements around the parish hall opposite were reflected clearly in the window. He was looking intently: three partisans were walking up and down with careless negligence under the trees shedding their leaves; they had guns on their shoulders and hand grenades in their belts. One of them had new boots on, Hungarian gentlemen's boots; he must have freshly acquired them. Spoils of war: he probably got them off some officer's feet.

A car, puffing loudly, was coming from the direction of Újvidék. The old motor was blowing out clouds of smoke. It did not stop but went on towards Óbecse. Apart from this the street was quiet and felt uneasy: alarmed houses lined up in the foggy morning, sullen and closed windows; trees shaking their fists and shedding their leaves holding onto the soil panic-stricken, clinging to the land that had not been Hungarian for two days already.

Some of the houses had the Yugoslav tricolours with the red star hanging on their front like wet tatters. Under the bright red foliage, which seemed to be burning without smoke, lay the looming black remnants of a straw-dummy dressed up for masquerade. The partisans dressed it in German uniform to make it look like Hitler and took it round the village and then they tore it apart, trod it into the ground and set fire to it. That was how they got rid of their wild, storming rage. Then they started dancing, first just with drinking bout and not the murderous hatred that overcame them later like a whirlwind.

Máté pulled his overcoat closer to him, and then with his head down crossed over to the other side of the parish hall, walked towards the Kastély utca and cut across it in front of the Horváth dentist's clinic. He knew where Horváth, the town crier lived; that was where he was heading first so that he could speak to his wife.

He looked around before he entered the simple peasant house with its gate painted green. He did not see anybody in the street. He pushed down the door handle but the gate was locked. He banged on it with his fist and waited. Then, because no one had turned up, he sneaked to the window and rapped on it. Someone must have heard it because the curtain fluttered slightly. The town crier's wife peeped through the split. Her face looked aghast and distorted from fear.

In a few minutes the kitchen door was opened, slippers clacked along the corridor and the gate was opened, too. But only a fraction.

'Let me in. I've news from Pista!'

'Who are you?'

'Kálmán Máté. Don't you know me? Come on dear, let me in. Don't let me be seen here.'

She opened the gate wider and Máté scurried straight into the kitchen. She followed him in a flurry. She had a shawl on her head; the paleness of her face revealed that she had spent the night without sleep. Her eyes were swollen red from crying.

'What is it you know?' she caught Máté's furry coat. 'What is it you have to tell me? Is he dead?'

'He has escaped, thank God!' and Máté also heaved a big sigh of relief now that he had passed the message onto her.

'Many said that he had been seen among those that were driven out to the cemetery. Everybody was shot dead there.'

'Yes, he was driven out but he managed to escape. He climbed out of the pit, managed to elude pursuit and then hid himself in the straw stack at my house. I found him there last night. There's nothing wrong with him apart from being fear-stricken; you can believe me. That's what I came to tell you my girl this early in the day.'

She started crying; the sobbing was shaking her whole body and a stream of tears was running down her face.

'Well now, please come and sit down,' she said when she calmed down a bit, and pulled out a chair for Máté. 'Sit down, or I won't be able to sleep. I had a terrible night. I thought I would never see my poor husband again. What wrong had that poor man done? Whose way was he getting in?'

'Being a Magyar, that was his sin. For this is now a deathly sin. Hush, why don't you stop crying now? Better go and find some clothes for him; he came all naked to me.'

'Oh, my God! Sorry, I'm lost completely.'

'Anything will do, as long as he's not cold. Tell me – and he lowered his voice while he looked around for even the walls might have ears – has nobody come looking for him? Did nobody come yesterday or last night?'

'No one in the world. Only the woman next door. She came with the terrible news.'

Then she ran away to be back in a few minutes, bringing a bundle full of clothes tied into a tablecloth.

Máté shook his head.

'This isn't any good my dear. How can I go through the whole village with a bundle of this size on my shoulder? What do I say if someone asks me who I was taking it for? This will catch anyone's eyes.'

'What do I do then?'

‘Stuff into a shopping bag the things he most needs. And later come after me, and bring the rest of the things. Or else he might come home to you at night...’

‘You don’t think anything bad will happen to him now that he escaped, do you...? Wouldn’t it be better if I went to your place?’

‘I’ll talk it over with him,’ and he was about to leave with the bag into which she had pressed a worn suit, a shirt, socks and a pullover. ‘What about shoes? He hasn’t got any either! Put in at least some kind of moccasins.’

Before he stepped out into the street, he opened the small gate ajar and spied out.

There was nobody in the street.

4.

András Molnár’s wife also looked out into the street from the small gate with the same kind of fear several times that morning. She had not closed her eyes for a second all night; she was sitting up and waiting for her husband to come home. She had also heard the rattling of the machine-guns in the cemetery, and the desperate neighing of the horses from the direction of the parish hall; later, the sounds of the accordion announced the merry feast of the Serbs; they spent the whole night singing and shooting; they celebrated the terrible genocide with a wild orgy.

She looked out into the street but she saw nobody there; it was as if the whole village had died out. Or had they shot everybody? Her heart sank with horror. No, that was just a terrible absurdity - she tried to console herself in vain.

Anxious though, she retired. She stood in the yard for a long time with her back against the gate as if she had been waiting for something. The dog also sat down at her feet and looked up at her with his faithful eyes. She could not take it any longer; she bent down and fondled his head. She had never done this before. The dog yapped happily.

Walking very cautiously, as if she were afraid of something, she sneaked into the backyard. Passing the corn-stub heap, she went as far as the neighbour’s fence and looked over into his yard but she could not see anything moving there. The yard of the other neighbour, András Csévári was also quiet.

She sat down on the small bench in the corridor; her hands fell into her lap, and with an empty soul she waited for something to happen. She kept listening to sounds coming from the main street; first the roar of a motorbike and then the clattering of the wheels of a car hurrying along the road reached her ears. Then there was nothing again, and the silence was pressing on her increasingly as if it had a physical weight. What could have happened to András? Who could she go and ask? Who could’ve seen him?

She was like a sleepwalker; she went around doing things she had to do: she threw some grains to the poultry, lit the fire in the stove, peeled potatoes, put some water in a pot onto the stove, mixed the pig-wash for the porkers and threw some corn-stalk to the cows, but in her thoughts she was far away.

It was in the afternoon that she learned with certainty that András was not among those driven into the graveyard. Nyiszom's daughter knocked on her gate in the afternoon; her father had sent her and she brought the news. But where can he be then, my Blessed Virgin Mary? Had he been driven to forced labour with the others, and would he be let home soon? She fell to her knees and with tears in her eyes thanked God who had, after all, looked down upon her; she had not been going to church and keeping the commands in vain. God was merciful to those that pray to him with clear conscience.

And could it be that God would punish those ungodly communists? 'If only it would be so!' she heaved a sigh, slightly relieved.

She tiptoed into the kitchen and, though it was broad daylight, lit the sacred candle. The barking of the dog made her go out into the yard again. The small Csángó boy was coming through the garden the way András told him to go so as not to be seen when he was last here. She hugged him and fondled his dirty face. The boy's eyes were terrified and his lips were almost blue. He was rolling his eyes as if he wished to say something, but he dared not open his mouth. She could not understand at that moment what was wrong with him; only later.

Two partisans turned up shortly after the boy, also through the back yard. They were following him; the poor thing had to go first and show them all those houses where he had been given food.

It was only now that Veronka noticed that the boy's lips were bleeding and his skin was broken; these damned men must have beaten him.

The partisans did not speak a word of Hungarian but Veronka understood what they were saying to each other, and she also realized that they would show no mercy to her. They had forbidding faces, they were raging and one of them had a swishing whip in his hand. It would not have surprised her if he used it on her. But instead of it, they growled at her.

'Pack up and let's go!'

'I'm not going anywhere' she said stubbornly. 'I did nothing wrong. Aren't you ashamed, shutting up these unfortunate Székelys and making them starve? You mean that I should be ashamed? What for? For giving them some food?'

'Zabranjeno! Zabranjeno!' One of them, the one with the better looking face, went on repeating. 'You've done something that's forbidden. Come on, we're taking you also to where they are.'

Jóska Bece, the small Csángó boy burst out crying, grabbed her hand and started kissing it. She caressed his hair.

‘Don’t you cry, my dear! I’ll be all right. I’ll scratch their eyes out. They want to drive me away. I’ll give them something to remember!’

All her protestations were futile; the two partisans did not fuss a lot but took her by the arms and forced her out into the street. There were some fifteen women already that they had rounded up; some half a company of soldiers were going round the houses driving the Csángós from the camp in front of them. These were the children who had sneaked out now and then to get some food to save their parents or brothers and sisters from starving to death; the Járek camp became notorious in the country for mercilessly starving the detainees.

In the first couple of days the unfortunate people had nothing over their heads. The Hungarians and those Germans who were late to leave were huddled together on a soggy pasture surrounded with barbed wire. The Székelys from Bukovina were also put in there once their carts, horses and food had been taken away.

There were nursing babies in their mothers’ arms in the camp; the mothers hugged the crying infants close to their bodies; they died within days because the mothers dried off and the babies, blue in the face from crying, sucked and lacerated their breasts in vain. But how could the mothers have any milk?

The dead had to be buried by their next of kin: they were given spades and shovels and there was a place marked out for a temporary graveyard in a corner of the camp; it was next to the rubbish pits. There were no coffins; the dead bodies were wrapped up into sheets, dirty rugs or the women’s shawls. They could not even put up crosses with the names of the deceased; the bells did not toll and candles did not burn for they had no candles. The father carried the dead body in his arms, raised it up to the sky, to God and then, on his knees, lowered it gently down into the pit.

It happened that the mother was put next to her child the following day: her heart broke in grief after her child. Or did she, perhaps, also die of starvation? There was no doctor in the camp.

By the time Veronka came to herself, she was already among the shrieking and lamenting women in the street. She would have liked to go back – if she had no choice but to go – even force her way back, for at least half an hour so that she could feed the animals, look around the yard once more, put some water into the porkers’ trough, lock up the cellar, the pantry, the room and the gate too, so that nobody could plunder the house while she was away. Anything was possible in this wicked world. She was hoping that the neighbour, Csévári would look after the house and the animals.

The noisy and excited group of screaming and cursing women started towards Járek. When they reached the parish hall, a smaller group from Kastély utca joined them; there were also some men in this group. But, as it

turned out later, they were not driven to the camp at Járek as a punishment for feeding the Csángó Magyars but because their wives had painted over the slogans on their walls. This was qualified as sabotage.

As soon as the army occupied the village, a special unit arrived together with the soldiers: the unit was made up of painters, and their task was to paint slogans on the white walls. Slogans like: Smrt Fašizmu, sloboda narodu! Death to Fascism, Freedom to the People; and Long live Tito! Long live the Soviet Union! Long live the AVNOJ! Down with the profiteers! Death to the Nazi fraternisers! Proletariat of the World, Unite! And there were others of this kind; they cheered heroes; unknown names appeared on the walls written in red paint so that people could draw their lesson.

Some painted these slogans over for they pained their eyes and offended their good taste. The people from Kastély utca were now driven to the camp in Járek for committing this crime. The group were made to run; they had to run as fast as they could from the railway station in Temerin to the mill in Járek. The elderly got dizzy, and when they collapsed they were whipped to their feet again.

It was around noon when, out of breath, the dishevelled group of people reached the camp. By then three larger plank sheds that even had roofs had been put together. Inside there were bunk-beds next to each other. Two of these were for sleeping; the third one was the so called 'dining room' but no one ever got food in there. That was what they called it; to mock it perhaps; they scoffed at it for there was not even a single table inside. People were allowed into it when it rained. And it often rained. Their clothes got drenched, they stank, almost steamed. Crammed together, they were standing around in groups because in this barrack there was nothing to sit down on; they could relieve themselves in a corner in front of all the others. Stale body odour and stench filled the room; stifling, fog-like fumes clouded above their heads. They could not have sat down on the ground – on the muddy soggy grass into which their feet sank down ankle-deep – because it was cold. They clung to each other. Somebody had the devilish thought of brainwashing these hardened fascists. They read out to them in Serbian through the loudspeakers from Marx's Capital or the works of Stalin and Lenin. Most of them had no idea at all what they were hearing.

The ones that had collapsed were pulled out and laid flat on the ground under the sky; no one was allowed near them. That was where the elderly died of starvation; none of them wailed; with their teeth clenched they waited for death to come. An old woman, her fingers on her beads, went on telling her prayers aloud: Our Father, and then Hail Mary, and then went on to I believe in one God the Father Almighty...

When the group from Temerin got there they were pushed into barrack number three, which was crammed already. A spectacled partisan was just

reading out from Stalin's works. At the same time a woman was praying aloud Hail Mary in German. She was praying without stopping, she could not even be silenced; she went on telling her prayers even during the night; she was the one who had buried her daughter the previous day. The child died in her arms. Now and then when she paused for a while she begged for the rage of the God to strike down, but God remained defiantly silent; or had he moved away from this region? Did he leave with the Hungarians?

Veronka's heart shrank more and more. When she started off with the procession from Temerin, she had not yet summed up the consequences of the things that she had done; after all there was no judge in the whole world that would condemn her for giving alms; such law did not exist. But when she saw the awful state of the camp, and she could feel that these men did not know mercy, she became terrified. She tried to find somebody that she knew; the only familiar faces were from her street: Panna Sós, who gave the Csángó kid some poppy-seed cake, and Panna Zsúnyi who was cursing and scolding the small Jóska Bece; she claimed she had never given alms to anyone, not to the beggars even; she had always locked the doors before them! This boy, Jóska, must have mistaken her for somebody else in the street.

The terrified people in the camp were eyewitnesses to how the children climbing in under the barbed wire fence with a sack of food had been caught that evening. Three of them were pulling a heavy sack that the partisans confiscated straight away. Of course, they did not divide the food among the starving men. That day the children had been to Tiszakálmánfalva to gather some food; many Hungarians lived there too. Intoxicated with delight, the guards bore down on the children bringing the food, and they whipped them, uttering cries of delight in the meantime.

There were no other places but Temerin and Tiszakálmánfalva where the Székelys could count on getting some food; these were the only places where Hungarians lived in the area; at Káty there were only a few Hungarians and they had already fled; Titel was quite a way off and the other neighbouring villages were populated by Serbs only; the children certainly would not dare enter their houses!

'For God's sake, please, don't hurt me, Mister! I've brought this for my Mom! Please, don't take it away!' They could hear a Csángó boy crying imploringly. He had also just come back from Tiszakálmánfalva; he was given some bread and sausages but the partisans found them hidden in his shirt; they took the sausages away and whipped the child. Later, of course, they eat the sausages themselves with great gusto.

There was a huge stout partisan woman – one could not tell her rank – who stuck a big red star onto her chest and her cap; she was the most beastly among the soldiers. She would go with her stool into barrack number three

every day, sit down and take out some food. She was eating in front of the hungry people to torture them this way, too. She went on eating for a long time, bite by bite, smelt the bread, the meat and the sausages while harrumphing, and then she took a good swig from her water-bottle. The people in the camp were given a mess-tin of water in the mornings only. This Amazon from Herzegovina, named Mirjana, had selected her torture techniques. When it rained, she drove the women out of the barracks. "This is instead of having a bath" she laughed maliciously. "You need a wash because you stink!" she shouted with her greasy hair flowing down to her shoulders.

Veronka felt right from the beginning that Mirjana was a wicked creature. When she looked at them surveying her 'flock' as she called the people in the camp, Veronka always tried to turn away and hide behind the backs of the others so that the beast's eyes would not stop on her. She succeeded in this the first two days but on the third day, by which time everybody was swaying with hunger, she suddenly stopped in front of her.

'Where are you from?' she asked in bad Hungarian. When Veronika told her, the woman, pretending she felt sorry for her, asked,

'Are you hungry?'

'Very hungry,' Veronka jumped at the chance, and everybody who heard them huddled around. Poor innocent people, they were probably hoping that they would get some bread.

'Think of the food you gave to these Csángós,' she said haughtily. 'Stuff yourself with it in your imagination. As long as that lasts, you won't get even cold water, let alone some food!'

She had a toy whip on her. It had a thin lash so it only swished but did not sting; and left no mark on the skin. This was, as she said, the thing that she used to flick the sheep of this lovable camp. She would flip everyone, and flick the women harder in their faces. She did not bother much about the men; they were not her concern. She was in charge of guarding the women.

A thin cat, all soaked, strayed into the camp on the third day. It was meowing and the children caught it. The possibility that they could eat the cat might have occurred to many of them. Red circles were dancing in front of their eyes from hunger; those who had been in the camp longer had become so weak from the starvation forced on them that they could not walk any longer.

Mirjana grabbed the poor cat – it must have been also hungry because it meowed all the time – from the caressing hands of a child. She held the terrified cat firmly, and then with a sudden idea waved to an unshaven man to approach her.

'What's your name?' she howled at him. When he looked back at her stupidly, she kicked him. 'I asked you, you fascist swine, what your name is. What is your name? Don't you understand?'

'I'm Mátyás Dobosi. I'm not a fascist.'

'Don't you dare talk back at me or I'll kill you! If I say that you are a fascist, then you are a fascist! Did you understand me?'

The unfortunate Dobosi, who was a farm-hand from Temerin, stuttered something and wanted to disappear from in front of her eyes but Mirjana grabbed him by his crumpled jacket.

'Bring me a piece of strong string! Well, who's going to run and get it?' she kept yelling.

Nobody moved. Obviously, they must have known that she had something wicked in her mind. And anyway, who had a piece of string? Where could anyone have got hold of some string?

Finally one of the partisans managed to find a piece of about a metre of sugar string. Everybody thought that she wanted to put it round the cat's neck. She might even strangle the poor innocent animal. But she had a completely different plan; she had thought of something hellishly evil.

She threw the cat with a sudden movement into Dobosi's trouser leg and tied the rope tightly round the bottom of the leg. The partisan-guards – to whom obviously it was not the first time that they had watched spectacles of this kind – were splitting sides with laughter. In the meantime they were holding Dobosi by the arms so that he could not escape. They were about to have really great fun.

The cat in the trouser leg wanted to escape, and was scratching and biting, inflicting terrible pain on poor Dobosi. In order to incite the cat even more, they were yelling and Mirjana was hitting its head with the whip handle through the trousers; to this the cat went completely wild. Dobosi started howling in pain, he would have tried to get his trousers off, and tried to reach the bottom of his trousers and untie the rope but the partisans prevented him from doing so. Only then, when he fell onto the ground scratching the soil in pain, did he manage to get out of his trousers. He tore off the string but when the cat still did not get out, he took his trousers off. His leg was all in blood. Tears gathered in his eyes; pain and the shock of horror filled his face; had he not restrained himself he might have done something irreparable by jumping onto the partisan woman to strangle her. In everybody's opinion this would have been the thing to do then; but he remembered his family and his small house in Temerin, and because of this he rather threw himself onto the ground and drove his ten fingers into the wet, soggy soil.

There was no other ointment that they could put on his leg, so the men tore up the wet, cold grass and put it on the sore leg bleeding with the scratches and bites. When the leg turned hot again they put some more grass on it. There was no doctor around; why would they have a doctor in a place where the goal was to have people die the sooner the better?

András Molnár's wife and the others from Temerin were let free on the fourth day. They were first lined up, and then were duty-bound never to reveal to anybody the things that they had seen and experienced in the camp; then the gates were opened in front of them. Some of the Csángó kids sneaked out together with them; nobody took any notice of them. The fortieth grave was being dug in the north corner of the camp. No one had to make an account to anyone of those who died in there. Not even to history so far. Perhaps there are some that somebody is still hoping to welcome back home somewhere.

