

PIESTANY. MOTHER'S BROTHER COMMITS SUICIDE. JEAN IS BORN. CHRISTMAS AND EASTER CUSTOMS. EARLY FRIENDS. 1919 - 1922

We didn't stay long in Madunice. By 1919 we lived in Piešťany. I don't know the reasons for the move. Perhaps Mother felt too cut off but more likely Piešťany was considered to be safer in the event of more riots. It meant a sacrifice for Father, being away from the farm: about 8 m. The farm bailiff was installed in our house on the farm. Father spoke to him at least once a day on the phone which was of the type which had a handle to ring the operator and was fixed to the wall. One held one piece to the ear and spoke into a funnel-shaped microphone fixed to the apparatus. He frequently visited the farm especially in the busy harvest months. Initially in a horse carriage, later by car. We were one of the first families to run a car. It was a large green open Fiat. We had a chauffeur.

Piešťany is a spa and had then 5000 - 10,000 inhabitants. The Vah river formed an "island" between two arms of the river just west of the town. On this island are hot springs, a large and luxurious hotel the Thermia Palace (see exhibit 33), also some less expensive accommodation, a flower garden and all the necessary baths, physiotherapy and other amenities needed for the ailing visitors.

The house we moved into was close to the bridge which crossed the river to the island. We had a garden in the back which reached almost to the river.

In the summer the town was packed with visitors seeking cures from rheumatism and arthritis in the main. Richard Tauber, the tenor, whose hands were crippled with arthritis, was an annual visitor and usually obliged with a concert.

Along the river was a large park with old trees. We children were almost daily taken for a walk along the promenade, separated from the river by a white painted tubular steel railing. There was a Kursaal in the park which housed a theatre and a restaurant. In front was a terrace which in the summer was always full of guests taking morning coffee, lunch, afternoon tea or dinner. A short distance from it was a covered bandstand with deckchairs placed around it in the open air. Only on the rarest occasions did I sit on the terrace with my parents to enjoy a raspberry juice or ice-cream but I frequently listened to the music, standing behind the conductor and gesticulating with my

right arm, stick in hand, aping the conductor.

Pi^yestany was also a big market town for the surrounding villages and had many shops, cinémas, a large post office, churches, banks etc. and a railway station at which all trains stopped.

An early impression of these days was in one winter when a pig from the farm was brought to the back garden. I heard it squealing which frightened me no little. For weeks afterwards we had chops, black pudding, sausages, pig's liver, hams and other meats and cuts as well as lard from the slaughtered animal.

- - - A tragic event occurred for the family on 20th May 1920. My mother's young brother - he was just a little over 19 years old - committed suicide in Budapest. It was a particular terrible shock for Grandmother who doted on her youngest and only son. (See exhibit 39.)

The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had the worst consequences in Hungary of all the successor states. Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland and even truncated Austria managed somehow to establish Governments which gradually restored law and order and got the economy going again. Hungarians prevaricated and argued and quarrelled amongst themselves: should they become a republic? or continue as a Monarchy? The landed gentry who used to run the country were lying low but were among those who favored the Monarchy. But who should be the king? Like in Slovakia, the soldiers returning from the fronts, swelled by the ranks of officials fleeing home from Slovakia, Poland, Croatia etc., (of 12,444 officials in Slovakia before the war only 35 had the courage to declare themselves as Slovaks and presumably stayed behind. Seton-Watson, *ibid*, p.323) were antagonistic to the idea of a continuing mismanaged monarchical system. Returning soldiers from Russian prisoner-of-war camps had been indoctrinated with communism. Everybody blamed everybody else for the debacle. In this turmoil the Revolutionary Communist Party established a Bolshevik régime which lasted from March to July 1919. This was the only one in Central Europe apart from the equally short-lived attempt in Bavaria, led by Kurt Eisner, under similar conditions after the overthrow of the Bavarian Royal dynasty.

