

## Chapter One

### *On the Train from Hell*

Clackety-clack—clackety-c-l-a-c-k. . . The cattle train in which I'm riding through the Bavarian countryside suddenly slows down. I wonder where we are, exactly, and why we're stopping here. I'm halfway dead from hunger. It's been that way for months: over a year, really. I'm 14 years old by now, I think. My given name is Istvan (Hungarian for "Stephen"). But everyone calls me by my nickname, Pista. Our family name is Nasser, and I come from a long line of Hungarian Jews. Before the Holocaust, we Nassers had lived in Budapest, the capital, undisturbed and prosperous, for many generations.

I think I smell Mother's paprikas potatoes. But. . . no. . . it can't be. . . It's just my imagination. I'm still in Bavaria, somewhere outside Muhldorf, the concentration camp where I've done slave labor for over a year, courtesy of Hitler and his men.

Rubbing sleep from my eyes as best I can with such skinny fists, I squint into the sunlight toward a tiny window in our crowded boxcar. From what I can glean as I sit on the filthy wooden floor, jammed against 80 or so men (all older than me, some in better, some in worse condition) it seems we're approaching a town. A prisoner standing up and looking out the window reports that he can see whitewashed houses, green farmland, and storage sheds.

Now the train enters a tiny station and jerks abruptly to a halt. With all my strength, I force myself wide-awake. I'm weak as a newborn baby. But I'm alive. Yes.

Our comrade, peeking out the window, informs us that he sees the stationmaster dart from his office, his arms upraised, yelling, "*Alles frei,*" or "All free!" God, I hope it's true.

Now the strongest among us stand up and stretch, try to jump for joy, and embrace each other. Eagerly, these lucky souls prepare for their first taste of long-awaited freedom outside our boxcar, and, more importantly, away from the forced labor facility from which we've just been evacuated. I'm too weak and sick to stand, much less join them, so I can only look on in envy.

Healthy or sick, no one aboard our train from Hell carries any belongings but the clothes on his back. I *have*, however, managed to bring my diary out with me. The diary is written on sheets of cement paper (that was all I could find), and bound with wire.

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My friend Joska, (who, before deportation, was a professor of psychology at the University of Budapest) is another Muhldorf “veteran.” Though 12 years older, he’s closer in age to me than anyone else at Muhldorf. Now he comes over to where I sit and embraces me. “Pista, the war’s over! We’re free!”

“Thank God!” I reply.

When Joska stands up again, I notice, for the first time, that he’s still wearing his awkward canvas prison shoes, although they’ve nearly fallen apart. Then I observe my own feet. I wear no shoes; the ones the Nazis issued me are long gone. Pus and blood ooze through the tattered wrappings around my ankles. The trousers and jacket of my striped prison uniform are worn thin. I haven’t the strength to kill the lice that crawl all over me.

Now I see some of my other fellow prisoners climb down from inside their boxcars and begin walking toward the village to celebrate their new freedom.

“Pista,” Joska instructs me, “you stay here!”

I smile, involuntarily. As if I had a choice. “Sure.”

“I’ll go into town, find some American soldiers, and bring them back here to help get you to a hospital.”

“Thank you,” I say, wearily. As he climbs back out, I call after him “Joska, be careful!” I still can’t imagine people like him and me just walking around freely in what must still be southern Germany. I don’t know why, but I have a feeling we’re not out of danger. Not yet.

“I’ll be careful,” Joska calls over his shoulder. I watch his scrawny back, and his joyous stride, as my friend pads happily after the others, still wearing his own baggy zebra-striped prison uniform.

Will I ever be glad to get out of this one and never see it again!

I nod off until various familiar, but unpleasant, noises jar me awake again. Gunshots! First I hear just a few, as sharp as fire crackers. But more soon follow. I sit straight up, craning my neck to see outside. What on earth is happening? Where is Joska? Now I wish he’d never left my side.