Veronka started back into the village with some of her companions; they were holding onto each other. The distance was not more than five kilometres but to them even that was hard going for they had become so weak in the camp. They did not get anything, not even a bite of food in these three days. Staggering along, exerting themselves to the utmost, they were dragging themselves, holding and supporting each other. Past the railway station an old woman was standing in Gazsi Kovács's gate; she brought them water and then handed out some dry bread among them with tears in her eyes.

'May God have mercy on us,' she was crying softly while she shared them the bread from her apron. 'We are doomed my Magyar kin. God Almighty has taken his eyes off us. We're all going to perish, you'll see.'

They were stuffing themselves with the dry bread and drinking the cold well-water that she kept bringing them in a blue can. They were just like cattle. They had been touched by a whiff of the lofty spirit of communism.

Veronka then collected all her strength and went on ahead and from the corner she almost ran all the way to her house. She grabbed the door handle and shook it but the gate was locked. She leant against the gate-post. She thought that András would be home waiting for her when she got back. It was obvious, Csévári, the neighbour, must have bolted the gate from the inside. She climbed over the low wall, flopped down and the dog ran howling to her. He was hungry, too; it was possible that the neighbours had not fed him since she had left. The pigs were crying in the sty and the cow was mooing in the cowshed. There were hardly any hens in the yard except for a few shabby ones lingering around the empty tray.

Half of the poultry was missing. Thieves had been to the house. They did not dare drive away the bigger animals, that would have been too striking but they had rifled her poultry-yard. They had also taken the ducks that she had been fattening. It was not difficult for them to get into the roost; they must have come through the garden. Csévári, the neighbour, said that he was sorry but he had noticed nothing; in the evenings they had always locked themselves in, he and his wife, Panna, and they had not seen any strangers in the house. The dog had not been barking. Or could it be that they did not hear him bark?

Veronka collected a few fresh eggs, broke them, fried them in some bacon fat, and ate, just about devoured them with the dry and mouldy bread of which there was still a bit left over. But she had already decided that she would make some griddle-cake for supper. Later she warmed some water in a large pot and had a good wash. She was terribly exhausted and she could hardly stand on her feet, but in spite of this she still mixed together some food for the pigs.

5.

The men from Temerin were made to labour hard at Csortanovci. The laying down of the new railway tracks was entrusted to them, they had to repair the roads and make them fit for traffic, and clear away the ruins of the collapsed buildings – the unpleasant remnants of the terrible air attacks.

They worked in circumstances like the slaves once did when they built the pyramids in ancient Egypt. They were pushed hard because the traffic at the railroad station had to be restored so that the connection between Belgrade and Zagreb could be established. The work was directed by civilians who were more humane than the partisans; if it was possible, they even allowed them short rests.

These breaks were very much needed for they worked almost bare handed; there were no machines to aid their work. Their nails broke, their skin came off and their hands were covered in wounds. Besides the men from Temerin, there were Hungarians from other places too, and also over ten Germans who shared in the labour. They were captured by the road side when they had lagged behind their group for some reason: their horse had foundered or the wheel of their cart had broken. But there were Swabians who never had the intention of leaving their native land, and so they remained waiting for the partisans with clear conscience; to their misfortune.

The Yugoslavs had learned quickly from the Russians the unlawful procedure sanctioned by the utterance “malenkij robot”: the nationalities were driven to forced labour. Those who, although not paid, were at least given proper food for their work, could be grateful to God. At Csortanovci the hated Hungarians got half a kilo of bread and cooked dinner every day. There were camps, however, like the one in Zombor where the men were starved to death.

András’s everyday task was to keep the confines tidy. He stayed in the school when the others left for work right after tea early in the morning. They did not get any lunch at noon but were allowed to eat at four when they returned to the school building, in front of which there was an armed guard day and night. The men were allowed to leave the place only with permission: a paper with a stamp on it. It was very rarely that the command headquarters

gave out such a stamped permit. Nevertheless, many got out into the village, sniffed around, brought back news, even did some shopping although there was not much to buy in the shops in those days.

The lavatories were in the back part of the schoolyard; they even had to build a latrine there. If they climbed onto its roof they could reach the branch of a knotted apricot tree, pull themselves up and in this way cross over the wall. Then they were in the yard of a house in ruins and through its always open gate could get out into a side street. They could walk around in the village with nothing to fear; no one asked for their identity papers; nobody cared about them.

Nevertheless, they usually sent those who could speak Serbian to do the shopping and to get news, and whom they thought capable of getting away with it if they got into trouble. But misfortune did not spring from here, and it came only much later.

They had no facilities for cleaning themselves; there was one pump in the yard and they gathered around it, usually not in the morning but when they came back from work. One of them was pumping the water and the other one, holding his palm under it, washed himself. They splashed the water making puddles around the well until the food was ready; this was both lunch and supper. They had food once a day, but then quite substantial portions. There was meat almost every day, mind you, sometimes it was ox meat that they were hardly able to chew. The menu was the same almost every day: the meat was chopped into the caldron, water was poured on it, salt, paprika powder, and a few baskets of potatoes were added and then it was cooked. If it turned out thin then they ate it as soup, and if it was thick they called it goulash.

Half a kilo of bread was portioned out to each of them every day. And they were given preserves sometimes. The cooks put it aside and gave some to them for breakfast with the bitter tea. For supper they nibbled on what was left of their bread; well, those who had any left of it, for most of them finished it by midday.

The two cooks, István Kispéter and Dávid Jani, surpassed all expectations. Once they surprised the internees even with fresh griddle-cake. Another time they cooked corn-cake for supper; the corn they had stolen, of course. The griddle-cake was also made of stolen flour; they baked it on large tin shovels on an open fire. There was a five-storied power mill at the end of the village which was closed now, but two men climbed into it through its broken windows; out of curiosity they searched its floors and found three sacks of flour next to one of the loading funnels.

They brought the flour back with them bit by bit. Those who went out to work collected anything they could find: they would bring back in their pockets sugar beets and carrots that they had dug out and corn on the cob, too. Uncle István Kispéter stockpiled of these things in a separate schoolroom; for the harsher days.

They were beginning to settle in the confines; they organized the washing and decided on who was to go over the wall to the village; András was also trusted with a task although he spoke hardly any Serbian. He was among those entrusted to bring back the flour from the mill. They could smuggle it out only by one kilo at a time, otherwise it might have caught somebody's eyes if they turned up in the street with a whole sack of flour, since in those days everyone lived in penury and nobody had flour; only the officially appointed bakers got sticky army bread every second day, and the civilians had to eat the same bread because all food reserves were destroyed in the war. The reserve-supplies were carried off by the Germans; they plundered everything, mercilessly killing even the porkers in the sties. They drove away the cattle, caught the poultry; pantries, sties and cowsheds were left empty behind them; those people who stayed alive and were not strung up as communist partisans onto a knotty mulberry tree could call themselves fortunate. The destruction was unusually great in this region. Bácska did not suffer in the war nearly as much as Szerémség because the battles were fought here with alternating success, and the retreating Germans put up strong resistance. In some sections the heavy arms had to be put into action.

The men on forced labour soon became lethargic and became resigned to their destiny. The soldiers, too, had enough of the war; they had become disorderly, they did not bother much about the service; they usually retreated into an empty wagon and played cards all day long. Everybody was missing the warmth of home.

Some of the soldiers directed the exhausted group of men back to the camp, making a slight detour across some beet or potato fields. On these occasions they filled their pockets with raw food that they scraped out from the soil. They took back with them pumpkins they had found in some cornfield – it tasted great grilled on the fire, and it was a special treat. Dávid Jani roasted and divided even the seeds among them. It was good to crack them during a short rest.

There was one thing that they were missing terribly: tobacco. The majority of the men on forced labour were hard smokers, but they tried in vain to bribe the commander of their guards by offering him all sorts of things; he could not get anything to smoke for his soldiers either. In those days tobacco was in short supply.

‘What a good opportunity to give up smoking,’ the sergeant said with a touch of irony. Namely, he was a non-smoker. He had gold teeth and a thick silver watch chain and a pocket watch with a lid that struck the hours in a lovely melodious sound. It was like jingling a silver hand-bell. He said he had inherited the watch from his father, but many claimed that this was a lie; it was loot.

As the days passed, their life was becoming bearable; Mussky the dog was a proof of this. A mongrel with one eye sniffed into their confines one day just as they were being driven back from work. He must have felt the smell of the food stewing in the cauldron for he managed to sneak in between the legs, and when István Kispéter started dishing out the tasty goulash – which turned out exceptionally good this time – he stood next to the cauldron with imploring eyes. They kicked him away first but, stubbornly, he kept coming back. Then one of the men from Temerin felt sorry for the dog, and poured out his leftovers to him since he happened to have no appetite. The dog crawled to his feet whining gratefully. Jóska Ádám caressed his head.

Then the dog was given a name. First they called him Russky and then they changed it to Mussky, for like this the Serbs did not understand the name. They did not wish anyone to get offended because there were many pro-Soviets among the soldiers.

The climate of public sentiment at the end of the war made everybody take side with the communists. Some out of conviction others out of fear. Once this region was almost entirely royalist and there were hardly any leftist movements around here. Now even the elderly were waving enthusiastically the flag with the star. Perhaps the farmers were slightly more reserved in this flush of victory.

Who the land would belong to was not yet decided: would it belong to those who had cultivated it until now or would they form kolkhozes like in the Soviet Union and start on the ‘tin-bowl’-system.

Fortunately they had hardly heard of the twenty million peasants and kulaks that Stalin had sent to death. Books on such topics did not get published around here in the old Yugoslavia because communism was feared more than the plague. And now it was raging here, shaking its fists to silence the peasants, terrorizing the middle class; the wave of communists flushed through the liberated country in ruins like some filthy gush in order to seize power and ensure for themselves at all costs the best catch in the offices, in power, in material goods, and secure a life free of cares. The greed, debauches, revelry and thirst for revenge of this mob was fearsome.

However, the men from Temerin on forced labour were occupied only with their own destiny and wretched life; all they were interested in was when they could go back home to their families and whether they would survive in this cataclysmic horror, next to which even the biblical Revelations were pale fabrications.

They were living their restricted, soldier-like life, they were mere numbers only, lying at the mercy of a small group of armed men. András Molnár felt so heart-broken sometimes that when the lights went out, he pulled the rug over his face and cried silently. The vision of Veronka, as he saw her for the

last time when he turned back at the street corner in Temerin, often flashed up in front of his eyes. She was standing in the gate, her hand shading the eyes out of habit. She was wearing a blue apron. And then came a flicker of Imrus, his son, smiling at him; this radiating message from the past was the thing that kept him going. The land had dropped to third-rate in importance. And yet he was brought up to be devoted to it and his ancestors had already lived a life in which the land was everything, it was life itself. His parents had looked twice at every coin just to be able to buy yet another and again another piece of land on their scrapings, and join it to what they already had.

How far all this seemed to be now! It had all faded into the past; nor could he see the three poplars that cast their shades onto the well by his small farm house. He could no longer feel the taste of that water either, as if it had flown away. Nothing else existed now but this wretched camp with its cauldron and constant goulashes, the sticky bread and the hope that one day he would be able to go home. And the lice which were breeding rapidly. First it was Jóska Zsúnyi who complained and showed what he had grubbed out from his armpit hair under his shirt; then the others started scratching themselves, too.

They did not have the facilities to keep themselves clean. The school did not have a washroom; they washed next to the pump in chipped enamel washbasins. They had three washbasins and a dishpan which they managed to get from the people of the nearby houses by exchanging some of their things for them. Some gave away a lighter, watch or pocket knife, others a hat or warm pullover in exchange. This was how they managed to get hold of the necessary dishes, and now and then got a piece of soap and a few razors that they were using by turns. They washed their shirts on Saturdays and dried them on Sundays because then they did not have to go to work.

The sun hardly ever shone, the sky was mostly clouded over and the winds were cold. They dried the shirts, underwear, socks and foot cloths spread along a line they had put up in the schoolroom which was their dwelling place as well. They had a good fire going in the iron stove, so it was pleasantly warm inside. The heavy, stifling and steamy air glazed the windows as well.

Not each of them had a comb, so it went from hand to hand and they shaved in front of a broken piece of mirror; but there were some like Kristóf Kelemen from the Gyepsor utca who had sworn not to shave until he was back home as a free citizen. Let his beard grow as long as Jehova's, he did not mind.

'You know where we lost the war, don't you?' Herényi from Tullabara asked, scratching his armpit and pulling the lice off his hair. 'At Dunkirk. Exactly there, to the hell with the German conduct of war.'

'Where do you get this absurdity from?' they trumped him but he stuck to it.

'If then all the half-witted German generals had come to their senses and the German Army had not stopped and watched with hands on their laps till

the cornered English and American army got rescued from over the Channel then all things would have turned out differently.'

'What would've been the right thing to do in your opinion?'

'The German Army ought to have landed and stifled the English. Afterwards it would have been easy to have the communists completely at their mercy; the Russians were not all that powerful. And then the fate of the world would have turned out differently.'

'It's easy to be clever afterwards' somebody muttered. 'Ill-fate has befallen our nation. What kind of a world is this in which the devil has pushed off God Almighty from his throne? It is now the Satan ruling over the world.'

'Come on, these are Nazarene fabrications!' Matyi Bosnyák interrupted a bit irritated. 'You are a Nazarene, aren't you?'

'Me?' János Sándor burst out indignantly. 'I'm Sabbatarian if you wish to know. It is said in the Script...'

'Don't start with the Scriptures! I've had enough of the Bible,' burst in Ignác Hevesi, paprika red with temper. 'You can see since a long time now, that it's not those up in Heaven that design our fate. It was in a wagon watching the carnal dances of naked whores that the old mumbling French and the ignorant English decided about the fate of millions at Trianon. Do not speak of politics and justice in front of me. If the justice of a nation is worth this much...'

'Justice is always on the winner's side. You'd better learn this,' a man with moustaches put a stop to the arguing. The others did not know him; they called him uncle János. 'And the loser gets the rope. All the crimes are cast at him; and in order that he would not be able to speak up later and say the truth, they hang him.'

They fell quiet and sat in a long silence, listening numbly to the crackling of the fire in the stove. Every other day it was another group's duty to get wood for the fire. They climbed over the wall and under the beneficial veil of the night they stole wood for the next day's fire. They made away with the planks of standing fences when they could find nothing else.

András Molnár went out several times with the group that went out to get supplies, and two times he also managed to put a white cardboard into the post-box at the corner. He addressed them to his wife. He did not put stamps on them. He had no money to buy them. Veronka would pay the postal charges. Just to let her know that he was alive, and where he was. But the post did not deliver any of the cards to her, so right to the end she had no knowledge about András's whereabouts or about whether he was alive or had been executed somewhere.

János Sándor, the Sabbatarian, pulled András aside and told him confidentially that three armed men and a civilian had visited the building

site and asked for the over forty-fives to report. They were going to give them easier work, perhaps even send them home. The elderly could cope with the hard work only with great difficulty anyway.

‘I’m just telling you this so that you come out with us if you can, you might be fortunate.’

The next day András Molnár announced that he was going out to work with the others; someone else should stay in and clean and tidy the rooms. He would like to meet the delegation, and, well, give his muscles a bit of exercise also.

He busied himself to draw attention: he carried sleepers, lifted the heavy long rails, ballasted, pushed stones in wheelbarrows and was constantly on the lookout for the three soldiers with the civilian to make a list of the elderly as in the previous days. He yearned for them so much that he almost got sick. He started back with the others low hearted, trailed at the end of the column; he had hardly got into the confines when István Kispéter was already telling him what a pity it was he had not been in just on that day. Uncle Dávid Jani, his fellow cook, was taken away and a German man too, and András could have gone home also, he was past the age limit, but they could not find him. It was a pity he had gone out because that day the committee did not go round the work sites but the confines in the region. There were some six groups of workers like theirs forced to work by the communists.

András Molnár was so weighed down by the news that he left his dinner and just sat on the straw and moped. If only he had not listened to the Sabbatarian he would be on his way home. ‘To hell with everything!’ He calmed down only on the next day, when one of the men from Temerin came in all pale, waving a faded coat; he could not even speak; he just held up the piece of garment to the others. The coat used to belong to Dávid Jani, the cook; everybody knew it. The old man used to dish out the portions with a big spoon in this coat.

The coat revealed that its owner had not gone home, and there was no doubt about what had happened to him. They killed him and shared his clothes. Somebody must have lost this coat; his grave was probably also somewhere near by; he had been shot and scraped into the ground.

By living through such agonies they found life even more unbearable without tobacco. Hardly any of them was a non-smoker. János Sándor, the Sabbatarian, who drank no alcohol and had never been to a cinema, was among the few. He just sat there with his head up and eyes closed, and was probably speaking to God for his lips moved now and then.

‘What is it you see in the future?’ they mocked him. ‘You could tell us whether we can hope for anything good tomorrow.’

‘Don’t look to the future but to your God! His face will tell you your future!’ he answered.

‘We wish he’d tell us where we could get hold of some tobacco!’ they teased him.

‘God doesn’t support harmful habits. Draw within yourselves. Or if you’re craving after tobacco, collect some dry leaves. They make a smoke, too.’

Finally they commissioned András to obtain something to smoke even if he had to find it under the ground; for they could no longer go without it, they were going to die.

‘You are here in the confines all day long because you’re helping out the cook instead of Dávid Jani; you have the time, and you can move around more easily; have a look around. Perhaps you could get some from the Russian soldiers: they have plenty of mahorka, Russian tobacco. Find out what they’re willing to take in exchange for some. We can’t bear it any longer without tobacco.’

András was glad to take the task on himself, and around midday he climbed over the back stone wall. He had met some loafing Russian soldiers before. They had rugged features; a Kyrgyz company was stationed at Csoratanovci at the time. They were slant eyed wild men who drank and swore constantly. On his outings he always picked up a few discarded cigarette butts for himself; sometimes he gathered as many as half a pocket. He unrolled and dried them in the confines, and had enough to smoke for days. He wanted to help the others so he took on this new task.

‘Papirosi! Papirosi!’ he mumbled to them, when he met Soviet soldiers. One of the Kyrgyz soldiers – he had a sergeant’s rank – asked him what he would give him in exchange. He offered him all sorts of things in Serbian but the sergeant kept saying: ‘Njet’. Finally he blurted out that he would be willing to give some but only in exchange for rakija, pálinka. He showed taking out of his sack that he had three packets of a hundred Hungarian cigarettes; he must have stolen them somewhere.

András almost fainted to see such a treat. He kept nodding violently: he had pálinka. ‘Rakija yestj, we’ve got it’ and he signalled to the Russian to follow him. He paced after him hurriedly but he was getting impatient.

Where should he take him? There was no point taking him to the confines since there was no pálinka there. For that matter there was no pálinka anywhere! He ought to win his confidence; he ought to steal the cigarettes from him. The Russian did not know that he was a Hungarian fascist on forced labour as they were calling them; he would not be able to find him if he managed to get a good head start. But how could he trick out the cigarettes from him?

Then a thought flashed into his mind: the mill. He would take the sergeant to the mill. He felt quite at home in there. He had been to it several times to get flour. He would go into the mill, climb over the wall and then through

the back yard he would be in the next street, and from there he could find his way back to the confines somehow. The Russian could stand and wait for him on the front side of the building, if he had the time; if not then he could go away without the pálinka.

They reached the mill. András was sweating even though it was cold. He pointed at the mill to the Russian: 'Tam rakija!' Throwing his arms about and gesticulating he tried to explain that he would take the cigarettes to the chief, boss or načelnik because he was the one who had the pálinka and he, András, would bring it to him straight away. The Russian should stay and wait patiently.