The Hungarian revolution was led by Béla Kun who was Prime Minister for 4 months. To prop up the prestige of his régime, Kun invaded Slovakia on May 20th 1919. This soured relations between the two countries for the next decade. A journalist and social democrat before the war, he was prisoner-of-war in Russia. After the peace treaty between the Central Powers and Russia, Kun returned to Hungary and saw an opportunity in the



38. Thermia Palace Hotel, Piešťany



39. István-György (Pista) Szilard

17 February 1901 -

20 May 1920

political vacuum to establish a Bolshevik republic with Russian support. After the counter-revolution led by Admiral Horthy, Kun fled and settled in Russia. In 1928 he became president of the West European section of the Comintern. He disappeared in the Stalin purges in 1937 when he was 57 years old.

Horthy who came from protestant landed gentry was the last Commander-in-Chief of the Austro-Hungarian navy and after the overthrow of the revolution took the title of Regent. The deposed Emperor Karl claimed the Hungarian crown but Horthy refused and remained ruler until 1944. In that year he tried unsuccessfully to conclude a separate treaty with the Allies. As a result the Germans imprisoned him which probably saved his life. It was the signal for the Germans to deport and kill Christians who had Jewish blood whom Horthy had protected while he was still in power. It was then, in 1944, that Mother and Ernő fled to Slovakia from where they and Anni were deported to their deaths (see chapter 29). Horthy was freed and spent the rest of his life in Portugal where he died in 1952 at the age of 89.

To come back to my uncle Pista. He was called up some time before the end of the war when he was about 17 years old. As was customary for men of his background he was accepted in the élite cadet officers' corps which had a status akin to what Guards officers in England. Many of his fellow cadets came from the gentry and nobility and no doubt were fierce supporters of the Monarchy. Pista must have been Catholic then and must have shared his fellow cadets' views on most current issues. In the troubled days of 1919 he was amongst Horthy's White Guards and I suspect involved in suppressing the Bolshevik régime.

The reason for his suicide is not clear to me and my family never spoke about it.

It appears, however, that it was discovered by his fellow cadets that he was of Jewish extraction. Some of the Bolsheviks were Jews and there was a tendency amongst some sections of the population to brand the Russian and other communist revolutions as being machinations of the Jews. There were probably jealousies and arguments between Pista and his colleagues. Temperaments ran high and Pista, with his love for the Monarchy, must have been feeling let down and finally couldn't stand it any longer.

Many years later I met Sándor László, one of the early acquaintances of Mother's from her Hlohovec days, who told me that Pista was killed by some of the White Guards. But that is almost certainly untrue, as I was always told that he committed suicide and Micka confirmed that in one of her letters. It is, however, not impossible that Pista was badly beaten up and that that was the last straw which drove him into tragedy.

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just during the Kun revolution. George was born on 5th April 1919. What a terrible time they must have had, living then in Gyöngyös in Hungary. Hardly had the war been over, Hungary having been defeated, when their lives were endangered by the Bolshevik revolutionaries.

Mother was pregnant when Pista committed suicide in May and it must have been a most terrible shock to her. Grandmother never recovered. She always wore black, became chronically ill and died young. There always hung a photograph of Pista in uniform in our house with a black ribbon across the right top corner and in a black frame. We were told that he died young as a soldier and only later did we learn the truth of his violent death.

I remember clearly Jean's arrival home. Born on 19th September in Bratislava, she arrived in a horse-drawn carriage from the station, held in mother's arms. She was a sweet addition to the family and I had a good look at her when she was brought in. She was christened Susanna Johanna but I refer to her as Jean here. Exhibit 40 was taken at the christening party in our garden.

Soon afterwards we moved to another house in Piešťany, located on the main road running from the station. Opposite were army barracks. To call it semi-detached conveys a wrong impression, though that is what it was. It was more like one wing of a house with two wings. In appearance it resembled a little grandmother's house in Porró Encs (see exhibit 2) with steep gables. There was a narrow front garden separated from the pavement by high iron railings and planted with shrubs. The front door led to a lobby from which a door on the right opened into a large wood-panelled hall which was two storeys high. A wide wooden staircase wound elegantly to the upper floor. It was covered with a deep pile carpet. Along the front of the house on the ground floor and facing the street was a large sitting room and a dining room. In these hung the Schurmann paintings I have described earlier. The furniture was large and there were good carpets and curtains. The dining room furniture was heavy and of black, partially carved, ebony. Also on the ground floor was a large kitchen and larder and another staircase made of stone slabs, for the servants but which we children used frequently. The bedrooms and servants' quarter were on the upper floor. My room adjoined the other house and a balcony running right across both wings, faced the street. This balcony was separated from the neighbour's part by a low wall and iron grill. The neighbours had two children: an older girl and a boy of my age with whom I became friendly. We talked a lot across the iron grill but even more often across the fence which separated the two gardens in the