Soon I see groups of terrified prisoners, the same ones who’d just jumped down from these boxcars and hugged each other so happily, rush frantically back to the train, with uniformed Nazi SS troops in hot pursuit.

Unfortunately, this doesn’t surprise me. The Nazis may realize they’re about to lose the war, but even so, I doubt they want Jewish concentration camp “scum” like us already contaminating their pristine Bavarian villages. Also, any remaining SS around here have probably been ordered to continue

picking off as many Jews as possible, in order to help cover up evidence of the camps and their overworked, underfed prisoners.

Many of the prisoners now scrambling up inside my boxcar bleed visibly from fresh wounds. I lie down flat, trying to avoid being hit by any stray gunfire. I see Joska crawl back inside. Thank God! But the fingers of his left hand look a bloody mess. Why did I ever let him go for help?

More shots pepper the train. I'm not hit, yet. But Joska is. He's barely inside again when he tries to stand, but then teeters, spins crazily around, and falls back outside, a fatal bullet through his head. To come all this way, only to be killed now, while seeking help for me! How can I forgive myself? And when will this madness end?

When we were all first herded onto this train, on SS orders that the camp be evacuated, a rumor circulated that we'd be taken up into the Bavarian Alps to be shot. But then we heard otherwise.

Before the train actually started up, one uniformed guard told us that, although the SS (Hitler's elite uniformed officers who ran the camp) had indeed ordered us shot, they couldn't stay around to see the order carried out. They themselves had to flee for their lives from the advancing Allies.

This left us prisoners, luckily, in the hands of the remaining, uniformed *Wehrmacht* guards (the enlisted men of the German army), many of whom actually disapproved of Hitler's tactics.

After the SS all cleared out, the *Wehrmacht* commander of our camp then ordered his men to begin taking us by train up into the mountains, as originally instructed, but to then abandon the train someplace below the mountains, where the Allies could find us easily.

Clearly, this is what whoever is driving our train just tried to do, but obviously, he chose the wrong spot. Wherever the Allies are, or are headed, they're nowhere around here just yet.

Finally, someone manages to shut the boxcar door. The shots subside, our Nazi pursuers having achieved the goal of killing as many of us as possible, and running the rest of us off. At last our train gathers steam and begins to chug out of the village.

At some point, I fall asleep again. This time, though, I wake to the whining sounds of fighter planes directly overhead. It must be the Allies! Unfortunately, though, all they can see from up in the air is a German artillery train.

Actually, the artillery at the end of this train is a decoy, or so we've been

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told. It doesn't even shoot (according to the same guard who told us earlier that we wouldn't be killed). But how would the Allies know that? Oh, God, help us! I didn't come all this way, and survive against all the odds, just to be killed accidentally by the Allies themselves!

"*Wrrmm. . .*" One of the fighter planes makes a low pass.

I hug the floor as bullets rip through the wooden roof of our boxcar, cascading onto our helpless bodies like heavy, lethal raindrops.

Someone lying on top of me starts bleeding profusely. I feel warm blood dripping onto my jacket and the skin beneath my threadbare prison uniform. Next, I feel a sharp sting, and find myself groping frantically for my kneecap. I've just been hit right in the knee, and it hurts fiercely! I want to reach for and clutch at my damaged knee, thinking that it might help ease the pain. But I can't even move. I lie trapped beneath the weight of numerous others, lots of them probably dead by now.

After half an hour or so of this particular misery, the train suddenly halts again. The weight atop me lessens a bit, as those who can still move struggle to their feet to flee our flimsy coffin on wheels. I hope they make it. Weaker than ever, I can only remain lying here, mingled amongst numerous bodies in what has turned into a freezing cold night. Arms, legs, and torsos of various others, mostly dead, provide me my only blankets and pillows.

I close my eyes again, drifting in and out of consciousness. My handsome older brother Andris smiles at me from Heaven. I'd like to join him now. "**No, Pista,**" Andris insists, silently. Firmly, my brother sends me away from him again. I'm sad. I want to be with Andris. I miss him so. . .