The sergeant was a bit suspicious but when he looked into András's face, he calmed down. Clear and honest eyes looked back at him. Two frightened eyes, trembling lips: this man would not cheat on him. He was afraid of him. All right, the soldier agreed, and passed the three boxes of cigarettes over to András. Goodness gracious! Three hundred Symphonias! His pals would lift him high up to the sky. This can't be true. And for what? Nothing at all! Just a small trick and he got them. He signalled to the soldier to wait for him; he would be back immediately with the pálinka. 'Setshas!' Straight away.

He tied the cigarettes into his shirt round his waist, and then swung over the fence. Then he ran along the narrow yard, climbed up onto the stone wall over which he had already climbed several times; but he dared not swing over it now because there were two Russian troopers in the street. The Russian soldiers noticed him, and signalled to him.

He could not go to them for they would capture him immediately and take away the cigarettes; they might even pass him over to the sergeant. And that would be the end of him. There was no other way: he had to find a place to hide. The troopers could not stay for long, they would have to go on and the sergeant would also not be able to stand for ever in front of the gate; he would have to leave with his unit. That was the only thought that he could put all his hopes in, and he was off already, climbing up the winding staircase higher and higher.

The flour was up on the second floor next to the loading funnel but he was not interested in flour now. He would come and get some the next day. The only thing that mattered now was to hide somewhere and disappear from in front of the Russian's eyes. He lay down flat on the floor and sneaked up to the window. The window was broken and he could see clearly through the lower corner and observe how impatiently the sergeant was pattering in front of the entrance. He kept looking at his watch and from this András concluded that he could not stay much longer for he was in a hurry to go. He smiled to himself. If he managed to get out of this tight corner he would, when he got home, give out of gratitude some money to St. Anthony. If only

he would protect him! Or ought he perhaps to turn for help to another Saint? Why on earth did he agree to this task? He was rushing to his own destruction. He started shivering. It was terribly cold in the draughty mill. He could hear mice running around the funnel. There could be at least a hundred of them around. He shuddered. Then he took another look at the sergeant walking up and down in front of the mill.

Not long afterwards he heard the puffing of some motor. He looked down and saw that a Russian soldier had come on a motorbike. The sergeant was telling him something and pointing to the mill; exactly at him as if he knew from which window he was watching them.

The soldier went away fast on the motor bicycle. The sergeant banged on the locked gate; the whole mill resounded. The scuttling of the mice stopped for a moment. The silence turned awesome suddenly. András felt his heart throbbing furiously in his throat. He did not dare look down for fear that the sergeant might notice him and shoot him. He climbed away from the window, put his hands on his ears and lay there in the numb, musty silence. He would have happily abandoned the three hundred cigarettes and gone back empty-handed to the confines.

There came another banging from the ground floor. Then he could make out clearly that the man on the motorbike was back. He heard noises; they were shouting in Russian in the street. It was obvious that the sergeant had asked for help from his fellowmen, and now they were creating uproar, and it was also obvious that they would not remain idle for long but come looking for him.

He sat up suddenly and took out a box of cigarettes, tore it with trembling fingers and took out a Symphonia. He lit it. The smoke calmed him down a little, but the fear stayed with him. He was not yet half way through it when he could hear the gate being forced open. The sound of steps echoed in the staircase, and they were getting closer and closer to him and the steps drummed with such violent awe above the world as if the whole sky was thundering. Then the door to the funnels on the second floor burst open. András Molnár instinctively put his hand into the cigarette box to stuff his pocket with Symphonias.

He saw then quite clearly, crystal clearly, the street at home, the house and in front of the gate Veronka standing in her blue apron, shading her eyes with her left hand.

The Last Supper

1.

Town crier István Horváth opened the stable door and looked out searchingly into the night. The yard was quiet. The soft sound of the door opening made the dog trot up to him; he fondled his head. Then he flung the rug under his arm, and started on tiptoes towards the pantry. He was lucky because its door was not locked.

The staircase to the attic was in the pantry. He was climbing cautiously, so as not to make a noise. The dog stayed down and started whining. Then he stopped, and padded back to his usual place at the end of the corridor. An old sheepskin jacket was put there for him to flop down on.

The town crier was groping his way in the dark, afraid of bumping into something. Only the two squares of eyelet holes shone with some feeble light, so he went in that direction. He knew the chimney must be to the right. He found it, and made his lair behind it. He lay down on his back, and pulled over his head the rug he had brought up with him to cover himself.

He had hardly dropped off to sleep when his ears detected the soft sound of steps approaching him. Somebody was sneaking up the stairs feeling his way, and then the flame of a lighter flickered in somebody's hand. It was in the hand of his host, who had come up to find out who had been walking up in the attic.

'Oh, it's you,' the town crier said relieved, and sat up.

'Who the hell would it be, if not me? You thought the partisans had come to fetch you, didn't you? Kálmán laughed at him derisively.

'Come on, stop it,' mumbled the other one. 'I just can't stand this any longer.'

'Now, now, what the hell is wrong with you?' Kálmán was turning angry. 'I got you everything: decent clothes, a rug, a word from your wife; what else do you want?'

'Peace, that's what I need.'

'Who's troubling you? What makes you so upset?' and Kálmán lowered himself next to him lighting a cigarette.

'I don't know. Couldn't tell you myself. I'm terrified. Every sound makes me shudder. Sometimes I get a vision of the butchers being on the watch for me; dragging me back to the graveyard.'

'Go on, try and have a rest,' said Kálmán, getting ready to leave.

'Please don't go. I'm not able to sleep anyway. Let's talk for a while. It's awful to be alone.'

'We'll talk in the morning. I'm exhausted. I've had enough of this day myself. Well, go on, try to sleep and don't worry, now that you've chosen the

attic. Shall I bring you a pillow for under your head? Or perhaps another rug? The nights have become quite cold already.'

'Don't worry, I'll be fine. This one rug's enough and I'll put an arm under my head. That's the way I like to rest.'

'Well, all right, if that's what you like.'

It became quiet again. The silence was raising an ever thickening wall around him, and he felt as if he was gripped by an iron band about him, and his heart stopped beating now and then. One must go crazy like this! He put the smelly rug over his face again, but could not bear it, not even for a minute. He sat up again and was all ears; there were no sounds in the night. Or still, did he hear something? Something was scraping right next to him; it sounded as if a mouse was squeaking by his feet. Then he heard some pigeons' feet scuffling on the roof tiles. One of them let out a booming sound; it might have been dreaming.

What could pigeons be dreaming about? Clean wheat, fresh stream water, cloudless blue sky or, perhaps, kissing their mate?

Then he remembered that they, too, had three pairs of pigeons when he was a child. His mother made soup from the young ones. He can still feel in his mouth the delicious taste of pigeon soup. They had the meat with tomato sauce. When could that have been? He no longer knew, the years seemed to be washed together in his mind as if he had gone crazy.

Then he became terror stricken again. He got the shudders. He had the feeling of standing on the edge of the mass grave again, stripped naked. Then he heard the rattling of the machine guns, and felt the sliminess of hot blood smearing all over his body; his hands became wet with blood, his mouth was filled with salty tastes, and he spat out with disgust; horror stricken and shuddering, he was trying to fight his way up - with powerful strokes of his arms like a swimmer from the bottom of the water - from under the dead corpses that were falling down onto him; up to the surface as soon as possible, and then he must run, just run in a zigzag, among crosses on the graves, run gasping for air with all his strength, away from death and back into life.

People say that one's whole life flashes through one's mind in the moment of death. One lives through everything; both good and bad. All this in a single moment, for this state is just like dreaming; one can live through years in a second. What the explanation can be for this miracle, science has not yet discovered. Life is full of exciting miracles and inexplicable secrets.

There he had been, standing on the edge of the grave, on the verge of death, and he'd heard the rattling of the machine guns and now he was trying to remember an experience of this kind, but in vain. His whole life had not flashed through his mind; not even a fraction of it. He had not been thinking of anything. Dread and awe had been convulsively clenching his heart, and

scratching and stifling him with an iron grip; he could still feel it; perhaps even more strongly than he did in the moment of danger. Could it be that this feeling would stay with him for ever, and he would never again have peaceful dreams at night? He would always live with the feeling of standing on the brim of a deep pit with bloody corpses down in it, and him falling, constantly falling down onto them. He was falling to such an incredible depth that he could hear the booming of the air in his ears. How long would this falling down into the deep go on? Forever?

However, it was not this imaginary depth whirling inside him that made him afraid, but it was something unfamiliar that was following in its trail, and could strike again. He was afraid of uncertainty, of the unending shuddering, of the oncoming new regime that made him shiver as if he was feverish, of inhumaneness; every part of him was trembling and fearing revenge because it was like dung water that had flooded the garden and he had to walk in it now, trying in vain to raise his feet out of it.

What was it in fact, that had happened? He could not give an answer to this question. He could feel, however, that hundreds of thousands, millions of people were asking themselves the same question. What had happened in fact? Was it ill-fate? Or, perhaps, something much more terrible than that? Could one remain sane under these circumstances? Could one go on living, working, talking, producing things, getting up in the morning and looking into the sun, watching the swallows' flight above the water and listening to the birds singing? Was it possible at all to do these things in a humane way in the future? Something had fallen apart. Not only in the world around him, but inside him as well. Was there any sense in continuing to live?

He was sitting on the main girder beam, wrapped up in a rug and shivering; had he been able to get hold of a rope, he would have hanged himself without thinking. That was the only way out. He felt as if he was swirling around in the dark among unsolvable horrors.

It was almost morning by the time he fell asleep. He woke with a start when someone softly touched his shoulder.

'Pista,' he heard his name called from far away. Could this already be happening in the other world? Somebody was calling out to him, but was it worth opening his eyes?

Rozi was standing next to him with a mug of steaming tea; and there was lots of pálinka in it.

'This will do you good,' she said simply, and put the mug down next to him on the girder that was covered in dust and cobwebs. 'Drink it Pista, so that you have something in your stomach. I didn't bring up the bacon and the sausages; you'll come down for that. I've locked the gate so that you can eat with us without feeling uneasy.'

He leant onto his elbow with a yawn.

'I've got no appetite, aunt Rozi. I was thinking about why I had run away at all. One cannot run away from one's destiny.'

'Of course one can. Don't say things like that or I'll get very angry with you. How on earth could one not run away? Everybody is the maker of his own fortune, that's what I've been taught.'

'The things we learnt a long time ago are no good today. You see what the world's like now.'

'I do. But you shouldn't worry about these things now; rather look after yourself. Drink up the tea; Kálmán's put some brandy into it; that'll do you good.'

The town crier waved his hand, but then stretched out his arm reluctantly for the tea, and took a swig. There was too much pálinka in it; it was, in fact, hot water with pálinka, but he drank it and could soon feel its warmth beneficially spreading through his entire body. He threw off the rug, dusted his trousers and walked down from the attic, taking the empty mug in his hand. Aunt Rozi had already set the table and Kálmán Máté was already sitting by it, obviously waiting for him. The town crier greeted him as is the custom in peasant families when they first see each other in the morning. Kálmán returned the greeting, and invited him to sit by the table. He was anxiously watching his guest's every movement. This man had been through a terrible ordeal, and Kálmán could sympathise fully with the man, his sufferings, agitation, anguish and monstrous fear that his eyes reflected even now; he was like cattle in the slaughter house when they realize what is awaiting them.

His movements also reflected his state of constant suspense as if he had not yet got used to being alive or of having come back to life; everything seemed strange to him, and he shuddered at every noise, because they might come to fetch him. He could still feel the breath of his enemies on his heels as they were running and chasing after him ready to shoot and kill him and throw him into the deep grave, even though he was alive. And all this to the sounds of music.

'Have some food, Pista,' the host said quietly and full of understanding. 'Cut a piece of sausage, too. We seem to have put a bit too much salt in it this time.'

'I don't feel it,' he said in a while when he had already eaten a piece. He was holding the sausage in his hand together with some bread, and was cutting slices off it with a pocket knife. 'It's not too salty, uncle Kálmán; perhaps a bit too hot. Did you put much paprika into it?'

'Not much, but the paprika turned out hotter this year.'

Aunt Rozi poured him some milk, but he pushed the mug away.

'Please don't mind my not drinking it, but it gives me stomach ache.'

'Don't worry; just leave it on the table. I'll pour it into the cat's bowl or leave it to curdle.'

'I like it curdled' said Kálmán, raising his hand and clutching the knife as

if he were ready to attack an invisible enemy. 'I have it with onions; a bit of onion and a spoonful of curdled milk. I learned it from my grandfather a long time ago. They say this is the healthiest food in the world.'

'Could be,' the town crier said, and jumped to his feet because the dog started barking and running to the gate. Someone might have been coming.

'It's locked,' the wife assured him. 'If anyone wishes to come in, he will knock on the gate. You just go into the room in the meantime, and hide yourself.'

'They may come through the garden, as I did; the way I'd come.' István Horváth was getting anxious.

The dog shut up outside. No one had come, and they calmed down. The town crier went out later to the stable, helped Kálmán with the littering and then swept up the back yard. Kálmán Máté put his boots on, and went into the village to have a look around and bring back some news.

It was around ten when he came back. He spoke his news in a calm manner. 'I've met no one in the world but two women. All is quiet.'

'Have you heard nothing about the other group either?' the town crier asked.

'Well, Kati Kohanec told me that they might have been spared. But it is also possible that it was just hope speaking from her mouth. Her husband was also driven away in that group. She also told me that the cemetery is full of crying women. Two partisans are standing at the gate, and they let no one go inside, but the unfortunate creatures climb in over the back fence and there they are, wailing.'

'Don't even tell me about it!' Horváth shut his ears. 'I can't bear even listening to it; it makes me so upset. I won't be able to bear all this for long; you'll see.'

'To hell you won't! You simply have to. Don't you think you should go back to your wife? You might find it easier there.'

'What do you mean by telling me this?' the town crier looked at him questioningly.

'What I mean is that you just pack up your things in the evening and walk home. No one's looking for you. Your wife will console you, and put you at ease. If you were to get the fears, you can hide up on the attic there, too.'

'There's a lot to it that you're saying,' István was pondering about his words. 'I may go right now.'

'No need to go now; it's better if you don't wander about the streets yet, someone may see you. But after dark you can set off; I'll go with you. I'll walk in front and you can just follow me. If I meet someone you wouldn't want to see, I'll give you a sign. You can just hide in a gate.'

Horváth was excited about the possibility of going home to his wife. He was yearning to see her. He ate his lunch with good appetite and had an hour's

snooze after it on the plank-bed in the stable, and when darkness fell, started looking impatiently out into the street. He seemed to be less frightened now.

When they left, after eight in the evening, the night was already old. Kálmán Máté was walking in the front, clutching a thick cudgel in hand. One could see by the way he was holding it that the cudgel was not meant for keeping dogs away. The town crier was walking two house-lengths behind him. They could hardly make out each other's figure in the dark. The street lights were not on.

They met nobody at all; Horváth reached home safely. He warmly shook Kálmán Máté's hand in front of his house.

'Many thanks. Allow me to embrace you!'

'Well, well, come on now!' the old man slapped him on the shoulder, but he, too, was deeply moved. 'Look after yourself. And if you think you'll be better off, you can come back to us; there will always be a place for you in my house.'

The small gate clicked closed, and then Máté could hear the dog whining in delight, and telling everyone through his yapping that his master was back home. First of all to his wife, who had already been waiting for him and was now hugging him with trembling arms, swallowing her tears. Horváth was dizzy with happiness. He lifted his wife into his arms, and took her into the room and onto the bed. That night he spent there, in the old bed, and fell asleep in the arms of his wife; he was very happy.

The next day, however, he woke up early at dawn with thousands of doubts tormenting him. What was going to happen to him? Were they going to come and take him away again in order to finish him off or, possibly, even pardon him, and put him into prison? He would go along with it willingly; he would do a year or two in prison, as long as they would only spare him. He was still young; a whole life was still there ahead of him. A year or two; what difference would that make? Perhaps he ought to find a lawyer. He told his wife Erzsi about it; she took her big shawl, put it round her shoulders, and set off immediately to Miska Fehér, the solicitor, who lived next to the convent.

Miska Fehér was, however, not at home, or if he was, he did not come out to the knocking on his gate. The bell had been switched off for it did not ring. The gate was locked. The shutters were down. There was no movement anywhere around the big house.

She went further and hurried to Dr Pfau, the other lawyer opposite the Grisca public baths, but there she was told that Mr Grisca had fled with the Hungarians because he'd not dared to wait for the partisans; he'd fled together with the son of Mr Kolter, who'd been an officer in the Hungarian army and a right-winger; a devoted follower of Szálasi.

'Don't go and report yourself Pista,' his wife put her arms around him when she came back having achieved nothing. 'I don't trust these men. What if they take you back to the cemetery? What's going to happen to me then?'

‘Don’t worry,’ he was trying to console his wife. ‘The law is still law. After all I have done nothing wrong; never. I have been a servant all my life. What harm could I’ve done to anybody? I drummed for the Serbs, then came the Magyars and I drummed for them, and now, if I’m any good for these people, I’ll drum for them as well.’

All this he said in a firm voice full of hope, but he was trembling inside. Later in the day he became less sure of himself, and when evening came, he did not want to sleep in the room next to his wife; he went up stealthily to the attic. Erzsi went after him with the eiderdown and pillows. She made him a lair and tugged him in.

‘This is unnecessary, you know, don’t you; absolutely unnecessary,’ she scolded him. ‘If they were to come, this is the first place they would be looking; and from here you wouldn’t even be able to run away. Come back down, you’ll sleep better in the bed.’

He couldn’t be persuaded. A turbulent, wild fear overcame him, and it made him shiver and shudder as a patient seized with acute fever. His soul was sick. And if it were to go on like this, his mind would also become deranged. He could feel that sometimes he was on the verge of desperation or of insanity, and that he could not always account for what he was doing. He was beginning to lose self-control. He had to do something, and that something was to be done immediately; right now. He had a shave in the morning and put on his best clothes: the suit that he had on when marrying Erzsi.

‘Where are you going?’ she clasped her arms round his neck. ‘For God’s sake, don’t go out into the street! What is it you want to do?’

‘I’ve had enough of this. I can’t bear it any longer; you can understand, can’t you? I’ll go mad if I have to keep on hiding here. I’m going to the parish hall to report myself. I don’t care what they’ll do to me. If they find me guilty, let them punish me. If they pass the death sentence over me, let them execute me; but I simply can’t go on like this. Just let me go, it’s no use trying to stop me from giving myself up.’

‘Have you gone crazy?’

‘I have. Yes, I am crazy. I’ve become completely crazy by now!’ and he rushed out and banged the door firmly behind him. He walked along the streets with a straight back and defiant steps directly to the parish hall.

He opened the notary’s door that had half a sheet of paper on it with the word: Sekretar.

There was a man, unknown to him, sitting behind the desk; he gave him a searching look from behind his glasses, and then asked in Serbian: ‘Šta je? What d’ you want?’

‘I’m István Horváth,’ he said with tension in his throat.

‘And what is it you want? I said, what is it you want?’

'I used to be the town crier here. The drummer!' he said with a lump in his throat and legs trembling. His throat had gone dry.

'You're saying that you were the town crier and the drummer?' the unfamiliar man brought his palms together with obvious delight. 'I've been trying to find you for the last three days! Man, where the hell have you been hiding?'

He was overcome by dizziness. They've been waiting for him. They know that he's been hiding. Well, that's it then.

'Here I am!' he said grimly and ready for anything.