40. Jean's christening party. Standing from left: mother, father, Irene Szkublics (friend), Paula Fuchs (distant relative, see family tree), between them Boris, covering up a carbuncle on her chin, Josef Schwitzer. Sitting: grandmother Szilard, grandfather Simon Schwitzer, Frida holding Jean, grandfather Szilard, nanny Klärchen. Anni on grandmother's lap, I on grandfather's, Taken 21 oct 1920



41. Father February 1921 Piešťany



42. Mother February 1921 Piešťany

Both parents are in mourning. Mother has short hair as she has on the christening party photo above.

back of the houses. This was a strong steel mesh fence through which one could pass small toys. My friend and I tried for weeks to make a hole big enough to slip through but never succeeded.

The garden was rather formal with beds of roses and other flowers, ornamental trees and flowering shrubs and gravelled foot[paths]. There was a brick wall at the far end through which a wooden door led to the large vegetable garden where there were also fruit trees and soft fruit bushes. We had a gardener. We children had a small patch of our own and also a playing area. At one time we had white rabbits which we were expected to look after.

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We had a cook called Mariška who had come with us from Madunice which was her native village. She was stout, had pale blue eyes and I never saw her without a kečchief tied under her chin, covering up her hair. She had a loud voice, always spoke her mind - in Slovak - and tended to run the whole household. Mother discussed with her every morning the day's menu and Mariška went daily in the morning with a big basket to the market and shops. Mother also went shopping from time to time for things like ham and patisserie. When we had chicken, these were delivered alive and were dispatched by Mariška into the next world. This bloody deed was carried out in a little paved yard behind the kitchen, separated from the flower garden by a wire fence. I never liked the spectacle of seeing the poor dying blood-bespattered birds in their death agonies.

Mariška stayed with us when we moved to Bratislava and later went with father to Veľký Lapáš. She was there when I left in 1939 but I don't know what happened to her later. She and I got on well with each other and whenever I sneaked into her kitchen I could be sure of a tit[bit]. She was also my Slovak teacher. We had two maids who lived in, like Mariška. One worked mainly in the kitchen. The other served at table in a black frock and white apron. Nanny also lived in. The gardener and chauffeur did not.

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Below the kitchen was a fairly large cellar where tricycles and other clutter were kept. One could go down by an internal staircase or through a door from the flower garden. This door was of iron, painted white and its upper part had glass panels of about 3" X 5". The door always got stuck and was difficult to open. One day, in trying to push it in, my right hand went right through one of the glass panels and blood came gushing out of my thumb. I yelled and ran up into the kitchen where mother, nanny, Mariška and the maids stood helplessly around me until somebody poured a whole small bottle of tincture of iodine onto my bleeding hand which stung horribly and made me yell even louder. At last the bleeding stopped and everybody seemed exhausted. I still have a scar on my right thumb.

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

Christmas was one of the great annual events we looked forward to and was wonderful. A couple of days before the 25th, the doors of the dining room were locked, its curtains drawn and we were told that the Christkind (really 'baby Jesus'; there is no 'Father Christmas' who is a relatively recent English innovation) must not be disturbed when He comes for a fleeting moment, carrying presents.

I I once saw a maid come out of the dining room and I could not understand why she was allowed, but we children were not. It was all very mystifying.

The big event was on the evening of the 24th. We were allowed to stay up beyond our usual bed time. We put on our best clothes and the family, one or two friends and the servants assembled expectantly in front of the door separating the dining from the sitting room. At long last the doors opened and there was a tree reaching from floor to the ceiling, glittering and dazzling in the light of real candles. There was no other lighting. In front of the tree were laid out all presents in pretty wrappings. There was a mysterious smell of pine needles and from the candles which added to the solemnity of the occasion. We stood dazed and speechless. We sang a few carols ("Stille Nacht ..."), Mother playing the piano. Then a short prayer was said and only then did we start opening our presents.