Asleep awake asleep awake. . . finally, I slip into a genuine slumber. As I drift off, my diary drops from my hand. I'll retrieve it later, I tell myself. I'm too sleepy to find it now amongst all the bodies. Besides, I can hardly move.

When I wake again, the train remains stopped, in the same place as before, as least I think so. I'm not sure how long we've been here, wherever it is, but at least I don't hear any gunfire. Forcing my gluey eyelids apart again, I peer out the boxcar as best I can. I can't see much in the darkness, but from what I can hear, there are no signs of life outside.

An American poem by Emily Dickinson I once read in school starts reciting itself inside my mind. I remember a line at the end of it about someone nearly dead who could not "see to see." I never understood that line before now. At this moment, though, I do.

***“Andris, I see you. I want to come to you.”***

***“Not yet, Pista.”***

I could be dreaming, but I think I just heard a faint hum coming from somewhere outside the boxcar. I *do* hear it! Now the hum builds steadily to a roar. The sound reminds me of jeeps in American movies. I can even picture a caravan of them, full of uniformed Yankee soldiers, speeding to the rescue! In my mind's eye, the jeeps' powerful headlights slice right through the soupy fog, like Moses parting the Red Sea. Maybe, just maybe, someone's coming to save me.

There's Andris again, still smiling. Ah, Andris! To be with you! It's lovely where you are.

***“Not yet, Pista.”***

Just then, the humming noise stops. I hear dozens of heavily shod feet hitting the ground, clomp-thud-clomp. Someone climbs up inside my boxcar. Another person follows. Now I hear *two* sets of footsteps stomping around, right near my head. I'm still too weak to open my eyes much, but I manage to move my left hand enough to yank at a hair on my right arm. It hurts. Now I know I'm not dreaming.

Voices. Two men are standing very near me, speaking American-accented English.

“My God!” says one. “Some of these fellows look like they're just kids!”

“They're probably young Jews from a concentration camp near here,” says the other. “Damn Nazis. How could they do this to people?”

“However they did it, most of these guys are dead.”

“Shit!”

Then one of the men notices *me* amidst all the heads and bodies. I feel him place a finger gently on my forehead.

“Look!” This boy's still breathing! C'mon, Sergeant, let's pull him out of here! We need to get this poor kid to a hospital right away.”

“Yes, sir!”

Now I hear other American soldiers climb up inside the crowded boxcar and begin combing the heaps of bodies for signs of life.

At some point, I'm picked up, lifted down from the boxcar by several sets of strong hands, and carried to a waiting jeep. Before blacking out again, I feel the same pairs of hands place me gently on my back inside the vehicle. Someone covers me with a wool blanket.

But I've left something behind. . . I can't quite remember what it is now.

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But something important remains in the boxcar. . . The jeep's engine starts up with a roar. It's too late to go back now.

Opening my eyes, I squint hard against the light. A burning pain has installed itself firmly inside my eyelids. Somehow, I'm in a bright white room. White-clad women bustle around. Angels! Ah, I'm in heaven! But where are the wings of all these beautiful angels?

I pull at a hair on my right arm. It hurts. That means I'm still on earth, darn it! But where on earth could I be?

Where are the hard wooden bunks of the Muhldorf concentration camp?  
What has become of my fellow prisoners?

Why all these white coats on everyone, and that disinfectant smell? Is Mother cleaning *again*? With effort, I work a bony hand beneath an unfamiliar sheet, and pull another hair, this time on my leg, just to make sure. Ouch! I'm definitely not dreaming.

Now a doctor with a stethoscope snaked around his neck bends over me, peering, with blue-green eyes, into my stinging brown ones. My tired lids snap shut in protest. The doctor pries them back open.

"Hello, son." I recognize an American accent, speaking German.

"Where am I?"

"You're in Seeshaupt, Germany, outside Munich. This is an American hospital. I am Dr. Popper."