'Now hurry up then and take your drum, and go rattle it, for we have some very urgent things to announce to the residents!'

'Sorry, but' he started stuttering. 'I've come from the graveyard...'

'I'm not interested in where...'

'But I was shot dead...they wanted to shoot me dead. I was driven out with the others. I ran away...'

'Good for you. I would have run away in the face of death, too. But I haven't got any time now; take your drum – you'll find it in the town crier's room – and just go... As far as the shooting goes, well, you needn't take it all that seriously. Things like that can happen...'

'I needn't take it seriously?' His tongue was beginning to falter. 'Listen man, they made me strip my clothes off and dig the grave... over a hundred Hungarian men were...'

'Leave it off, man! Those men were Ustashe for sure. There are many Ustashe around, you know! But that troop has gone away; don't even bother about them...'

István Horváth stumbled out into the corridor and started towards the town crier's room, which was in the other wing of the building, next to the guards' room. The drum was there, hanging from a hook. He took it off, put his arms through the straps, and while rattling it, burst into a laugh. So that's what it was? A mistake? And Ustashe? Like hell they were Ustashe. They were proper partisans with the five-point red stars on their caps.

As he was going out he met Nyiszom. He greeted him.

'How are you, Pista? Have you come back? They've been trying again and again to find you ...'

'Stop for a second' he said in a voice coarse with excitement. 'You could perhaps tell me something about my case, could you? I was taken out to the cemetery with the others, if you had not been aware of it. My name was read out...'

'It was another István Horváth that they wanted,' Nyiszom said. 'It's lucky that you've stayed alive. But excuse me, I'm in a hurry, we've just received the news that József Eichard, the former Chief-notary was captured; your former boss.'

‘And what happened to Géza Bódy, the deputy town clerk?’

‘He’ll be taken to court; probably together with Eichard. The blame for the extermination of the Temerin Jews lies on them. You must also know that, too.’

‘I know nothing. Leave me out of this because I don’t know anything. I’m just a servant: the town crier and drummer. And I better be off now because I have to go rattling the drum.’

The man with the glasses gave him the text of the announcement in both Serbian and Hungarian, and in less than half an hour’s time the drum was already rattling in the streets with István Horváth’s self-confident, sonorous baritone resounding far away. “Notice is hereby given...The authorities of Temerin require the residents to...”

2.

The genocide did not need to be aided by jurisdiction, but war criminals were impeached in bombastic mock court proceedings; some of the accused were sentenced even to impalement. József Eichard, Chief-notary, was taken to court in Újvidék, right after he had been captured. The court room was full of curious people. There were not many among them from Temerin, as the village was still in numb mourning, but among the Jews there were quite a number interested in the trial. Mostly those who had survived the tragedy, like the son of the old Schlossberger, and Wiedrich, the pharmacist, and another few from Óbecse. The Serbs, however, showed little interest in the trial; they did not even know the man.

The court decided on sentencing Eichard to death, and Géza Bódy to twelve years of imprisonment because, due to their felonious collaboration, forty-one Jews had been killed; they had passed them over into the hands of the gendarme, and the gendarme executed them all at Zsablya on the banks of the Tisza, and thrown their corpses into the river.

The insane act of bloodbath had been carried out by a gendarme lieutenant – urged by a self-motivated patriotic burst of enthusiasm in a slightly drunk state - aided by Eichard, wishing to “save his village from the Jews”. Later on he was heard boasting all over using that expression, and saying that Temerin was the only place in Bácska that did not have a single Jewish resident.

On that tragic day in 1942, a gendarme lieutenant named Bodrogi came to Temerin with a platoon of gendarmes. They had been in the Sajkás-region, combing through the farmland, because the partisans were on the move. They came with the news that the Jews were also helping the partisans; and among them were some Jews from Temerin. “It wouldn’t be bad to give them a lesson” the Chief-notary proposed. The gendarme lieutenant – who

was an old acquaintance of his, a friend of his son-in-law – remarked, while they were sitting and drinking, that he would not mind to “do this sacrifice” for him; if he wished, he would even exterminate the Jews. All they needed was to find an acceptable pretext: send a report to his superiors that the Jews in Temerin were taking an active part in the partisan movement with weapons in their hands.

The lesson turned out to be more than good; the terrified Jews had been driven together, taken to the bank of the Tisza on the confiscated Ámann bus, and shot dead. All of them, women, children and old people; there were no exceptions. The only Jews that had survived were those who happened to be away on that particular day like Doctor Treder, Juliska Wiedrich, the pharmacist, and the Schossberger boy. To replace them, they had sent a telegram to the two Gussman boys with the deceiving news that their father was sick, and asking them to come home immediately. When they arrived two gendarmes flanked them at the railway station. They were shot somewhere in the fields out of the village.

Even the Jews who had been visiting people in Temerin had to die. Marcsa Gussmann, a nineteen year old girl, was introduced to her fiancé, a young engineer from Ada, on that day; their relatives had brought them together. The young man had arrived with a bunch of flowers to visit his prospective wife; he saw her for the first time in his life at the place of execution. And it was for the last time, too.

They said that the small Ági Hirsch, the girl with the red hair, who went to school in the convent, fell to her knees in front of the firing squad and prayed to the Holy Mary, but the Blessed Virgin did not help her either.

When the devilish plan came to his mind, the Chief-notary asked Bódy for the list with the names of the Jews on it.

“Bódy, please draw up a list of the Jews for me!” Eichard gave the order to the deputy clerk. He made the list without suspecting what it was intended for, and gave it to him. It was according to this list that the lieutenant and his men collected the unfortunate victims.

“Did you know what the Chief-notary needed the list for?” asked one of the jurors from the deputy clerk at the trial.

“I didn’t have the slightest idea,” he said, trying to defend himself. “Many of those Jews were friends of mine. I had been to school with several of them.”

He was sentenced to twelve years of imprisonment. As a collaborator. As an accessory to crime. He could have denied carrying out the order. But why would he have done it? he kept questioning himself in prison. There was absolutely no logic to it. They could have collected the Jewish residents without the list as well. After all, the gendarmes were accompanied by a local policeman who knew them all. They needed no list to carry out the action.

The court condemned József Eichard to be hanged by the neck until he was dead. The appointed defence counsel asked for remission. The clemency plea was dismissed...

3.

‘The sentence will be carried out tomorrow at dawn! Is there anything you wish for?’

József Eichard had aged ten years in one day. He was listening to the young judge with his head bowed. He looked at him with blinking eyes; was he the one who had prosecuted him? Or was that another judge? Everything was mingled up in him. He was not able to utter a single sound.

‘You’ll be escorted over to the death house. Is there anything you wish for?’

‘I’d like to see my wife’ he stammered out, but he himself could hardly make out the words he had said.

The judge – but it could have been the gaoler, too – left him. The door of the prison cell closed behind him. The warden looked in through the peep-hole.

Eichard collapsed onto the bunk. Even if perhaps not unexpectedly, he had met his fate certainly very abruptly, and everything seemed so pliable as if things were not happening to him, as if he were a mere spectator from far away. “Do you understand?” Of course, he did. He had known beforehand that there would be no mercy for him if he got into the hands of these men. These are a bunch of Zionists; the whole world had become Jew-lovers. But he would not become one of them; not even if they executed him. He would stick to his firm belief; he was a pure-blooded German; his father had not even spoken Hungarian. He was a devoted follower of Hitler. The world was going to the dogs because of the Jews. They caused the ruination of Hungary; they were to blame for Trianon as well. He took his share in their extinction. This was as much as he was able to do...Forty-one Jews.

He was sitting on the bunk-bed numb, with no feelings at all, holding his tightly clasped hands firmly between his knees.

He had not expected to be pardoned, but the fact that his appeal had been rejected hit him hard. He felt as if he had been stabbed and his blood was flowing now. How long was he able last out? This was the end already. This was death. What was it that the man with the spectacles had asked him? If he had a wish? He wished to see Baba, his wife. He knew that she would come. She might already be here in the building. She had been informed of all the developments. The defendant had called her on the phone. Baba must be already waiting around here somewhere, and had brought him the fish.

The keys rattled again and the lock turned open; a sergeant looked in with the same question that he had been asked before, put in a pert, impudent

manner: "Is there anything special you wish for? We're taking you over to the death cell. You'll be hanging tomorrow, my dear Fascist notary!"

The Chief-notary was irritated because this was not the tone to speak even to those condemned to death. But there was no point in bothering about such trivialities now. The important thing was that Baba should come and bring the fish. Yes, the fish was important. He said to her once: "You know, my dear, even just before dying, I'd love to have a good meal of fish! That's what I'll want you to bring in for me!" Baba was laughing then. It was summer, the sour-cherries were ripening, and they were sitting in the garden of the notary house. It had a lovely spacious garden around it. Baba always had the fish brought from Újvidék because there was no fish monger in Temerin.

"Oh, you foolish man, death is such a long way away!" and she clasped her arms round his neck. "You are such a strong man that you're never going to die!" He laughed at this. "What if they hang me?" he asked, to which Baba burst out crying and started consoling him, telling him "you're not wicked, or a murderer, or a bandit, why would anyone hang you my dear Jóska? For God's sake!" And here he was now about to be hanged because he was wicked, a bandit and a murderer by the words of the law; a multiple murderer. A mass murderer, although he had not touched with his own hands a single Jew. And yet, if he had then taken his stand, picked up the receiver and called up Újvidék, the chief constable, or the gendarme headquarters, or anyone who could have stopped that monstrous bloodshed, then he would not be here now waiting for death.

"Come, pick up your things, and let's go! The death cell is expecting you!"

His things? What things did he have? Was he to take the rug also? What did he need a rug for from now on? The mess-tin? The spoon?

He set off, head up, and the sergeant gave him a push.

The death cell was just like the other cells. Perhaps it was slightly more spacious. And there was a table in it with two chairs. The guard would sit on one of them because it was the custom that a man condemned to death was not to be left alone for a single moment. He would be sitting on the other chair nodding off; or speaking; or he could ask for cards; or for something to read so as to make time pass more quickly.

He was left alone, but half an hour had not yet elapsed when the keys rattled again in the lock. He knew, he was quite sure that Baba had arrived.

The door opened and his wife was standing there with a guard behind her. They embraced each other. Baba burst out sobbing; her whole body was shaking.

'Stop crying!' he was consoling her. 'It's not worth it. It's not going to help me now anyway.'

'Let me see again what you have in your bag!' the guard said.

'They've looked into it outside, twice already!' she said.

'It doesn't matter. Two heads are better than one.'

'Here you are,' she passed the bag over to him.

'What's this?' he was unwrapping the wax paper.

'Fish.'

'Fish? Not really!'

'My husband's last supper.'

'If I were the one to be hanged I'd certainly eat something else! Damn sure. Bogami! But my mother had always told me to respect other people's opinion. So I'll hold my tongue. Here's the fish, have a good supper. And this? What's this? You've not hidden anything in it, have you?' he kept turning the bread around in his filthy hands. It was a round loaf, still fresh, baked the same day. It had not yet been cut.

'And I've brought a bottle of wine as well!' she said, passing it over to him. The cork had not been touched.

'Riesling,' the warden said, smacking his tongue. 'I also like Riesling. There's no match to the Riesling from Szerémség region. Karlóca Riesling is world famous. Anyone who drinks it will live for ever! Well, I'm not saying it because of you, and I wasn't trying to mock you, sorry.'

He turned round and went out. He was obviously eavesdropping from outside the door. But there was nothing he could listen to. The two of them were not speaking. They were sitting opposite each other without a word. They were looking at each other. In this moment the Chief-notary saw Baba the way he had seen her as a young man: blooming, fresh, laughing and happy. Well, how quickly the years had passed over them! He had just turned fifty. In a few years' time he would have retired if the old system had stayed on. His mother in law had a big house at Titel right next to the Tisza; it was surrounded by an orchard. They would have moved out there. He heaved a big sigh.

'I brought you the fish,' she said whimpering, and then burst out sobbing. 'Must you? Is there no other way out? Is there no way you could be pardoned?'

'They'll carry out the death sentence tomorrow. It's the rope. Just as they do with the murderers. And they'll bury me in the graveyard ditch. You won't be able to visit my grave even.'

'You'll go on living in my heart for ever, Jóska! You'll never die!' she put her hands around him and lowered her head onto his chest. 'Would you like me to go away together with you?'

'I don't want to hear a word about it! You have your old mother to look after, and the future of our daughter is also in your hands. How can you even think of it? Would you really run away? You must be strong now. You have

to go on with life, my honey. My dear little dove!' he was fondling her as in old times. 'You might even be proud of me one day. They'll name a street after me in Temerin'

'What good would that be to me? I'd rather they'd let you stay alive!'

'I've sacrificed my life. I don't wish to go on living in this Communist world. This is no longer life for a man.'

The keys rattled. The warden stepped in.

'Visiting time is over. From now on no one can stay in the death cell. You'll have to leave, comrade!'

'You just go, Baba. It's better like this; both for you and for me. Go please. For God's sake don't start taking a farewell, don't even turn back, just go as if you were not taking leave from your husband in the death cell, as if you were just running over to get something from the store. Go, my darling, and look well after our dear daughter. Tell her that it was her I was thinking of in my last moments. And that she must never be ashamed of her father.'

He went on talking with his eyes closed, but by then he was alone in the cell together with the warden who had sat down by the table turning round the Riesling in his hands.

'Shall we open it?' he showed warm interest in it.

'Just open it! Drink to my health.'

'No use now, my comrade,' he said somewhat crestfallen. 'But I'll drink to it if that's what you wish. But you'll have to have a taste first; in case it's poisoned.'

The Chief-notary tried the wine, drank a sip or two, and then sat down with a big sigh. He put the food from the bundle onto the table; he put the fish next to the bread. He kept his eyes fixed on it; it was a big piece of carp. The warden passed his hand over it for the bread. He broke it in half and looked at the inside. There was nothing in it.

'Won't you look at the fish, too?'

'No,' he laughed. 'There are bones in it. I might prick my fingers on them. You know, I can't stand fish. There's nothing like beef goulash. And lamb roasted on the spit! Have you ever had mutton leg roasted on a spit? Well, then you don't even know what delicious food is!'

'The Lord also had fish with his disciples for his last supper!' he said with a radiating, exalted expression on his face.

'The Lord was resurrected after Golgotha!' the warden remarked triumphantly.

'In order to redeem sinful mankind,' said the notary.

'That's what I don't believe in. There are things that I cannot believe. This is one of them. The other one is that justice wins. Bullshit. Power wins. There's one thing in the world that is even more powerful than power.'

Money. See? That's the truth. Isn't the world fraudulent? Ugh, let me break off a piece of that bread; the Riesling will taste better. Aren't you going to have some of that fish?'

'Later, before I close my eyes.'

'Will you be able to sleep in this state?'

'I might not; but I'll close my eyes. I'll eat the fish – it'll be my last supper – and then I'll stretch out on the bunk bed.'

'Don't you wish me sitting here with you? Don't you wish to talk to me? Just to take your mind off dying?'

'I'm glad to be listening to you. Yet, all there is left for me to think about is dying. Could I not get a priest, perhaps?'

'What the hell for? You are a mass murderer. You won't get absolution anyway. And priests are not yet in regular service in the prisons. We no longer live in that kind of a world. The days of Communism have come.'

'So I have noticed,' said Eichard with a slight irony. 'Many innocent people have to die for this cause.'

'You don't wish to say that you're also innocent, do you? You have exterminated every Jew in Temerin. I'm just looking at you. You must be a merciless man. If I were on duty in the morning I'd watch the wind blowing your legs. What are you laughing at? Have you gone mad?'

'I'm not laughing at you. I've just remembered something. The wind would be blowing my legs, you say. But there is no wind now.'

'Well, that's just a way of putting it. All I wanted to say is that I'd go and watch how a man like you dies.'

'It's my pleasure,' he nodded towards the warden. 'You're invited.'

'Just you wait a bit, and you'll be off your pedestal in no time. I've seen brave men on the gallows. They shat or wetted themselves. One is brave only until one sees the gallows; and then bang goes the courage! That Dušan who took sides with the Hungarians, the dark one, I can't remember his second name now; he went on cursing our God; it was a real pleasure listening to him. And when he was taken there and given over to the hangman, he fell to his knees and was whining like a beaten puppy. He was, indeed!'

'Stop it now. You're not in here with me to tell me such stories. Rather leave me alone then. Please do. I'll be all right on my own. At least I'll get the time to make peace with my conscience.'

'All right, I'll have another mouthful of wine and leave you. I'll be back later. But if there's anything you need, just bang on the door. Have you got any cigarettes? Hasn't your wife brought you some?'

'I've never smoked in my life.'

'You should have. It's the greatest pleasure. You'd probably enjoy a puff or two now. Well. I'm off now.'

When the door had closed behind him, the Chief-notary took the fish into his hand, smelled it and then, with other-worldly piety on his face, he put it down next to the bread. He broke a piece of bread off and chewed on it slowly. It tasted good. He had always liked bread. He also drank a glass of wine. He had no idea what the time was, perhaps it was after nine. It was dark outside; pitch dark. Death must be like this. Or was it white? It might even be pink or perhaps flame red? Why do people imagine it to be black?

And then all of a sudden invisible people started swarming around him; it was like magic. The old Schossberger came first; he entered through the wall from that world into which he was about to depart. He said nothing, just sat down on the empty chair opposite him. His beard was shaking, his eyes were looking here and there, and he was startled. Uncle Schossberger who had always spoken to him with such great respect that he had even taken off his cap to him. He always wore a knitted cap. Like the ones the Jews wear in the Synagogue. His Hungarian was not good; he mixed German words into his sentences, drawling the last syllables as if singing. Then came Béla Gussman, the merchant from the main street. He had false teeth; he had a flat forehead, protruding ears and combed up, spiky hair. "Szervusz Jóska," he held out his hand. His palm was soft. "You're holding out your hand to me, Béla?" he asked with a flicker of his eyes. "Why would I be angry with you? We aren't vengeful; It's Jehovah who'll pass his sentence over you pretty soon!" Jehovah! What had he got to do with Jehovah? He was going to his own God; his God was more just and not avenging like the God of the Jews. His Lord had died for mankind and then was resurrected; he would take the sins off his shoulders and wash his soul clean. After all, what was it? Perhaps an escapade. But to say it was mass murder? It was that lieutenant who swore that he would show and arrange that the village would be rid of the Jews, and then he also went for it. He had been led onto it; so the burden of the blame did not weigh on his soul. And yet it was he who had to pay for everything; he and that poor deputy clerk, Géza Bódy, whom he had asked to draw up the list of the Jews.

"Uncle Jóska", said the caressing voice of Marcsa Gussman. He liked the small Gussmann girl. When she and her mother sometimes accompanied her father to the parish hall, he always gave her a swing on his knee. And he would get a kiss from her in return. Marcsi also died there on the bank of the Tisza at Zsablya; but what did she want from him now? He put his hands on his ears, but he could still hear her calling out louder and louder: "Uncle Jóska!" One must go mad from it. He was just about to jump up, bang on the iron door and call in the warden, when his eyes fell on the fried fish, and he calmed down. Time had come for him to eat his last supper. Like Christ before the Golgotha.

He knelt down, made the sign of the cross and said the Lord's Prayer. He got mixed up towards the end. He could not remember the text clearly. "Keep us out of temptation... we forgive those... that offend us."