When we were a little older, we children rehearsed a play which we presented to our parents and friends on one of the Christmas days. They endured these performances with obvious relish. We also presented our parents with home-made gifts, not very different from those made by our children. The 25th was a semi-fast day. Church in the morning but we didn't always go. Lunch consisted on that day of a sour plum soup and carp.

Though Christmas was by far the most important feast, there were others.

St. Nicholas was on 6th December, when adults went to restaurants or had parties at home. It had a special significance for us children. On the 5th December before we went to bed we put out shoes or boots - not stockings. - In the morning they were filled with sweets, nuts, tangerines, chocolate money wrapped in silver paper and other goodies and also contained a piece of coal or a stone. The latter were the work of the devil, to remind us of the constant struggle between good St. Nicholas and the evil forces and to encourage us to be good children.

EASTER CUSTOMS

Easter is for the Catholic church perhaps an even more important festival than Christmas and it also lasts longer: almost 5 days. There were various aspects to Easter, some of which ^{were} of pagan origin, but all to do with renewal and the Resurrection. On Good Friday there used to be hours-long processions along the

Stations of the Cross, partly inside the church but largely around the church. I was too young to attend until later in Bratislava.

The most important event for us children was on the morning of Easter Sunday. At a given signal we burst out into the flower garden with little baskets and looked for Easter eggs hidden underneath bushes and spring flowers and behind tree trunks. The eggs had been hard-boiled and were usually of one colour: mauve, red, green, blue and yellow but some were multi-coloured. There were also a few chocolate eggs and eggs made of two halves with silver paper outside and filled with sweets. The colour-patterned egg shells, from which the contents have been sucked out, were too fragile and precious to be hidden away in the garden. They were made by the villagers and several in a bowl made a pretty table decoration. I tried my hand at piercing two tiny holes at each end of an egg and suck out its contents but I usually ended up in a complete mess. On the other hand I was reasonably good at painting faces on hard boiled eggs and sticking on bits of coloured wool for hair and beard.

There was another curious Easter custom, much more appreciated by teenagers and even some adults, than by us children. Days before Easter one could buy little whips (called korbács, pronounced korbaach), 12 - 15 " long, and made of plaited willow twigs, tied at one end, knotted at the other with a coloured ribbon. They were of natural yellowish colour or each twig was dyed of a different hue. They made a swishing noise when swiftly cutting the air. Boys armed with one of these in one hand and a little perfume atomiser in the other, ceremoniously whipped all females, followed by spraying them with the highly aromatic cheap perfume. Neighbours, especially those who had little girls, were visited and whipped and sprayed. In return the girls gave the boys sweets. On the next day, Easter Monday, the girls returned the visit, armed with whips and atomisers, if they so wished, but this was less general. Adults went sometimes beyond these ceremonial whippings. We could hear shrieks of laughter from the direction of the kitchen as a tradesman or the chauffeur or gardener let go their whips on the female staff and give them a thorough thrashing. I have seen later in villages young men pouring buckets of water in lieu of perfume over young girls wearing their best Sunday finery.

One other custom needs recording. During the week leading up to Easter, church bells were never rung. Instead there were rattles, rotating round a handle, similar to those used by football crowds in England. We children had some such rattles which made a hideous grating noise. Only after the Easter service were bells rung again, expressing the joy of the risen Christ.

My parents made many friends and entertained a fair amount. All their friends were from the same social and economic background as ourselves and of course many of them were farmers. In pre-World-War-I days one would have social contacts with the garrison commander and other local dignitaries. These were now all Slovaks, some Czechs, and apart from the language problem the new administrative élite and the old middle class kept completely separate socially. It took about another 15 years for social contacts to develop between the two.

There was the Fuchs family (distant relatives, see family tree): mother Paula, a haughty tall lady, a fox round her neck, earrings dangling. Her husband shorter, quiet, unassuming. Son Pali, about 10 years older than me, like his mother, with the nose always sniffing up in the air. His cousin Didi Szkublich, also older than me, was beautiful; her mother always jolly. (Both these ladies are on the photo taken at Jean's christening party). The last I heard of Pali was that he lived in Vienna and Didi in Canada.