"Is the war over?"

"As of a few days ago."

"Who won?"

"The Allies."

"I'm free?"

"You're free, yes, but you're extremely weak and very sick. What's your name?"

"Istvan Nasser. I'm called Pista."

"How old are you, Pista?"

"Fourteen, I think."

"When were you born?"

"February 17, 1931."

"Yes, you *are* fourteen. This is May 13, 1945. Where are you from?"

"Budapest, Hungary."

"You've been talking in your sleep to Andris. Who is Andris?"

"My brother."

"Where is he?"

"In Heaven. I saw him."

"When did you see him?"

"I think yesterday. I wanted to go with him but he wouldn't let me."

The doctor nods. "Lie back, Pista. Rest."

Obediently, I lie back. "How did I get here?" I ask. "How long have I been here?"

"Some American soldiers found you near here in an abandoned boxcar, almost dead. You've been in this hospital about five days."

I recall none of those days.

Now my bed is cranked up, and I'm brought a cup of warm chicken broth. Slowly, I sip it through a glass straw. It isn't much, but compared to the prison food I'm used to, it tastes wonderful. But the mere effort of drinking exhausts me.

After eating my soup, I lapse again into restless slumber, this time punctuated with horrific nightmares. German tanks roll into Budapest. . . I am deported. . . I see the glaring twisted lights of Auschwitz, the creepy fog. . . at the Auschwitz selection point my baby cousin Peter is murdered before my eyes, and then Andris and I are separated from Mother and our Aunt Bozsi. . . Andris and I escape to Muhldorf, where we're then starved and beaten. . . here, now, is Andris again, dying in my arms inside the Muhldorf camp.

"*Don't go, Andris! Please don't go!*" I wake up, sob-screaming at the white wall. Nurse Erika, a fresh-faced beauty with braided blonde hair, whom I met earlier today, rushes in.

"Easy, Pista, easy," she coos, patting my shoulder. "You've had a bad dream."

"Yes Nurse Erika, just a bad dream." I try sounding manly and nonchalant, like American men in movies.

"I'm going to give you an injection to relax you."

I force myself to take this news like a man. "Yes, Nurse." I roll over and she gives the shot. When I'm on my back again, I force a smile. "Thank you, Nurse Erika. You know," I gulp, "I just want to tell you, I'm not a sissy. I. . . I'm not a. . . sissy, Nurse, or. . ." I begin to cry.

"Pista, we all realize how brave you are."

"You do?" I'm surprised and warmed by her words. I'm used to being a number, not a human being anyone talks about.

"We've spoken of it already: how brave you are, and how remarkable it is

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that you're here, after all you have endured. It's a miracle."

I grow bolder, something like my old self. "Would you like to sit down? If you sit down awhile I'll tell you all about my brother Andris." This I say as if offering her a huge, important favor.

"All right. But only for a few minutes, Pista. We're not supposed to let you get worked up."

"I promise not to get worked up."

Nurse Erika settles into a chair beside my bed. "But before you start, Pista, I have a favor to ask you."

"Of course." I can't imagine what favor I could possibly do for her, in my wretched condition.

"Please, Pista. Speak Hungarian to me!" This she says in perfect unaccented Hungarian.

"How do you know my language? It's kind of an unusual one."

"My mother was from Budapest, like you. I visited my grandparents with her every summer as a child. When I was twelve, my grandparents both died within a few months of each other. I haven't been back since, but I miss it."

"Me too," I reply, softly.

We're silent for a moment.

Then Nurse Erika folds her hands in her lap and closes her eyes. "I'm ready for you to start now, Pista."

I begin speaking in my native tongue, the first Hungarian I've spoken to anyone other than a few inmates inside Muhldorf in a long long, time.

"My brother Andris was three years older than me. That would have made him seventeen now. He was brilliant; he planned to be a doctor. He was handsome as a movie star, blond and blue-eyed. He was the best soccer player at school, and. . ."