MATURA

I FLED from my home town, Sopron, in Hungary, when I was eighteen. During the First World War, I had been the leader of a student pacifist movement at the *Gymnasium*, and I had also taken part in the two revolutions that followed the war. When Admiral Horthy successfully staged his counter-revolution, I was expelled from school by the new Fascist regime, imprisoned, and forbidden to attend any other *Gymnasium* in Hungary. As soon as I was released from prison, I escaped to Austria. My situation as an émigré was miserable, but what I regretted most was that I had been forced to leave school just before my final examinations and therefore did not receive the much coveted *Matura*, the Certificate of Maturity, which, under solemn circumstances, was presented to graduates from the *Gymnasium*. Although in Vienna I made up for my interrupted studies and entered medical school, I could not seem to rid myself of the disappointment. Even decades later, a nightmarish dream repeated itself: I stood before my class in Sopron, unable to recite my lessons. I had forgotten math, biology, physics, history—all my subjects. I would never get the *Matura*, never.

As time passed, ties with my home town slackened to an occasional greeting card from distant relatives (my parents and brothers left Hungary soon after me) and a few schoolmates, and finally ceased. Before the Second World War, I emigrated to France, and eventually to America, so I was separated geographically, too. It seemed unlikely that I would ever again hear any news from Sopron. But at the end of 1944 Sopron made the headlines. The war communiqués announced that this westernmost city of Hungary had been stubbornly defended by the Nazis and their Hungarian allies against the onstorming Red Army. The strategic location of Sopron, half enclosed by mountains, had made its defense easier, but finally the city fell. What Turks and Tartars in past history could not achieve the Russians did. Although, of course, I was glad to see the Nazis defeated, I was somehow sorry. I could imagine how badly the town had been damaged—my school, the little baroque house where I was born destroyed.

For another two decades, I heard nothing further. Then in the spring of 1965 an envelope postmarked Sopron arrived at my office in New York, where I had been practicing medicine for a good many years. The envelope contained a printed invitation to the forty-fifth reunion of the class of 1920 on the last Saturday in June—the traditional day for graduations. In Hungary, *Gymnasium* reunions take place with regularity as long as any alumni are still alive. A note from the principal of the school, a Mr. Laky, accompanied the invitation. He hoped that I would be able to attend. "The teaching staff, the pupils, and last but not least your former schoolmates will be happy to greet you, who have achieved fame in the outside world," he wrote. My whereabouts had been discovered through the publication of one of my stories in a Viennese magazine.

I was greatly touched by the invitation. Homesickness, intense when I first left Sopron, had passed away with the years, but I still had a desire to see the places of my youth. At the end of the Second World War, I longed to revisit my home town. But then had come the terrible reports that the Jews of Sopron had been deported to extermination camps, and that the Hungarians had behaved no better—even worse—than the Germans. I thought at the time I could never go back into that world where all those close to me had been murdered. As I reread the invitation, I found that my feelings had altered. A new generation had arisen, I told myself—a generation free of guilt. Wouldn't it now be possible to see everything with my own eyes, without anguish?

My wife opposed the trip, and so did everyone I spoke to. At best, they said, it would be visiting graves. After deliberation, I answered the principal with a gently worded letter, avoiding anything that might offend the sponsors of the reunion—professional obligations made it impossible to leave my office in June; I had already planned a vacation to Europe for the month of August. And I added that I was not a bona-fide member of the class of '20—I had not achieved the *Matura*.

Two weeks later, I received a second letter from the principal. The anniversary celebrations had been postponed to the last Saturday in August, he wrote, and as to my argument about not being a member of the class of 1920, it had no validity. Hadn't I been expelled by the Fascists? Was I willing to accept their verdict? Of course not. I would be greeted with open arms.

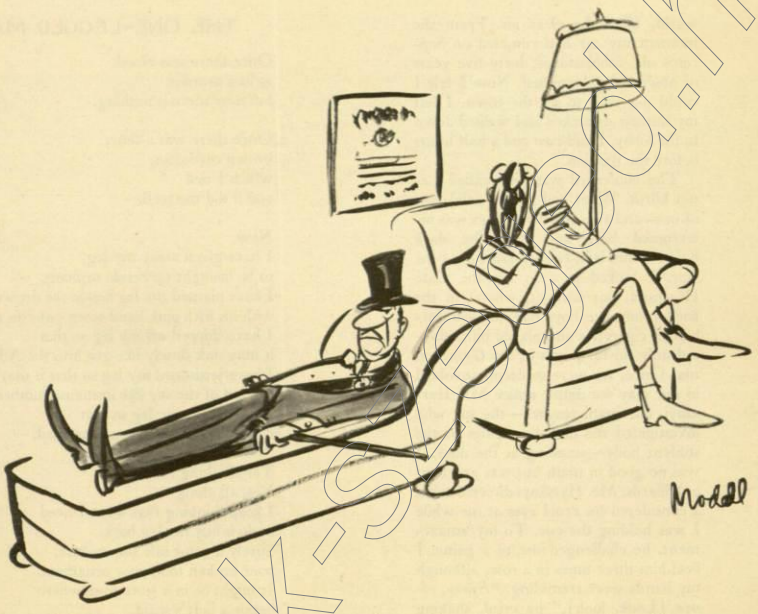
This time, I said to my wife, I could not refuse—anyway, during the last week in August we would be only a few miles away, in Vienna. My wife remained adamant, and so we compromised; while I made my overnight trip to Sopron she would remain in Vienna.