One morning Anni awoke all shaken and in distress after a bad dream. She had dreamt that the Fuchs house was on fire. Indeed, we learned later that they had a fire.

When the parents had a party in the evening, we were asked to come down, already in our night clothes. I liked this because Mother used to give me on a spoon a sugar lump on which she had dissolved a drop of black coffee.

One family we got friendly with were the Munks who lived and farmed in a village called Horná Streda a few miles north of Piešťany. Mother Aranka was not beautiful, of somewhat swarthy complexion but the very incarnation of friendliness and good humour. She was an aunt of my friend Peter Valko (then Wolff) now living in Winnipeg. Her husband barely reaching to her shoulder was very taciturn and just sat and watched quietly life going on around him. They had two sons: Pista about 3½ years older than me and Franzi about 2 years older than me. Franzi was later in the same form in Bratislava as Judy Preč and Jeno Hees; later we were together in Prague. He is with me in photos 108 and 112. Both brothers are in photo 67. The Munk boys were always dressed very neatly, polite, had some of their mother's sense of humour and constantly engaged in some useful activity. At one time they had a small four-wheeled carriage drawn by two ponies. I remember my admiration for them when they

had driven the several miles from their farm to our house along the busy main road and having negotiated the town streets without mishap, arriving unannounced. I spent several childrens' parties at their comfortable house and they at ours. On one of these occasions Pista slipped on our big staircase and tumbled down head over heels. I was very frightened that he ~~might~~ have hurt himself but he got up smiling, neat and tidy as ever without even a hair out of place and none the worse for his fall.

Amongst others of my parents' friends were the parents of Rudi Payne (originally Scheibner; Scheibner means the glass pane maker, hence his English name). They farmed in a hamlet about half-way between Piešťany and Madunice. Rudi's cousin Eric Glaser was one of three boys and they had a sister Mila. The Glasers lived in Bratislava and not until we moved there did my parents and I befriend them; Mila lives in Chicago. She lost her husband in January 1986.

There were other friends like Lajos Winter who owned the Thernia Palace hotel but I have forgotten most of them. One family with whom my parents had no social intercourse were the Lichtensteins. They ran a drapery shop. They had two daughters. The older, my age, Steffi now Doss lives in Cairo. She lost her husband in 1985. The younger, Lilli, was about Jean's age. Our respective nannies were friends and we often met on our daily walks in the park and along the river and listened together in the summer at the bandstand. Steffi and I had always a lot of things to talk about or collected dead leaves in the autumn or played together. Later they too moved to Bratislava and we went to the same form.

Father preferred Sunday entertaining as he was too busy and tired during the week. He abhorred small talk and polite conversation. As soon as he could he got the men round a table in the hall for a game of cards, while the ladies chatted in the sitting room. The men smoked cigars and the card game they played was called Bunko and was played with a form of tarot cards.

I remember one Sunday morning after a party the night before, Father standing at the curtained window in the sitting room and on the verge of tears which affected me deeply. As soon as he had noticed my entrance he seemed alright again but his eyes were still red.

On another occasion when we had visitors staying the night in my room, I slept on a sofa in my parents' room. I went to bed hours before them but was woken up by their quarrel. I felt uneasy at the time but as a child one doesn't know and doesn't attach much importance to such things but the incident was never forgotten. They had now been married 7 - 8 years and something had gone wrong.

Exhibits 41 - 44 were taken in Piešťany in February 1921. These 4 photos together with a fifth one of Jean as a baby, which she has, belonged to father. Years after the last war they were handed one day to Schnuki who passed them on to me. Mother has short hair as she has on the photo of Jean's christening party. Both parents are in mourning. Could it have been still for Pista who died 8 months earlier in May 1920?

Exhibits 45 and 46 I cannot date but the one with Jean on must be later than 45. Exhibit 47 shows Mother and Anni as they appeared in a Viennese society magazine.

Exhibit 48 shows Boris and George when he was about 1 year old.



43. I in February 1921 in Piestany^V



44. Anni in February 1921 in Piestany^V



45. Father, Anni and I end 1920/1921

46. I, Anni and Jean early 1921 Piešťany



47. Anni and mother from Vienna society magazine

48. Boris and George about 1 year old