He broke off a bite of bread and ate it. Then with a light move of his fingers opened up the fish. The tiny bottle was in there: a small phial, and the arsenic inside; Baba had brought it. He'd bought this phial of poison twenty years before and had been hiding it ever since; they spoke about it now and then. If they ever found themselves in a situation from where there was no way out then they would take it. But fate had given him grace now to take it all alone. They had agreed at the time already that they would swallow it with fish; the Lord had also eaten fish with his disciples for his last supper. Eichard did not like fish, in fact. But he knew that his wife would bring him fish this evening. Fish, with this tiny phial of poison inside. So that he should not have to die like a rogue or scoundrel on the rope. Gentlemen do not like rope; they find it shameful and humiliating to be hanged, and if they can choose they would rather take a pistol or the volley.

He pursed his lips. It flashed through his mind that by present concepts he was no longer a gentleman. He was nobody, a rotten intellectual traitor who had to perish, because he had no longer any role in the present regime.

But the time would come – and now he believed it strongly – when the dead would be unearthed, those who had been secretly buried at night, and be buried again with tears in the eyes and patting of the chests and would be shown the justice they deserved. This regime would certainly come to a doleful end. Something that is inhuman cannot stay up long for it is at the same time unnatural, too.

He clasped his hand firmly around the phial. He would have never thought that so much strength was needed for suicide. He was lying with his face down; the rough rug felt like fire in his face. What would happen if he decided not to take the poison? How long could he go on living? It must have been about ten o'clock. They take the ones sentenced to death to the gallows at six in the morning. He already knew; he had heard it every morning when they were led along the corridor. They carried out five to six executions in the prison yard every day. Everyone was awake at that time; trembling and with faces pale they were leaning with their ears on the door. They could hear chaotic cries from outside. "Long live Stalin!" And then another one, "Long live the king!" The day before it was a Hungarian to be executed for he cried out in a coarse voice – God might have even heard it – "Éljen Magyarország!" "Long live Hungary!" Who could it have been? Hungarians weren't brought into the prison; they were done away with in the graveyard ditches. They were outlaws nowadays.

Well, it must have been about ten o'clock. If they came to fetch him around eight that would leave him eight hours. Plenty of time. Eight hours! But these eight hours would be filled with anxieties and horror; he would get crazy waiting for the approaching death and counting the minutes. And what would these eight hours be good for? They might be worse than death even.

There were a few pieces of paper and a fountain pen on the table. Each person condemned to death was given the chance to write his last letter, and take farewell from his beloved ones. That was guaranteed to them by the law.

He pulled the paper closer to him, screwed off the top of the pen and tried it out on the paper; it had lovely blue ink in it.

"My darling Daughter, dear Zsuzsika,"

He stopped. What should he write to his daughter? Baba, his wife, was going to tell her about their last meeting, and pass her his message. His tears started rolling; they rushed down his face and wetted the paper. The ink had smeared. No, he didn't have the strength to continue writing. He was not going to say farewell to anyone.

"Jóska bácsi!" "Uncle Jóska!" he heard again the voice of the Gussmann girl and could feel the fondling of her hands on his face. This was a cruel thing, the cruellest thing that he had lived up to. He ought to say to the Jews that he was sorry. To each one of them. All the Jews from Temerin were surrounding him now, those who had been executed, beaten to death and mocked at; he was facing them and his own conscience was looking back at him. He was thinking about how the gendarme lieutenant had got away with it. He had been sent to the front lines on the Don River bend and was killed there. He died a hero, and was promoted to the rank of captain. His family were proud of him. His photograph was, for sure, hanging on a wall in a village somewhere in Transdanubia, surrounded with a national tricolour ribbon; now and then, his family would light a candle in front of it and look proudly at him. "My father was a hero," says his son, who sets him up as an example. He might even have some Jewish friends. They shake his hands and respect him. He is an honest man in their eyes. Well, is there justice in this world?

He clasped his fingers round the phial with the arsenic again. And then he thought what if Baba had changed its content and it did not contain poison but clear, pure water? And he would drink it and would be waiting for death to come with his heart at peace, and he might even go to sleep and then wake up to rough hands thrusting him out into the corridor; two wardens would be urging him with gun butts driving him out to the place of execution like a beast to the slaughter. The gallows – which had become a permanent piece of equipment in this prison in Duna utca since the war had ended – would be waiting for him in the yard.

Holding it up to the light, he examined the content of the bottle. No, Baba couldn't have done a thing like that to him. That would be terrible. To end his life on the gallows, this wouldn't be worthy of him. There's yet one more blow he must give to this lot: they would find him dead when they came to fetch him in the morning. He imagined the stir up when they discovered his dead body. The warden would be called to account; and he'd deserved it well; to say that he'd like to see him being hanged! He'd get disciplinary punishment, maybe even imprisonment. Then they'd try and discover who had brought the poison in. That wouldn't be difficult to find out. But even the law allows the wife to do such a thing. Nobody could prove it, anyway. The food that she'd brought in had been inspected by two men, after all. They'd not suspected the fish. It might even come out in the papers in bold headlines: "Chief-notary of Temerin Committed Suicide in the Death Cell." No, not like this. He was no longer Chief-notary. They'd put instead: "Butcher of the Temerin Jews" or simply, "Murderer of Jews, Chief-notary..." He was thinking of possible variants, and amused himself in this way for some time. Then he got tired of this game, became sleepy and his stomach started turning.

'Oh, my dear God!' his sigh went up to the Heavens, and he said again the Lord's Prayer. He ought to repent his sins now, but he didn't know how to start. Ought he to write down on a paper, I'm sorry? The Temerin Jews wouldn't be able to read it anyway. Why should he write it down then?

The decision had ripened in him; all he was lacking was the courage to do it. He was working it up slowly, and then with a sudden movement he thrust the phial into his mouth and crushed it with his teeth.

It felt as if his whole body had been flushed with heat; all of a sudden he was feeling very light; he could even fly up, all he would need to do was flap his arms. His body was already beginning to rise. Flowering meadows and trees were waving up to him, he could see the garden at Titel and then the house where he'd have moved once he was retired. His daughter Zsuzsika was running to him, there was a blue bow in her hair, that long past summer beside the Tisza he'd never be able to forget. He was taking them with himself now; the scent of the linden-tree, the buzzing of the bees on the blossoms and the peaceful twilights whose purple light shone back at him from the distance of the past. And he could hear the toll of the evening bells, too.

He stood up and then dropped back, trying to move his arms. He spread out his arm to get the fountain pen. But he had hardly any strength left; the poison had turned him weak. He could not yet feel the pain but it was coming, these were his last moments. Somebody was greeting him: "Good day, Mr Chief-notary!" He could not make out his features, everything had become a blur. The pen fell out of his hand. The incredible knife of pain stabbed him in the stomach and then grabbed and clenched his throat. He

fell onto the bunk bed. There was a rattle in his throat, he would have loved to go on living, it didn't matter for how long, eight hours or only eight minutes, just live, the longer the better...

The warden looked in twice through the peep hole and thought that he had fallen asleep. He was lying flat on his stomach. It was only in the morning when they had come to take him to the executioner that they had realized with dismay that he was dead.

There was a letter on the table with the salutation only that he had started to write to his daughter. There was some kind of a scribble under it, a capital B and a loop that resembled the letter O and then something illegible, perhaps the word "Bocsánat", "Sorry". But that was of no importance.

His corpse, which was already stiff, was taken out and the paper with his last message was thrown away.

The execution of his sentence was officially declared to have been carried out. The request for the handing over of his corpse was denied, and no one knows where he was buried.

4.

Kispéter found it suspicious that András had stayed away for such a long time; he did not show up for his dinner, either, although he had always been busying himself around the kitchen. Kispéter learnt that he had scurried out through the back main gate on the pretension of getting cigarettes. The old Morvai had even seen him walk towards the mill with a Soviet soldier.

There had been some skirmish around the mill in the afternoon, the men coming back from the mill talked about it. Could he have got into something? He needed some flour, anyway, his reserves had all gone, so he organized two of the men to go out and walk round the mill at dusk. They would first cautiously approach it, and if they found nothing suspicious climb over the wall the way they usually did it.

Two volunteers set off right after dinner, those two who had been assigned to peel potatoes: Jóska Nagyidei and the Árpád boy who had been very diligent. They took the rubbish out into the rubbish collector in front of the building and then sneaked away past the guard, who did not take any notice of them.

It was quiet around the mill but they could immediately see the traces of the afternoon fighting on the broken gate. They also detected some bullet marks; but they could see none of the units of the Red Army around. The two armoured cars in the back street were also gone. The Soviet troops were in constant movement; they were coming from the South and passing on in the direction of Újvidék.

It was Nagyidei who spotted András; he was lying next to the loading

hopper with everything white around him; the Russians had shot at one of the bags of flour, but András had been hit by several bullets, too. He was bleeding severely and rattling in his throat, but he was still alive then.

‘Oh, my God!’ cried out Nagyidei. ‘All these cigarettes!’

He was thrusting handfuls into his pocket. There were cigarettes everywhere around: Molnár’s last acquisition. The Russians had left them there; they satisfied themselves by killing him. They shot a round into him and then devastated everything around. They were looking for the pálinka; the sergeant had claimed that there must be some.

They did not find any, so they had to leave without it cursing wildly, and left András behind bleeding from several wounds.

‘What shall we do with him?’ Jancsi Árpád asked. ‘Uncle Jóska, what can we do with him? How can we take him away?’

‘We’re not taking him anywhere!’ Nagyidei took off his hat. ‘It makes no difference where one dies. He won’t last long.’ He put his hand on András’s forehead. ‘Let’s rather cover him. I’ll shake the flour out of this sack. It’ll do for a cover. Give me your haversack; we’ll rather take back some flour in it.’

‘Shouldn’t we pray for him?’ asked the boy, who was rather frightened.

‘We could do that. Do you know the prayers?’

‘I know them all. I’ll start with the Hail Mary, that’s the way they do it at wakes.’

Later, after they had prayed the Hail Mary, he asked,

‘Will this not cause us some problems? Shouldn’t we perhaps tell someone about it? What should we say?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I think he deserves to be buried decently. He was an honest, good Magyar. I knew his wife as well. And his son, Imrus; we courted the same girl two years ago. Don’t you happen to know Vicus Góbor? The daughter of the Góbor in Kastély utca? A nice girl she was; she married someone else, the Szvincsák boy. That bristle-haired boy. He’d inherited 15 acres from his father. And Vicus had four. Twenty acres, that’s quite something, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah, that is something’ said Nagyidei quietly, and made the sign of the cross.

‘I’ll never have twenty acres’ whispered Jancsi as they were sneaking down the staircase with the haversack bursting with flour on their shoulders.

András Molnár was by then not alive.

A Message from the Other World

1.

He was running, straining himself desperately to the utmost in the night that enveloped him with mysterious, soft lights. His feet waded into puddles, bushes were scratching his naked upper body, he slipped and fell to his knees now and then, but he jumped to his feet with wild resolution and gathered headway again.

There was still light in some windows and one or two lamps burned at the street corners. A cat ran across the street in front of him, and it occurred to him suddenly that it was a bad omen. But was it possible for an even greater misfortune to befall him?

Lajos Uracs knew the area well and he also knew that along the south side of the cemetery there was a deep ditch that was most likely half full of water by now. In mid-summer the Gypsies made adobes there to build houses with. His house was in the Szlatyina part, next to the cemetery, so he was instinctively running in that direction. Perhaps he could hide in the yard or the pantry or go up to the attic, but he was afraid that his pursuers would quickly find him there.

They did not know even his name and were shooting at random in the night. A shot passed him, hissing by his head. Then silence fell. A deep silence filled him also; his ears were almost humming from it. He had run out of air and collapsed. The lights of the village were shining far away. He could feel that he was safe; he had run a long way and the cornfields were just an arm's length away from him.

When he caught his breath, he was shaking with cold. He must get hold of some clothes; his torturers had pulled off his shoes as well, and had torn his shirt into rags while they were fighting with him; fortunately the deathly blows had not reached him because he had slipped and fallen to the concrete floor. From then on the raging men from Zsablya and Csurog did not bother about him; they thought that he must be dead. They were hammering down on those who were wailing and crying, and still moving.

The Serbian residents of Zsablya and Csurog had sent a delegation to Tito even before the partisans entered Temerin, asking him for permission to settle their accounts with the guilty before the civil authorities were set up. Tito had given them the permission. In the end the blame for the awful butchering falls onto him. The word went around that the partisan commander was not only vengeful, but also sickeningly vain, a dandy who could hardly wait to set himself up in the nest of the Karađorđević Dynasty, called the Beli Dvor, that is, the White Court Royal residence. He was much

more interested in that than in the Szerém front lines and the inhuman sufferings of thousands of partisans dying there. He surrounded himself with unprecedented splendour.

The man running away from the mass grave was in such a state that his own mother would not have recognised him. The shreds of clothes that he still had on were hanging down all bloody and muddy. His face was also almost unrecognizable, not only from fear and the horrors that he had been through, but also from the blood that had dried on him, and the outcry in his bloodshot eyes under his forehead that was dark from dried-on mud. He might not have been a human any longer but a whining animal trembling for its life, which had been run over and would run away now if it knew where to go. Should he, perhaps, knock at one of the farm houses?

He was standing by the road leaning against a mulberry tree, alertly looking around and silently taking count of the nearby farms. The one over there with the poplar-lined path belonged to Zavarkó. He would not go there. The one on the right is Zelenka's. They might not even be out there, he would go in vain. If he were to run on, he'd get to the old Hevér's farm and then the next one was the Puszti farm. He knew Imre Puszti well. The two of them had served together in the Yugoslav army. If Imre is out on the farm he would take him in and help him. This thought enhanced him, and, looking out cautiously onto the road that was lit by moonlight, he continued his flight towards the Puszti farm. It was quiet, he need not have been afraid of being surprised, but even if he had been, he could have reached the cornfield in three jumps.

He was lurking about the farm for a good ten minutes. All its windows were dark, and there were no dogs barking, either. Did they not have dogs on the farm? Or had they perhaps just wandered off somewhere?

He quietly opened the stable door and stepped inside. One of the horses neighed; it must have felt somebody enter the stable. It made Uracs startle, he stood back against the wall waiting for someone to call out to him; a farm-hand perhaps. Or even Imre Puszti. But since this did not happen he set off by the wall encouraged, feeling around himself in the dark. He could find his way easily, all stables were alike: the animals tied to the manger on the right and the left; the plank-bed was always in the left corner.

Face down, he toppled down onto the creaking, makeshift bed, the mattress of which was filled with fresh straw. It promised him a soft resting place; sleep, which was what he was yearning for: a good sleep. But he dared not close his eyes. They might find him there sleeping and take him back to the graveyard from where he had just escaped. There were exactly thirty of them, and yet there are only twenty-nine corpses resting in the mass grave. If they were resting at all and not seething in revolt in the other world also for the terrible injustice that had befallen them.

He firmly clenched his teeth and swore an oath: he was to come back here! He was to come back and take his revenge!

Bitter saliva gathered in his mouth. He spat it out. Then he carefully pulled the rug off the bed. It was a ruff rug with a stinking, acid smell. He searched for some clothes on the hook nails on the wall, but could not find any. So he threw the rug over his shoulders, and started towards the door. He was half way out when he turned back, and went to the horse's box and found, even in the darkness, the colt that had neighed earlier. He pulled his hand softly over his fur and then tapped his neck. The horse blew into his hand. This was the sign of alliance, of friendship between a man and an animal. The colt seemed to be kissing him as a sign of gratitude, wishing to return the tenderness and affection that he had shown him.

It felt soothing that he had been able to take farewell from at least one friend in that terrible insecure night, when he had no idea where, which way he ought to go? He was standing there in the yard, squinting at the moon that was taking cover now and then behind the clouds. The wind had risen in the meantime, bringing a damp smell of the soil from the direction of the cornfields.

He noticed the well; its knotty upright arm looked as if it were shaking its fist to the sky. He found the tub next to it half full with water. He washed his face and chest, raked through his fine head of hair with his fingers and then, placing the rug on his shoulders again, started into the fields. The moon hid behind a cloud and darkness fell suddenly onto the land, which was damp and foggy; it carried the promises of rain and uneasiness.

A Magyar peasant who had run away from the grave was making his escape in the night in the mysterious light, completely devastated mentally, with no hope and no country left any longer, without roots, like a weed carried by the wind in the arid pasture land. It might be that somebody would depict in this way hopelessness, the gate to hell, the inhuman sufferings and the horrors of the war in his artistic work: a man heading along stoop-shouldered, with a rug over his back, in the darkness of the night. Fleeing from the home where his ancestors had lived, from the land that his ancestors had turned arable, and had protected and watered with their own blood and fed with their own sweat.

Who was that man? Fate? Doom? A Rider of the Apocalypse that had dismounted his sneezing horse and was now enduring all the terrible sufferings inflicted by the riders? Or was he the incarnation of peace? Was he the germ of future storms? Who was in fact this man who had risen from a mass grave to become a witness?

Lajos Uracs was born in a small peasant house in the Kastély köz; his farther was a day labourer like many of the poor residents of Temerin.

He would go hoeing into vineyards in Szerémség, too, in the old Yugoslavia. His mother died early, and so he grew up without a mother's love; his father sent him early to work as a boy farm hand, then he became a farmhand then he got himself a farm by paying in kind and managed to get three acres of land.

After serving the army he married Viktória Kocsicska, the blond Vicus, who had rich peasant boys courting her as well, but she had chosen the poor Uracs instead of them. They had moved from the farmhouse into the village; Uracs started growing vegetables in a section of his land, and took the vegetables to the market in Újvidék. He had a grey horse named Szultán, and a cart, and he would take his goods to the Futaki út market place twice a week. This used to be the best market in the town before the war; farmers from Futak and Kiszács also went there, but it was the goods from Temerin that were the best and bought up first. The Újvidék housewives would buy cottage cheese, sour cream and butter from the Kiszács women only when every churn was empty on the stands of the women from Temerin. And the same was true of the vegetables, poultry and eggs.

They lived in harmony, worked a lot and had made some profit. The greatest profit was the birth of their little girl. The little Julika was the spit image of her mother, the neighbours said, but Lajos could see some of his own features in her as well, and her eyes were as if his mother had been looking at him, and wishing to tell him something she had no time to tell. But what could it have been? How many times had he been brooding over it on nights when he was turning round in bed, unable to sleep? There is something he ought to know, something that they had forgotten to tell him, and at this moment he felt an increasing desire to know it.

Was it perhaps this horror? Was his mother trying to warn him about this? He stopped suddenly at the verge of a cornfield. He was thinking of his wife, Vicus, and the three-year-old Juliska. He ought to send them a word, just so that they knew that he was alive. To assure them and then go into hiding while this terrible storm was raging about. It started raining. Small drops of cold autumn rain fell on him. He pulled the rug over his shoulders closer to him. He was thinking of home and the small house close to the graveyard. In all, it was just two rooms: a kitchen and a room, but it had a tiled roof and a wooden floor. He had built a summer kitchen in the yard, and in spring they would always move down there. They cooked and had their meals there, the room they used only to sleep in. It was what they called the clean room. In daytime they only opened the door to it when they had visitors. The visitors always admired the many beautiful embroideries, the tablecloths, curtains, the colourful rug on the floor, the many porcelain figures, all the things that showed what good taste Vicus had.

There was not a picture of the Blessed Mary above the bed, but their marriage photograph, enlarged and in a thick frame, signed Photo Balázs, Temerin. He had a moustache in the photograph; and Vicus had a headdress. This was what women in Temerin used to wear after they got married.

Later she stopped wearing her folk costume; she had some town clothes made for her and they had even purchased some cheap frock in the shop. She had put away her headdress, too, and gathered her hair into a coil at the back of her head. Lajos bought her some golden earrings at the fair. How happy she was to get any kind of knick-knacks! He closed his eyes and could see the house and the yard; he was walking in his thoughts across the spacious yard and Cézár, the big German shepherd lay down at his feet with servile devotedness. He had raised him and taught him everything that a dog ought to know. A single word was enough for him to sit down at his feet, stop barking, or run and fetch the stick his master had thrown. He loved that dog. It was, perhaps, his predecessor, the father of Cézár that he had loved even more. He called him Farkas, Wolf, or sometimes, when he was in a sentimental mood, Farkaskám, my little Wolfy. The dog was shot by hunters. He had the strength to drag himself into the farmyard where they used to live at the time and passed away at Lajos' feet without taking his eyes off him; as if he were saying: "Help me! Please, help me!" There was no way he was able to help him. The dog died in his arms in the end. He buried him under the plum tree. When later he passed by the tree he would always raise his hat in front of that plum tree. He could see the top of the tree from far away. Every time he saw it he was thinking of the dog, the dear faithful Cézár. Now and then he would come back to him in his dreams; just as the small house and the warmth of his home. He opened the gate in his imagination and the three-year-old Juliska was flying into his arms. "Apuka!" "Daddy!" she was crying.

No, he shouldn't be thinking of these things now! He shook his head angrily. He shouldn't be thinking of anything else but finding a secure place for himself to save his life, because that was all he had now: nothing but his life. Not even a country, perhaps. He was not even a man any longer. He was just a bleeding, sore, distorted wound that was covered by a rug and getting soaked with rain.

He was walking in the direction of Ókér. If he managed to get onto a train there, then he could easily reach Szabadka. The border was not far from there. But trains were not commuting at the moment. Only military lorries and armoured vehicles clattered close to him along the roads.

It could happen that they would open fire on him without any warning. This was the reason why he did not dare to leave the cornfields; he rushed from one field into another, so that he was in cover all the time.

Since trains were not yet running he had to make it on foot to the Hungarian border; and that by avoiding the villages and the farms. All there was to eat were things offered to him by nature: plenty of pumpkin-squash and pumpkin for the cattle. Here or there a fruit tree was offering its late fruit, there were apples to pick and some bunches of grapes on the vines in many places; the sugar beet was also left in the ground and if there was nothing else but corn, he still did not starve. He would have cooked them, for the ripe grains were hard already, if he had some kind of a pot. But he had nothing. The rug was rain-sodden and no longer kept any warmth inside.

At night he tore out some sheaves of corn stalk and put up a makeshift roof above his head to shelter from the rain. During the day he tried to get dry when the sun came out for an hour or two. Thick fogs swirled early in the mornings and the nights were rather chilly. The only creatures he met were stray dogs that ran away from him terrified. Once a hare crossed his road; they eyed each other from a good distance for a while and then the animal shot off.

He did not know what day it was and how many nights had passed since he had escaped from the mass grave; everything had become blurred, fear merged with hopelessness, exhaustion blunted his mind, his muscles were numb but he just kept on walking, throwing a frightened glance now and then onto the road. He took great care not to move too far away from the road, because it was leading him, showing him the direction in which he was heading.

It must have been on the third or the fourth day when he noticed a makeshift field-guards shelter. Somebody guarding the melons must have stayed in it. There were no longer any melons around, but the cottage was still brooding there embraced by two cornfields and a stubble field.

His heart gave a throb. This was like real heaven! A proper cottage, dry bedding, where he could have a rest and put his head down for a sleep in peace. 'My god, a cottage! Please, let it be empty,' he heaved and prayed silently.

Crouching down on his knees, from the first rows of a nearby cornfield, he kept his eyes intently on the cottage to see whether he could see anything moving around it. He noticed nothing, and this encouraged him. He approached it cautiously and put his head inside the door. It was empty, but he could see on the straw that somebody had been lying on it not long ago. It could have had a permanent lodger who might have gone into the village to get some food or was searching the fields for some reason. Whoever he was, he could not be someone from the authorities, because they did not live in cottages.

Taking all possibilities into consideration, Lajos Uracs decided that he would have a rest. He put down his rug to let it dry a bit, then lay down on his stomach onto the straw. In five minutes' time he was asleep.

When he woke up, it was getting dark already. Could he have been sleeping all day long? Or perhaps for two days even?

He pricked up his ears. It was raining outside. But next to the monotonous swishing of the rain, there was something else he could hear; it was a strange noise that made him think that he was not alone. Somebody was there with him in the cottage. If he held out his arm he might even touch him. He could get him, and if he were an enemy he could overcome him catching him by his throat. But he did not move. Nor did the other person.

They went on sitting in silence like that, waiting for something; perhaps for the other one to speak up. Uracs finally plucked up the courage that was left in him, and asked in a slightly trembling voice:

'Is there somebody in here?'

There was a long, long silence, and then came the answer:

'Yes, there is.'

Uracs felt relieved. He put his question in Hungarian and got an answer in Hungarian. He could have asked in Serbian also and then he might have got a blow on his head. Because it was quite possible that the other man was, like him, a Magyar in flight; a soldier, perhaps, who had stayed behind from his troops and had hidden in here. Someone who could have killed him, after all he was fast asleep. Or perhaps he could have noticed that he was not an enemy? Or perhaps, that he was a Magyar even?

He turned his head in the direction from where his voice had come but he could see nothing in the dark. A match lit up in a while and there was a bitter smell of cigarette smoke.

'Won't you have a smoke?'

'If you'd offer me a cigarette. I haven't got any.'

'Here, take it,' but he could only guess where his hand with the cigarette was, and felt towards it. He took it and then the match was lit again. He saw nothing, but the stranger could see his face clearly in the light. True, he could have had a good look at him in daylight already when he was sleeping on the straw. He did not know what the stranger looked like, who he was, what sort he could be. If he offered him a cigarette he could not have had bad intentions. He might even help him when he had heard what an ordeal he had been through.

When his cigarette was burned down to ashes and he had crumbled the end with his fingers, only then did the man speak again.

'Where do you come from?'

'Death. I've run away from a mass grave in the Temerin cemetery. And what about you?

'Is it enough if I tell you that I'm a Magyar?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Please don't ask me anything further. Where are you heading?'

'I'm not sure. Perhaps I'll make it to Hungary. The old one, for this has been Hungary also up till now. Or do you think the Hungarian soldiers would come back here once again? What do you think?'

The stranger kept quiet as if he had not heard the question. He spoke much later, when the rain had already stopped swishing on the reed-covered roof. The moon had come out shining brightly again, and he could see a bit inside the reed cottage. He was straining his eyes, but all he could see were the outlines of a man sitting. He could not make out his face, but it seemed to him that the man had a beard. This made him smile. His beard might have also grown; after all he hadn't had a shave for days now. He stroked his face with his palm; it was still bristly but turning silky. A few more days and it would look imposing.

'What happened at Temerin?' he heard the question in the dark.

'I don't know. I was taken into the parish hall. There were several of us in there, all Magyars. The Serbs beat everybody to death. They kept yelling and saying that they'd been given permission to do it by Tito... And I know that the men were to report the following day. But I was not home by then...'

There was another stretch of silence and then the man said:

'Well they went about it the same way as in Bezdán, Óbecse, and Mohol, or Topolya, Péterréve and Horgos. In Szabadka they drove the Magyars into the Zentai úti cemetery and made them dig a mass grave... It's the fourth day now that the massacre has been going on, their merciless revenge; thousands of innocent people are dying just because they are Hungarians. Yes, they were given permission by Tito, and they have confidential directives from Moša Pijade, the communist leader; from Moses. It's not only the Serbs that are retaliating but the Jews also. What's your occupation?'

'I'm a poor, simple, working man. I'm a poor Magyar, who's been going to work by the day if it was necessary. I'd never had any enemies. They'd still taken me in, and in there they knocked everybody silly, split people's heads, disembowelled them, pushed their eyes out, tore their ears off or castrated them. They killed people, inflicting the most terrible pain on them. Then they threw the bloody corpses up on carts, and took them out into the cemetery. They took them into the grave where I was supposed to be lying now; exactly thirty people were to be buried in that pit. They managed to bury only twenty-nine. Twenty-nine awfully mutilated, bloody corpses; I stayed alive; by pure luck; or perhaps God Almighty had helped me escape.

My wife had prayed for me. I'd love to send her a word that I'm alive. Only a word; but who can I ask?

'Aren't you hungry?' the stranger interrupted him with a touch of impatience. 'I could give you a slice of dry bread. And I have some bacon too, if you'd accept it.'

'Oh, I'd be really grateful. I haven't had decent food for days. And I've seen no bread since I've been on the run.'

'Here's my haversack; use it to your health,' the man said, and then stood up and pressed himself out through the narrow opening. This time he could see him in the cold, silvery moonlight. He did not have a human face; it looked just awful: bloody, torn pieces of flesh surrounded with a dirty beard. One of his eyes seemed to be missing. He must have been one of the people that the partisans had worked their hands on.

'Wait!' a scream of terror burst out from Uracs's mouth. 'Man, you... you...'

'I was luckier than those who were pushed into the mass grave. But I have to go now, and I don't have the time to tell you my story. By the way, I'm also a Magyar, from Topolya. I must go home now for I'd forgotten something.'

'Please don't go, for God's sake. With a face like that, oh, don't go home, I beg you.'

'You can keep my haversack. And once you've had a rest, just continue cautiously along the road another twenty kilometres, and then you can cross over the border. But don't try and ask someone to take you onto his cart. You can't trust anyone these days. People are scared to death. God be with you, fare well. If you cross the border, please kiss the Magyar soil for my sake, too...'

Lajos wished to ask him something, but he disappeared into the night. The soft, soaked soil muffled the sound of his steps. He could see his shadow, it flashed over the dirt road, and then he vanished into the cornfield.

2.

It took him three days to reach the border. Maybe it was twenty kilometres only; he could no longer remember it. It seemed that he was walking day and night; all was a blur to him, the nights and the days. And his shuddering was increasing. Fear was trailing behind him and following him like a sly dog, ready to sink his teeth into his heels.

As he was nearing the outskirts of Bácsalmás he stopped a farmer on a cart carrying maize.

'Excuse me, but I've lost my way. Which village is that with the steeple I can see over there?

The farmer stopped his cart, took a good look at the shabby man and said before answering his question:

‘Are you a smuggler?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Because there are many of them around nowadays. They’re coming and going. What are you selling?’

‘Me, selling?’ and Uracs’s eyes filled with tears. ‘My life. Don’t you want to buy my life? How much would you give for it?’ He let the rug slid off from his shoulders and was standing there with his arms spread out like a new Christ who has just come off the cross. The man was looking at him in a shock, unable to speak, and his throat was tightening. He could not understand it, but the air of tragedy touched him. He stumbled down from his cart and, stepping over to Uracs, put his arm around him.

‘I didn’t want to offend you. Are you coming from Bácska?’ he said, pointing to the south.

‘Coming? I’m running away from death.’

‘I’ve heard what’s happening over there. Come sit up, I’ll take you to my home. You ought to have a rest. You look terrible.’

‘The whole Magyar nation is like me now,’ Uracs said with tearful resignation while mounting and sitting down on the driver’s plank seat.

They did not exchange any words while they were ambling home. They were sitting like grief itself on the cart, and even the horse seemed to be drooping under the weight of their sorrow. The homestead, whose gate the cart rolled through, looked neat and clean, and a woman with a red and white spotted kerchief on her head closed the gate behind them. She was the farmer’s wife, looking with awe in her eyes at the visitor, who was getting off the cart with difficulty. Her dear, soft-hearted husband would pick up anyone. Who was it this time that he’d brought back with him? It was only the day before that they had a stubble-faced stranger sitting with them at the table; he’d disappeared by the morning from the stable where they’d put him up for the night. There were fugitives everywhere around in the fields; one was beginning to get afraid of them, they looked so down-and-out. There were many red-starred soldiers, too; the partisans were freely coming and going as if the border did not exist. Many thought that these parts were still Yugoslavia, and the Bunjevci were clamouring and beating their chests that the region ought to be joined to it. And that Hungary did not exist any longer. It would be divided up because it fought on the side of the Germans. It was going to disappear completely, they were proclaiming it with joy.

Uracs helped his host unharness the horse, then skilfully pushed the cart under the shed. Then with his only possession – the haversack he was given in the reed cottage, from which all the food was by now gone – he went into

the kitchen and told his hosts in a humble voice who he was and where he had come from. He did not speak much about the horrors; they could read it from his face. The wife's distrust vanished, and she became sympathetic toward him.

'Is there anyone you've left behind?'

'My wife and three-year-old daughter. They think that I'm also there with the others in one of the mass graves ...'

'Did nobody see you escape?'

'Two people did. But they wouldn't dare say anything. And they may not even be alive any longer.'

'I'll get something for you to eat. Go out to the well, you can wash yourself in the tub. My husband has a razor in the stable; go and tidy yourself. I can see that you don't have any clothes either. I'll find you something.'

When Uracs came back from the stable freshly shaved. A shirt, underwear, thick socks, moccasins and a pair of patched trousers were put out for him on the back of a chair in the small room by the kitchen. There was cottage cheese, milk, butter, bacon and half a loaf of bread on the kitchen table.

'There's some left-over potato soup and cheese-noodles from yesterday. Would you like to have them?' she asked, having by now completely warmed towards him.

'I've brought some pálinka, too!' the host said. His name was Mihály Kovács; he owned eight acres of land, and had some grape-vine in his garden. There, in Bácsalmás, everyone had a small vineyard, just big enough for them not to have to buy wine in the pub. They brewed pálinka from grape pomace, mulberries and fruit.

Later, while making a snuggery for him in the stable to rest from all the things he had been through, Kovács told Uracs that there were many Bunjevci in the village and they were all looking to the South now. Communism had stirred their minds and they'd changed within a day's time. They'd turned restless; they sneaked on each other and they uttered threats.

He complained that the Russians had driven off one of his horses also and now he only had this old grey horse that was blind on one eye, which was the reason that they'd left it behind. 'It's good for nothing but sausages!' they yelled. What could he do now with one horse? He could manage somehow through the winter, but what about next year? This is why he wouldn't mind at all if Lajos decided to stay with them; his wife's health had failed and the doctor told her to avoid heavy work. The two of them, two strong men, might be able to cope with all the work. He couldn't pay him money, he was not asking him to be a paid farm-hand, but he'd give him shelter, a home, food and clothes, and he could stay there with them and wait for the time when he could go back home without having to worry. The border was close.

He'd be well off for news, because a herd of smugglers were coming and going, bringing and taking news and goods. He might even send a word to his beloved ones. Later on the postal service would start, too. He could write to them and they could come over and visit him. He'd be put up modestly here in the stable, because he could tell that he was not a priggish, proud man but a hard-working good Magyar. He himself had no children and they could not even have any, and this small farmstead would bring in enough for him as well to stay on under their roof. He ought to think about it...

The offer was tempting. Well, he'd reached a home, he had a roof above his head and could wait with his heart at peace for the winter to arrive. But what kind of peace was that? He didn't dare go out into the street. Mihály Kovács went and reported at the parish hall that a Hungarian refugee from Bácska was staying at his house. The neighbourhood was full of wanderers. The Székelys came with their families on long carts pulled by shaggy-haired horses; some of the carts had a cow tied to the forage ladder, others had piglets in boxes on the carts. The Csángós were fleeing, the merciless storm of history kept driving them on and on. They had become homeless again on their own land to where they had come home. They had come there as if coming to the Promised Land, and now they were leaving it like beaten up strangers, dispossessed and derided.

Lajos fretted over the offer. Should he stay here, in this decent place where he could do some work until things changed one way or the other, or should he go further into uncertainty? But where would he go when he had nobody in this country where, in spite of everything, everyone was a brother of his.

He decided, in the end, that he would rest from all the disasters he had lived through, calm down a little, pull himself together and then make up his mind later on. In spring, perhaps, he could decide. By then things would clear up a bit, the Bunjevci were saying that there might not even be a border between Yugoslavia and Hungary. The fact that the partisans kept coming over every day also pointed to that. One morning, as he was going to the shop, he saw with his own eyes three partisans leading along the street a man all tied up. The unfortunate captive kept crying out at the top of his voice: "Magyars, don't let them take me away! I used to be Chief-notary in Bajmok! The Serbs are dragging me away. They are going to shoot me dead!"

No one went up to him to help; the Hungarian policemen were in hiding. Nobody dared to pick a quarrel with the partisans who took away not only the Chief-notary of Bajmok but everyone else that they had set their eyes on. They must have had informants in the villages by the border where the Bunjevci lived in greater number and had informed them about the suspicious individuals, first of all about those that had run away from over there. They would come here every day and go back with one or two men. No one ever

had any news of the ones that they had taken with them. They must have shot them or sent them away to some mines after the Russian fashion; Tito's men were learning very easily and fast.

They were very apt to learn and gasping for revenge, they were merciless and arrogant. They behaved as if they were at home and the Hungarians were just guests, second-rate people in their own home. And the official authorities were encouraging all this: the Ministry of Interior was in communist hands and allowed for all kinds of illegal partisan hunts, thus aiding unintentionally or perhaps intentionally the extermination of honest Hungarian men.

The case of Bajmok's Chief-notary being removed by force made Uracs upset and fretful. If that went on – and who would put a stop to it since the communists were getting ever more impertinent – then they might take him away too, one day. Someone would report him as a suspicious individual, a Hungarian from the other side of the border. He must have committed some crime if he didn't dare go home. The informers here would report him, and one day three partisans stinking from pálinka would turn up in Mihály Kovács's house and drag him away. They might not even take men like that to hearing but shoot them without even passing sentence over them. He, in fact, was no longer a living man, they had wanted to bury him once already, there was nothing left for him to go on living for; the mass grave in Temerin was still waiting for him.

When around Christmas the partisans came over from the neighbouring Szabadka and went from house to house searching for a man by the name of Siflis – who was in hiding at Bácsalmás according to their knowledge –, Uracs decided to move on. He packed up the few things that his host had bought for him. He had a worn out fur coat that used to belong to the old Mihály Kovács; it was moth-eaten but it kept him warm. They had given it to him as a present. Better to say that it was a payment, since he had done all sorts of work round the house. He took in the wood, the corn-cobs and kindling for the fire, he fed the piglets and the fattening pigs, laid the bedding for the horse and the two cows in the stable, shelled corn up in the attic, went to the mill to get corn, to the baker to get bread, and even brewed the grape residue this year. He had the skill to do them all to the great satisfaction of his host.

'I think it's better that I leave' he said.

The woman started crying and, sniffing, wiped away her tears. Kovács hummed and hawed.

'Things will change, all this must change, Lajos, you shouldn't worry. No one has looked for you yet.'

'Because they think that I'm in the mass grave. But what if it comes to light one day that I'm not? And as for the change, I'll tell you, honestly, I

don't believe in it. And what if it's going to get worse? It's for the sake of the peace of my mind that I must go. I can't take all the excitement any longer. I've had enough of it. I've been through lots of things. Even now that the war has ended, I can't put my head down for a good night's rest. Every noise makes me startle and wake up. Oh, they are here to drag me away! I can't rid myself from the sight of the mass grave. At nights I'm haunted by the mass grave, the sight of the bloody corpses, and I often dream that I feel the soil thrown down on me, it's getting heavier and heavier, I can't get air any longer, I'm going to choke in a moment's time! And then I wake with a startle. I'm drenched in sweat. Well, I'm not able to bear this any longer! I wish at least for my nights to get peaceful. I can suffer through the days somehow. The nights are terrible though. The partisans came again yesterday. And the dog barked at night. I woke with a start. Why should I go on gabbling any further? Thank you for everything; I'll never forget your kindness. I'll let you know about myself one day; if the world changes, then I might even come and visit you for a day or two. And I wish you a merry Christmas...

Mihály Kovács wanted to harness the grey horse; he would take Uracs wherever he said he wished to go, to the end of the world even, but Uracs stopped him. Goods trains were running already; he could hear the whistling of the engines. He would climb up on one of them and disappear from around here. Where to? He had no idea yet. He'd just go out into the world.

'An army pal of mine lives in Halas; his name is Mihály Jurasics,' said Mihály, all exited from trying to be helpful. 'He's not a Serb, poor man, only his name is that. He would take you in; tell him that I'm asking him to do it. He would do it. If there was no other escape for you, I'm sure you'd find a home at his place. I don't know where he lives; he might be on a farm somewhere on the outskirts, but you're sure to find him. Mihály Jurasics, that's his name. He's a good sort of Magyar; he's not a communist.'

Lajos Uracs, however, never made it to Mihály Jurasics's farm, not even close to it. When he had cautiously scurried down from a wagon and was hurrying to get out from Halas railway station because there was a great turmoil around it, he was suddenly flanked by two Soviet soldiers.

'Davaj, davaj', they were saying and pushing him towards a set of carriages on the fourth railway track. It was a long set of wagons with wire on the windows for transporting live-stock.

Uracs instinctively asked the soldiers in Serbian what they wanted from him, and kept pointing at himself: "Yugoslav, Yugoslav". This, however, did not seem to help, although it slightly softened the firm expression on the soldiers' faces. But they still pushed him next to a group of men. "Malenki robot" they shouted, but Uracs did not feel at all like being taken to any kind of forced labour. He had enough of everything. He wanted to escape.

With a sudden and brave decision he lowered himself onto his hands and knees and scrambled through to the other side of a train which was about to go. There he hoisted himself up on to the train that a small shunting engine was pushing out of the station. The Russians were shouting, there was turmoil and a shot or two were fired, but, puffing along, the small engine moved out of the station and the racket stayed behind.

When, hissing, the engine stopped, Uracs drew himself up into a corner close to the door so that he would not be seen in case somebody looked in. Then he heard the pebbles grating under somebody's feet. A stifled voice called out:

'Hello there! Whoever you are, needn't be afraid, I'm the engine driver. A skilful escape. I'm standing here now, some three metres away from a cornfield. When you hear me whistle, it is safe. Jump out and run away for I've got to go back with my engine.'

'Thanks, my brother!' he answered back also in a stifled voice, trembling with fear.

'Don't mention it. We're all Magyars.'

This was welcome; a human voice at last in this terrible, inhuman world. A Magyar that was willing to help another one. There were no Serbian soldiers here with the red star, but instead of them the units of the Red Army were collecting and sending civilians by the thousands to the Soviet Union, to Siberia perhaps, or even further into sure death. They would capture anyone they found in the streets or shops, even drag people off the train when they were on the way home to their families. Their families would be waiting for them to come home for many years in vain. Half of these men captured and dragged away innocently and unlawfully, would never return. Malenkij robot! Just a little work. And how long would this little work go on? 'Setshas.' Until the five-pointed star fell down.

Uracs heard the whistle that was blown for him, jumped off the train and made to the cornfield in three steps. He was running for a while, then he stopped out of breath and fell to his knees exhausted. All the excitement made him burst into crying. His crying was not like a storm slashing the ground with yelling and cursing; it was quiet like the sniffing of a child that has just been spanked.

He wandered for days, got into one of the small summer cottages by the Halasi Lake and was eating the corn, the pumpkin and the sugar beet he had to scratch out with his ten fingernails from the ground. His clothes were in tatters again, the soles of his moccasins came off, but he kept on going back to life. If he could ever reach back into it! He did not know which way to go; here, however, he could already feel that humanness existed and the feeling of co-operation and belonging lived on in people's hearts.

People living on the farms would take him in for a day or two, and asked him with strange, excited looks in their eyes where he had come from, what he was up to, and where he was heading; and when they heard that he was a Magyar from Bácska on the run they would put out for him onto the table at least a dry piece of bread, a jug of milk, a handful of cottage cheese, onions, sometimes even bacon. An elderly woman killed a chicken and made him some paprika goulash. He had never before tasted such delicious goulash.

But he moved on from here also, restlessness and fear urged him to go further. He ended up on a farm by Kiskörös. It belonged to Zoltán Mihalik who had come here as a Tót, that is, Slovak emigrant, but had turned Hungarian since, and spoke no other language but Hungarian; and he fiercely hated the Russians. He was deeply religious; whatever work he started, he would make the sign of the cross beforehand. At lunch time they would always say the Lord's Prayer and only then sit down at the table. This was not just sanctimoniousness; his host was deeply religious and received the Holy Communion every Sunday.

He did not have much land, sixteen acres only, but, being a very shrewd man, he went to fairs, bought and sold things, exchanged things, fattened pigs, raised oxen and went into kitchen-gardening as well. This was where the newly arrived Magyar – who had told him the most terrible stories – was able to help him most.

It was not yet springtime, but they had already started with the seedlings in the warmth of the stable. When the weather turned a bit fairer, then Mihalik harnessed the horses and the two of them went out into the fields to bring back a cartful of corn. The cornstalks were still standing with the ears on because of the war events. There were no men around to reap them. Armoured vehicles flattened them or the neighbours took the harvest away, those who had been spared by the war and had not been taken away for malenki robot by the Russians either. Sometimes they found ownerless pigs, wandering about hungry and lean in the cornfields. They drove them together and took them home to fatten.

'May the good Lord forgive me,' Mihalik would say, making the sign of the cross. 'But I had no heart to leave them out there. These piglets would have perished out there. And the corn would also have gone to waste. This country has been through too much loss; that's true, isn't it?' And he looked at the new-comer Magyar. Uracs kept telling him that he was right, he did the right thing and this could count by no means as a sin in the eyes of the good Lord. He shouldn't worry over it.

And he did not worry any longer. And Lajos was rewarded by him too, as a sign of God's mercy, in the form of a pullover, a lighter, then a pocket knife. He had his meals together with the family and could fill his plate for a second

helping too if he wished, for the wife kept offering him and the kids got to like him as much as if he were a family member. He decided to stay here in Kiskőrös on Mihalik's farm.

He lived with them for five years and then the wheel of destiny took another turn.

3.

In nineteen-fifty, when the Communist regime came into power, the farmsteads around Kiskőrös had to be taken into co-operatives. The small town became occupied by what they called "educators of people", that is, workers from the factories who went out cheekily onto the farms and claimed – though they themselves had no idea – that those co-operatives were the only right way into the future for the peasantry.

Two years later Lajos Uracs was already brigade leader of the kitchen-gardeners in the "Wheat-Ear Farmers' Agricultural Co-operative". He became a respected member of the co-operative, who was given permission to move into one of the cooperative's flats built along the road leading to Kecskemét, although he had no family. No one had ever asked him whether he was a Hungarian citizen. It seemed natural; he was a Magyar. Which country's citizen would he be? He lived under his own name – he was still afraid though that one day someone might come to take him away –, and there was one thing that was preoccupying his mind all the time: the wish to inform his family that he was alive. But how should he go about it?

He racked his mind and thought of all kinds of daring plans, but none of them could be realized. He did not dare to go home. He indulged in fantasies about bringing his wife Vicus and his little daughter Julika over to Hungary; the flat was spacious enough for the three of them to live in. His wages were also sufficient. He had everything, except peace of mind.

He lay awake at night, craving for his home; he walked along the main street in Temerin and the Kastély köz a thousand times, and then along the way by which he had been taken to the graveyard on the cart among the bloody corpses. He stopped in front of his small house, knocked on the window and waited, all excited, for the light to be turned on and for the sounds of Vicus's voice asking "Who is it?" And then he answered: "It's me, Lajos." The door flung wide open, and his darling, beloved wife shot out; he lifted her into his arms and started running, running. He ought to have sent her a word secretly, in a way that nobody else but she could learn about him, and no news of it would go round the village. Let them go on believing that he had been dead for a long time. Then nobody would ever look for him any longer. It was time he had some peace.

However, there was no way he could send a message home; but after nineteen-fifty-six the Wheat-Ear Co-operative was invited to the agricultural fair in Újvidék. The chief gardener, a certain Kálmán Nagy, was sent to the fair. Uracs was very close to him and had told him about his terrible Calvary several times. Kálmán Nagy had shown great understanding for his request, especially since it meant no difficulties for him. Uracs asked the chief-gardener to devote a morning to visiting Temerin if he has time, since it was not far from Újvidék, only eighteen kilometres. He should just go there, look around and find out how his family were doing. However, he ought not to tell anyone that Uracs was alive, not even if he were put to the rack.

The chief gardener had some good news on coming back home from Újvidék: Uracs's family were alive and the small girl was fifteen already. The house looked spick and span, their lodgers were in good health. Vicus worked in a clothes factory and had a good salary, and the daughter went to a technical college in Újvidék; they said that she already had a young man courting her, someone named Bozóki.

Uracs had every reason to be happy, but the news only saddened him, and he was inwardly gnawing at himself. What would happen if he went home one day? He would go and report at the parish hall: "Here I am. Do with me whatever you wish! I don't feel guilty, I've never harmed anyone all my life..." No, that was just impossible. He could not do a thing like that. He didn't have the courage to do it, nor did he have the resolution and it could also turn out to be a disastrous move. Should he give up his life here, leave the country that had embraced him as a son, the home he had found here? Who knows what fate would be ahead of him there at home? There were moments, however, when he no longer knew where his real home was.

This was how the years had come and gone, loaded with torments and the chief gardener of the Wheat-Ear going to Újvidék with the products of the co-operative and bringing back fresh news from Temerin every three years. On one occasion, on a Sunday morning, he waited for the opportunity to secretly take a photograph of the daughter. Uracs had it enlarged and kept it on the wall above his bed. She had grown into a real beauty, this Juliska of his: she was blond and gracile, and looked with a charming smile into the chief-gardener's camera as if she had been aware that he was taking this smile back to her father – the father that she had never known. That is, she had known him, but could no longer remember him, since she was just past three when fifteen years previously the partisans had occupied Temerin in 1944. She was eighteen now.

The days rolled along terribly slowly. A year seemed like eternity to Uracs. When the chief-gardener went to the fair for the third time, he could no longer bring news about the girl. She had gone to work in Germany; she

went with her fiancé. No, not the one he had told about the previous time, but a car-mechanic, a young man from Újvidék: Most likely a Serb, or perhaps a Šokac. His name was Bogdan.

‘Oh, my dear God!’ Uracs grabbed at his heart, since he felt as if somebody had thrust an invisible knife into it. ‘A Serb? My daughter would marry a Serbian young man?’

He had lost the desire to live. Had he been home, he would have certainly prevented it. Vicus seemed not to bother about things like this. But this was terrible. His grandchildren would become Serbs. Their name would be Ivanics or something else ending in -ić-vić, and might not even learn to speak Hungarian. But there was something noteworthy in what the chief gardener had said.

‘They are coming home for a visit to the parish-feast on saint’s day, the first Sunday in September! They are expecting them on Rozália day. I’ve learnt that from the neighbours. They might even be wedded on that day. I even know that they are expected to arrive on Saturday, because the wedding will be on Sunday.’

‘If the wedding is on Sunday then they’ll probably arrive on Friday,’ Uracs thought, ‘so that they have time to get prepared for it. If he had a passport, then he could be there on Sunday, stand in front of the church before the service began and wait for the young couple. He would step out and embrace the bride and say “I am your father!” He would say it loud in a far-reaching, resounding voice, and the bells would start ringing. The organ would sound and Vicus would cuddle up to him as a cooing pigeon, just like in the old days. And they would be going home, the music would sound around them as is the tradition at weddings; the best-men would shout out rhymed verses full of fun, gates would open, everyone would be out in the street to admire the bride, the wedding procession and the young couple.

He did not have a passport, however, nor did he have the courage to go home. His name might be kept on a file at the border, and when he entered the country he would be arrested immediately. “Are you the fugitive who left twenty-nine of his companions on a rainy day at the end of October?” A bony hand, the hand of death would be pointing at him, and there would be no mercy for him. He did not dare to go home, he had not dared to send a message even up to the present moment, lest his family would get into trouble in this wicked and inhuman despotism that is called socialism.

This had caused the death of the man who had taken him in. Zoltán Mihalik could not go on living without his land. After everything he owned had been taken away from him, and they forced him to enter the cooperative, he hanged himself up on the attic. His widow worked as a scullery maid at the co-operative’s kitchen. She was given a household plot only because the

other members were roused to indignation. The president of the co-operative – a sacked factory worker, a drunkard and a great communist – was of the opinion that “a kulak’s widow is undeserving of land.”

Was it simply an idle dream that he could go home and take his share in the great happiness of his family? If he were a bird, then perhaps he could go. Then he could fly there unnoticed. Oh God, if only he could turn into a bird just for one day! And what if he went and looked for his daughter secretly, when she was on her way home, and sent a message through her that he was alive and was thinking of them all the time? Oh God, what would happen then? One must go crazy like this! Why, his daughter, together with her fiancé, was going home through here, the train would be clattering with them along here, through Hungary. They might be going on the midday fast train on Friday; that’s the train that had connection with the express trains coming from Germany. He had already looked that up in the time-table at the railway station. The fast train got in at 12.25 at the Halas station; if he went there in the morning and got onto the train he could go as far as Kelebia; he would have almost an hour to look for his daughter. He would recognize her easily since he had seen her in the photograph. Fair haired and slim just like her mother. Vicus was like that at the time he courted her. He can remember it, they used to dance in the Csillag tavern on Sundays where the brass band played the music. Vicus was really good at dancing the waltz. She could turn equally well from right to left and from left to right.

He was counting the days. There was nothing else that could interest him but this journey; the chance of meeting his daughter kept his spirits up. Sometimes he was like a sleep walker, a moonstruck wanderer, and did not care about things happening around him, as if he were already and constantly journeying in that train going home at full speed. He could feel the swaying of the railway carriages and hear the whistle of the train, the swishing sounds of the engine and the squeaking of the wheels turning in the bends.

He had played out in himself a hundred times what this unexpected and strange meeting would be like. He’d enter the coach, see his daughter, his eyes would run full of tears, his knees would start trembling, his throat would stiffen, and he’d be out of breath. He’d be tottering. Then he’d kneel down next to her, and start crying. No, that was no good. His daughter mustn’t learn that he was alive for she’d tell everyone in her delight. It was only his wife who could keep the secret to herself. He ought to send her a word from the other world. He just didn’t know how to do it.

He thought of not even speaking to his daughter. He would just watch and find out which her luggage was, and then smuggle some kind of message into it that only Vicus would understand. But what could that be? It was too dangerous to fiddle about other people’s luggage. If the bridegroom, who

was a Serb, noticed it he might call him to account. It could even happen that they would pass him over to the police and then he would have to tell them everything. That would be enough for the news to get round. They would also hear about it at home and then someone would come to fetch him and take him back from where he had run away in 1944: the mass grave. Oh no! Just not there, please Lord!

He ought to think of something else, something simpler and more palpable, something natural and not striking. The best thing would be if he were to remain incognito all the way to Kelebia. He would do nothing but sit in the compartment and delight in his daughter. What a meeting this was going to be, my Lord!

He kept planning and torturing himself. He worked out everything down to the smallest detail, pondered over it, and in the end everything turned out differently to what he had planned.

4.

The fast train was five minutes late. These five minutes were hell! He'd never had to wait longer than that! He was biting his lips and walking up and down the platform. It was a quiet end-of-August day with the heat still oppressive, but in the air one could already feel autumn advancing beyond the gardens. The sky was bluer and more translucent. This was already a salute to autumn. Gossamers were floating in the air and the swallows, gathered in groups, were taking their farewell.

When, with brakes squealing, the train stopped at the station, Uracs ran to the last coach and climbed onto it. His plan was to go along the whole train and have a good look at everyone.

He was lucky; in the third coach he noticed his daughter sitting next to a sharp-featured young man. So that was her fiancé. There was a free seat opposite them.

'May I?' airily asked the new passenger, who only had a small bag on him. He put it carefully up on the rack and sat down. Later he took his coat off.

He watched the couple in a shock. They were speaking to each other in Serbian.

'Jugosloveni? Yugoslavs?' he, too, asked them in Serbian. The young man nodded. His daughter did not even look at him. He continued now in Hungarian: 'Németországból? From Germany? Many Yugoslavs are working now in Germany. Are the salaries better there?'

He got no answer. Did they not wish to converse with him? He must think of something else to win their confidence.

He was staring at his daughter. She was more beautiful than in the

photograph. He felt an urge to kneel down and, with his head bowed to his daughter's knees, tell her everything. He dared not do it, after all her fiancé was a Serb and he might give him up. He was in a terrible state; he felt he had to die. He looked out of the window; a cart was going slowly along a dirt road and a dog was running after it. The girl was also looking at the same sight.

'Do you like dogs?' her father asked.

'Yes,' she said, hesitating slightly. 'When I was a small girl, we always had a dog in our house.'

'Are you also Yugoslav?' Uracs asked suddenly.

'Why are you asking?'

'Because you speak good Hungarian.'

'I'm a Hungarian from Yugoslavia; from Temerin. Everybody's Hungarian... or was Hungarian there; earlier.'

'The Hungarians also go to work as guest-workers in Germany?'

'Well, yes, if they wish to earn well. There's not much work at home...'

'Are your parents alive?'

'My mother is. My father died in the war.'

'On the battle-front?'

'He was killed in the war...In Russia...'

She fell silent for a while with her eyes clouding over, and then suddenly changed the subject. 'Do you also like dogs?'

'Yes, I do. In the old days I always used to have a dog. Dogs are man's most faithful friends. I can remember a darling dog; sometimes his clever eyes still haunt me in my dreams ... I called him Cézár...'

The girl raised her head suddenly, and looked out of the window, searching the far distance with her eyes. When she turned back in a short while she seemed slightly perplexed.

'Cézár?' she asked warmly. 'How interesting. We also had a dog with the name Cézár a long time ago... I can't remember him, but my mother has told me about him... Cézár is quite a common name for dogs around us, too.'

She snuggled closer to her fiancé, who stubbed out his cigarette at this, and threw a murky glance at the stranger. As if he wanted to ask him: What the hell are you bothering us for when you could find a free seat in another compartment? What do you want from us? Can't you see that you're not welcome?'

Uracs understood his look well, and in himself he agreed that the young man was in the right, yet he could not leave them. After all, this conversation was what he had come for, his sole aim. His face also showed anguish. He got over his inhibitions; he felt that he had to act because they were fearfully close to Kelebia, where he had to get off the train. How much he would have loved to have gone on with them, gone as far as Újvidék and from there,

changing trains, home to Temerin. His daughter would jump off the train first, and then, running to her mother, she would cry out laughing with great, great delight and pointing at him: "Look Mother, do you see who I have brought with me? Don't you know him? He's my father!"...

A dream this was. Pure fancy. The train clattered on; he closed his eyes; it was good to indulge in daydreams and plan things so that later on the reality of life would be even more painful to him. Him, as a guest in his own house in Temerin? He might never in his life cross again the threshold of that house, except in his dreams. In his dreams he was always at home.

'My Cézár was a half German shepherd,' he continued, forcing himself to be calm. The girl's eyes lit upon him again. The wind through the open window ruffled and tossed about her hair and it looked like some golden smoke in her face. Now her eyes were deep blue; the sea must be as blue as that.

'And what happened to him?' she blurted the question.

'He strayed away one day. He loved rushing around in the fields, he was excited by the smell of hares; once, I can remember, he managed to catch one and brought the squealing thing to me in his mouth like a precious prey. I scolded him that time. I knew, I suspected that this would cause his death one day. And so it happened. The hunters noticed him. They shot at him and wounded him seriously... I carried him home in my arms. He did not whine, only looked at me with surprised and terrified eyes, imploring me to save him.

'Poor doggy...'

'I took him home...My wife and I buried him in the garden, under the old plum tree. On the right, as we went into the garden; by the bower of the vine...'

The girl gasped for a second.

'By the bower of the vine?' she asked almost inaudibly. 'Interesting; we also have an old plum tree in our garden, and a bower of vine; to the right, as we go in.

'Have a look at the old plum tree!' Uracs said, standing up because the engine was whistling, the points switches were clattering and the train was pulling into the border station. 'There's something else,' he turned back from the door, and took out something wrapped in brown paper from his bag. 'I saw this in the parish feast and I took a liking to it. It's a heart made of honey-cake. I'll give it to you. It's a fairing.'

'Really?' she said, clapping her hands together. 'We're just going to a parish feast!' She unwrapped the heart. In the heart, under the looking-glass, she saw the name Vicus. Her mother's name.

She jumped to her feet, but the stranger had already jumped off the train and was pacing with slow steps toward the yellow station building with the pebbles screeching under his feet. Not once did he turn back.

He had ordered the honey-bread heart in Kiskőrös and had the name of his wife written onto it. If Vicus saw this and her daughter told her the old story about Cézár, she would immediately understand that this was a message from him, and that he was alive. And this was all he had wished for: to let her know. She might even remember that he had bought her a heart just like this one in the Temerin feast when he was courting her. The name Vicus was written on that one, too.

‘A heart with a looking glass!’ she turned, standing by the window slightly pale, to her fiancé. ‘Look Bogdan, a heart with a looking-glass!’

‘Should I run after him?’ he asked.

‘He gave it to me.’

They got through the customs with mere formalities and the train went on fast. Both of them felt excited thinking about their future and had forgotten about the uninvited stranger. It was only when they changed trains at Újvidék that the girl suddenly remembered, ‘Bogdan, imagine, I’ve left the heart with the looking-glass on the train!’

‘It doesn’t matter, my darling! I’ll buy you another one that’s much nicer! Don’t get upset about it.’

So they did not talk about the honey-bread heart any longer. Nor did the happy bride tell her mother about the dog. She had completely forgotten about it and about the stranger, too. She was happy.

She remembered them only eight years later.

5.

It happened eight years later, in seventy-one, when she had been home as a mother with her two small daughters, and had packed up her own mother to take her back to Essen with her. Julika went home for a visit with the definite intention of taking her mother back with her to Essen. The mother would be looking after the children at home while she was working at the factory. Namely, she could not go to work because of the children and financially that meant a great hindrance. It was difficult to put aside the money they were trying to save so that they could build a new house. They would have a new two-storied home put up in the place of the old house in Temerin; that would be the most modern one in the village. Bogdan was planning to set up a car-mechanic shop in the basement since he had learnt the trade and had been working as a mechanic for ten years now in Germany.

They had a good life in Germany and had all the things they needed, but it was at home that they found their life was really worth living. This was the way Bogdan, being a Serb, felt about it too; after all he was also from Bácska, and everyone who is used to the way of life there finds it difficult to adjust to

a completely different one. They were never completely at home in Germany; they always longed to be back in their old home country. Another two or three years and then they'd have the money for the house. Vicus would look after the building work. The children could start school back at home. Well, they would have to learn the Cyrillic alphabet but it was Serbian times now in Bácska.

Vicus had to be talked into this journey; she was reluctant to leave her small country house. She would manage somehow on her own these two years before the young came back. They planned that they would live with her son-in-law's parents in Újvidék while building the house. She listened half-heartedly to the things her daughter told her about Essen and about that other world, about an easier life that she could not even grasp. She still washed the clothes in the wash tub, and warmed the washing water in the caldron. She cooked her meals on the cooking-stove fired by corn-cobs. And when she baked something she lit the fire in the hearth and heated it with corn-stalk.

A week and a half of talking her into it, imploring and even beseeching was needed before she gave in at last. The daughter could send her husband a telegram that he could come and wait for them at the station in Essen, and then they set off with loads of luggage onto the long journey that had dramatic surprises in store for them. Vicus was over fifty, but she was of weak health and had been through two operations already, and was quite fragile at the time, too. She was sitting languidly in a corner, watching the landscape running by: the Hungarian land, the farms, the small villages, the steeples greeting her from far away, the nodding poplars and the swirling crowds at the stations.

When they were nearing Kiskunhalas, suddenly the journey of eight years earlier – when she was coming home with Bogdan to Temerin for her wedding – flashed through Julika's mind. She could even see the strange passenger in front of her eyes. How strange, she had never thought of him since.

'Oh, I'd forgotten to tell you, Mother, that a man got onto the train here when Bogdan and I were coming back home for the wedding. I think he was from Kiskőrös. He looked like a farmer. He gave me a honey-bread heart, the kind with a looking-glass in it, like the ones you can get in the village feast at Temerin. And do you know what was written on it? Believe it or not, it was your name: Vicus. He told me to give it to you as a fairing. He was a very kind man. Oh yes, he also told me about his dog. Isn't it strange? His dog was also called Cézár, and some hunters had shot it. He told me there on the train that he had taken the dog home in his arms and buried him in the garden under the plum tree... Isn't that strange?...'

Suddenly she fell silent, looking at her mother alarmed.

'Oh, my God, dear Mother! What's wrong with you? Aren't you feeling well? Oh, dear me, please help me somebody, my mother's fainted!'

One of the passengers wetted a handkerchief with water from a thermos flask and put it on her forehead.

'A doctor! I need a doctor!' the daughter was running up and down the corridor, but she couldn't find a doctor in the carriage. The conductor turned up, though. The train started braking; they were nearing Kiskunhalas.

'I'm already better,' Vicus sat up suddenly. 'My dear girl, where are you?'

'I'm here mother. Oh, you gave me such a fright! Are you feeling any better? Thank God. Sit up, like this, with your head up. I'll hold your head. What happened to you?'

'Come closer darling. Oh Lord, oh my dear daughter, you can't understand. Your father is alive!'

'My father? My father is alive?'

Don't you understand? It was him. It was him sending me a message through you! Your father. That Cézár, it used to be our dog. He is buried in the garden under the old plum tree. That's how your father had sent me a word...'

'But wasn't he killed in the war?'

'No, he wasn't. He escaped, my dear girl! He managed to escape from the grave. He was the one who had sent me this message. He's waiting for us somewhere. Oh, my God! Take off the luggage! We must get off immediately! I'm not going any further from here, not one iota before I've found Lajos.'

'But Bogdan's expecting us. We've paid for the tickets all the way to Essen!'

'I'm not interested in the tickets or Essen right now. I want to meet your father. Your father is alive, my little girl! He has sent me a word. Can't you still understand?'

'I can... in fact, I can't... Where has he been up till now?'

'I can't explain it to you right now... You'll understand it all one day. Your father sent me a message through you, and you forgot to tell me about it.'

Julika started crying bitterly. Her daughters followed their mother's example and were crying, too. The other passengers helped them off the train. They put their luggage into the waiting room. Vicus flopped down on a bench; her daughter was kneeling in front of her and caressing her hand.

'Please, don't be angry with me Mom... I didn't know it was him sending a message. That my father... I'd completely forgotten about it...'

'It doesn't matter, my darling. The important thing is that he's alive... You know, they wanted to bury him in a mass grave when he was still alive. He managed to escape from the butchers. He has been in hiding ever since, and he didn't even dare to send us a word. Oh my God, how they looked for him,

and how many times they came and bullied and harassed me, banged on the gate many times even at night! They searched through the house... They didn't want him to stay alive because he was a Magyar. He was guilty of a single crime: being Hungarian... It is a terrible world we live in if even that counts as a crime in our own land, on the soil where our ancestors had lived. However, this is going to change from now on. I'll protect him and stand by him; oh God, where, which way shall I go to find him?'

'It seems to me that he'd said he was working in a co-operative. Oh, I don't remember any longer, dear mother. I can't remember... But I can still see him...'

'We'll find him. Yes, my daughter, we'll find your father...'

This was the story that I was told by people who had heard it from Vicus. This has become a legend in Temerin. The family of Lajos Uracs had searched for years after the father, who had managed to escape from the mass grave and then sent a message in such a mysterious way. Vicus looked for him sometimes alone, sometimes with her daughter and later on with her granddaughters. She walked around the outskirts of Kiskunhalas and Kiskőrös; they had been to every co-operative farm, they had knocked on Council doors, asked around at the police stations, wept and engaged a lawyer, but Lajos Uracs had disappeared without trace. No one knew anything about him, as if the whole world had conspired against them in order to keep the secret of the innocent man who had escaped from the mass grave.

Then the years passed and Vicus got tired of seeking and became resigned; her daughter had gone back to her husband in Essen and they came back home only rarely. Their lives had turned bitter, and they are no longer happy. People in Temerin see Vicus now and then; she leaves for the graveyard at night, sits down by the mass grave; it would be better, her heart would suffer less, perhaps, if Lajos were resting down there. She weeps and sobs, lights candles and takes flowers to the grave, and keeps hoping; her husband will turn up one day, open the small gate, and just stand there in the middle of the yard!

In her dreams she keeps hearing the gate squeaking; she rushes out calling out to him: Lajos, Lajos! But there's no one in the night to answer her calls.

She often prays with tearful eyes until the morning dawns.

When I am back in Temerin my first walk takes me to my father's grave. I go, just as everybody else visiting the Temerin cemetery, with a single separate flower in my hand. This was the thing I used to see the locals do and also the old women wearing kerchiefs on their heads and carrying wreaths in their hands on the Day of the Dead; they would, under the pretext of shortening their way, walk in great numbers past the mass grave that had no sign on it. When they were next to it, they would drop "by chance" a flower onto it. This was the way they have been taking flowers to those on whose grave it was forbidden to light candles, for whom it was forbidden to pray or even stop by their grave. And the grave always bloomed out full of splendour as flower gardens do in springtime.

This was the grave that István Horváth, the town crier, had escaped from, whose Calvary I have written about. He had climbed out, stark naked, from underneath the corpses. He told me on one occasion about the ghastly events of the day. It was when I had come home for the funeral of my father; he came over to our house and knocked on the window.

I was all alone with my father, my dead father who was lying there on the bier between two candles. I was conversing with him; taking my farewell from him. When I had heard him knock, I let István in. In his eyes there was fear and the painful flaring of the candle light. He was sitting there shivering next to the dead body, and then spoke up as if in a feverish dream. He had brought me the message of the dead. He came as a witness; the only witness that was left.

'I'm going to tell you the true story! There's one thing I wish you to do: swear by your father on the bier that you'll not write down my name as long as I am alive. Because I'm still terrified.'

This was the hour of truth in the black night among the prayers told during the wake. I could hear in his voice the message of horror coming from the mass grave, the smell of death and gunpowder and the screams, although a mutter was all he could manage.

I was only able to understand all this fully when I heard about the case of Lajos Uracs too, who, having been torn to pieces with fear, did not dare send any sign of his being alive for decades. And his feeble attempt turned out to have been in vain; he had never met up with his family again.

He disappeared without leaving traces, as so many other people did; fear, however, still hovers like big black birds above the region. Even during the daytime there is night in Bácska. I can detect this in the clear, honest eyes of the people, and fear also casts a shadow over their foreheads.

I went to the house of Lajos Uracs, stood for long in the gate, walked

across the yard, and opened the door to the room. There was a photograph of his on the sideboard with a candle next to it, and his wife Vicus was praying in front of it as if it was an altar. She was talking to him. And she told me with her face drowning in tears: "Maybe his body is yearning to be back in the mass grave from where he'd escaped!" What horror! What self-torture this was!

The authorities, however, still prohibit the orphans and the widows to stand by the graves. This topic is still a taboo in Serbia. No one has spoken of it so far, and this has given me reason to pass on the story that I was told by István Horváth during that awful night. I am crying out instead of him, I'm telling with my throat stiffening all the things he had wished to tell, and I am speaking in the names of all those who had been thrust into mass graves or buried in the fringe of ditches without any signs. I am speaking in the names of forty thousand Magyars.

Some time ago I went to András Molnár's house on the Gyepsor. Veronika is still expecting uncle András to come home. She sits in the corridor or in the kitchen and she startles whenever the gate is opened; and at noon, when the bells ring, she tiptoes out into the street and, standing in the small gate with her hand shading her eyes, looks into the distance. She is expecting the postman to come. He might be bringing a letter. Whenever she sees him she asks: "Have you brought me a military postcard from my son? Because my son Imrus is fighting in the front lines for the country, for Hungary..." There is nobody to enlighten her that Imrus was killed a long time ago in the Bend of the Don River, somewhere close to Oskol. White-shirted birch-trees are standing guard by his grave.

Veronka sometimes mumbles, sometimes talks in herself smiling, and whenever she can she trudges off to the parish hall, where all the clerks know her by now. They do not speak a word of Hungarian, but they understand that she has come, like every time, to report the disappearance of her husband. The official on duty promises that they will inform her as soon as he has turned up, and tells her to go home; there's nothing to worry about.

She finds her peace for a while. She sits in the corridor waiting for the postman again. She has no land. The state had taken it away from her a long time ago, because she was not able to meet the compulsory delivery quotas of crops assessed ten times higher. She has no live stock either. She just sits indifferent in the corridor or in the kitchen and the years pass by her. When I visited her, I also sat with her for hours, hoping that she would say something. All interest in the world has waned from her. She did not say anything. Only her lips were moving silently.

At times like that I try bitterly to guess how many Magyar families were ruined, and how many decent Magyar men fell prey to the revenge in Bácska.

Until now it was forbidden to speak about the events of those days. There was no evidence of the genocide. Those who were dragged away were taken away secretly under the dark veil of the night. Former Hungarian soldiers and those who happened to be at home on leave were captured. Tradesmen were exterminated, the peasantry was decimated and the intellectuals were wiped out. Dezső Andrée, a journalist from Újvidék – simply because he edited a Hungarian paper for Hungarians – was tied to a tractor by his feet and dragged along the street until his head turned into a mash. A teacher was cruelly beaten to death because on 15th March he gave a lecture to his pupils on the Hungarian Revolution. His family were also killed. There were some whose guilt was to have sung the National Anthem too loud; somebody else had recited a poem. A certain merchant had said: “Bácska magyar föld – Bácska is Hungarian land”. A Serb overheard him, and this was the cause of his death. There were some hanged, others had their eyes gouged out, some were mutilated, others again were impaled. This was the Balkan way of revenge. And all this was done with the assent of the Commander-in-Chief, following a scenario written beforehand.

According to the census data, seventy thousand Magyars were missing from Vojvodina after the end of the War. Where had they all disappeared? According to a rough estimation, about thirty to forty thousand had moved out from the land of their ancestors at the end of the war. A part of them lives in Hungary now, many of them wander round the world homelessly. But where is the missing 30-40 thousand? Are they all lying in mass graves? Whose conscience is burdened with their senseless deaths?

I am crying out for them now as a living witness. I am doing it in the names of the witnesses that are no longer alive. Time has come to look into the eyes of the past. We should think about the fact that future generations will be calling us to account. Common history also requires us to show our true colours. These victims also must be given a last tribute because the soil that they are resting in is their home country, too. Why did they die the death of martyrs? One must talk about past events so as not to be confronted with bloody revenges in the morrow of this land, but rather with understanding and forgiveness. The bell should toll for them, also.

This is the cause for which my cries are going out for.

GLOSSARY

Honvédség - The Honvédség (lit. “homeland defender”) was a specifically Hungarian army within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, distinct from the Austrian Landwehr. The term Honvéd continued to be the name of the Hungarian military after the end of World War I.

dobrovoljci; dobrovoljac, sing. – volunteer This is a word used in the book to describe persons who had been given land expropriated from the former Hungarian estate owners in recognition of their activity as volunteers in the Serbian Army during the First World War.

Ustashe; Ustasha, sing., – Ustashe was a Croatian far-right organization put in charge of the Independent State of Croatia by the Axis Powers in 1941. They pursued Nazi/Fascist policies and were subsequently expelled by the communist Yugoslav partisans and the Red Army in 1945.

Székely – The Székely are a Hungarian ethnic group living in Transylvania in Romania. Some Székelys had migrated to Bukovina at the end of the 18th century and were later resettled to the Carpathian Basin.

Csángó - The Csángó are a Hungarian-speaking ethnic group of Roman Catholic religion living in the Moldavia region of Romania. They settled there between the 13th and 15th centuries.

Bukovina - Bukovina is an area located in the eastern Carpathian mountains.

Bunjevci; Bunjevac, sing. Bunjevci are a South Slav ethnic group originally from the Dinaric Alps region, now mostly living in the Bačka (today northern Serbia or Vojvodina) and southern Hungary.

Šokci; Šokac, sing. - Šokci are a South Slav ethnic group living in various settlements along the Danube and Sava rivers in regions that today span eastern Croatia, northern Serbia (the Vojvodina province), and southern Hungary.

pálinka - Pálinka is a traditional type of brandy that is produced in Hungary

utca – street

út – road

köz – lane

Note 1.
Spelling of names

1. Hungarian names are spelt in the regular Hungarian form
2. Serbian names are spelt in the Serbian Latin alphabet
3. For certain names of Slavic origin the Hungarian transcription has been used where appropriate

Note 2.
**Hungarian nicknames or pet names
have been kept in the translation:**

Ági	– Ágnes	Miska	- Mihály
Imrus	– Imre	Pista	– István
Jancsi	– János	Pali	– Pál
Jóska	– József	Panna	- Anna
Juli – Julika – Juliska	– Júlia	Rozi	– Rozália
Karcsi	– Károly	Sanyi	– Sándor
Kati	– Katalin	Verka – Veronka	- Veronika
Laci – Lacika	– László	Vica – Vicus	– Éva
Marcsa – Marcsi	– Mária	Zsuzsi – Zsuzsika	– Zsuzsanna
Matyi	– Mátyás		

Note 3.
**Place and Geographic names (with some exceptions)
are given in the Hungarian form since this was the usage of the time. Below is a list
of these names in alphabetical order with their present-day Serbian equivalent.**

Bácsföldvár	Bačko Gradište	Kiszács	Kisač
Bácska	Bačka	Mohol	Mol
Bánát	Banat	Óbecse	Bečej
Baranya	Baranja	Ókér	Zmajevo
Bezdán	Bezdan	Pétervárad	Petrovaradin
Becskerek	Zrenjanin	Péterréve	Bačko Petrovo
Bogatics	Bogatić		Selo
Csantavér	Čantavir	Római Sáncok	Rimski Šančevi
Csortanovci	Čortanovci	Sajkás	Šajkaš
Csurog	Čurog	Szabadka	Subotica
Duna	Danube	Szerém, Szerémség	Srem
Feketics	Feketić	Szóreg	Sirig
Futak	Futog	Topolya	Bačka Topola
Gospogyinci	Gospođinci	Tiszakálmánfalva	Budisava
Horgos	Horgoš	Tisza	Tisa
Isterbác	Išterbac	Turija	Turija
Járek	Bački Jarak	Újvidék	Novi Sad
Kanizsa	Kanjiža	Uzsice	Užice
Karlóca	Sremski Karlovci	Zenta	Senta
Káty	Kač	Zombor	Sombor
Kishegyes	Mali Idoš	Zsablya	Žabalj

Tartalomjegyzék

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