AT eight o'clock on a sunny August morning, I left Vienna to travel the eighty kilometres to Sopron. The ceremonies had been scheduled for noon, and I remembered that the trip took three hours or a bit longer. The Reichstrasse led through numerous towns and villages. One slow-moving cart—to be expected at harvesttime—could bring traffic to a standstill. And thirty kilometres from the Austro-Hungarian border the road to Sopron branched off the main route; it was a dirt road, and that would be slow.

But I found that things had changed. A modern Autobahn now bypassed the populated places, and the dirt road had been paved. After only an hour and twenty minutes, I arrived at the Austrian frontier. The customs official, a typical *gemütlich* civil servant, barely glanced at my passport and wished me a *gute Reise*. I continued on the narrow strip of no man's land to a level-crossing gate painted with the red, white, and green colors of Hungary. The gate rose high, and I drove into a wide square surrounded by barbed wire. The Hungarian flag flew from the eaves of the customs house—the old flag, except that the crown of St. Stephen had yielded to a red star.

A soldier wearing tight

breeches and high boots—a Russian-style uniform—approached my car and in broken German asked for my passport. The Volkswagen I had rented in Vienna naturally bore Austrian license plates. Much to his surprise, I answered in Hungarian and at the same time presented him with my American passport. "How come?" he asked, pointing suspiciously at my passport. I explained that I had been born in Hungary and had left many years before but had never forgotten my mother tongue. "That's another matter," he said, obviously pleased, and he smiled as he shifted his carbine higher on his shoulder. He was a handsome, very young man, with closely set black eyes. While he took my passport to the customs building, I gazed ahead to the mountains that encircled Sopron, only two kilometres away. The soldier returned with my passport and wished me a good journey. I waved goodbye to him, my first countryman.



"And when did it first occur to you that perhaps life is not a cabaret?"

A few minutes later, I turned a sharp curve, and there was the panorama of Sopron trickling down the hills to its compact center in the valley.

In a long and enthusiastic response to my acceptance of his invitation, Laky wrote that he had made a reservation for me at the Red Star Hotel, on the main boulevard. I did not recall a hotel of that name and assumed it was one that had not existed in my time. When I arrived, I was amazed to find that it was the good old Hotel to the Hungarian King, a bit shabbier, and scarred with bullets. Over the flag on a rusty signboard was the image of the King, with crown and sceptre; he alone seemed to have survived the change of his realm into a Communist state.

I parked my car right at the hotel entrance. There were no other cars in sight. (I learned there were only two taxis of prewar model and one newer, official car in town.) As I took my suitcase from the luggage compartment, a man in a black jacket with gold buttons rushed out to meet me. "Are you Berczeller *doktor úr*?" he said. (In Hungarian, titles and other forms of address are put after a name.) I nodded yes and he bowed slightly. "I am Boross *elvtárs* [comrade]," he said, adding that I was expected later. He was the hotel clerk and, he said smilingly, Jack-of-all-trades. He took my suitcase and opened the door with a grand gesture. He was a man about fifty, with a round gypsy face and a trimmed mustache.

Before the war, all hotels, even at the remotest corners of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had emulated the big hotels in Vienna: giant lobbies with columns, thick carpets, luxurious sofas along the walls, deep chairs upholstered in red, crystal chandeliers. When I was a boy, I had thought that the Hotel to the Hungarian King was the only one of its kind and was immensely proud of it. Now the carpeting had disappeared, the chairs and sofas were worn, and the crystal had been replaced by shaded bulbs. Boross *elvtárs* followed my glance at the ceiling. "Direct hit, with your kind permission," he said with an expression of regret. Pictures of Schönbrunn and of the Hofburg still hung on the walls, but the portrait of Franz Josef had been displaced by one of Lenin.

Several guests sitting in the lobby looked up from their newspapers when I entered. I studied the gentlemen with gray hair or bald heads, wondering if one or another could be a former schoolmate. None of them appeared to recognize me, and in a moment they returned to their reading. Boross urged me to follow him. The room on the second floor into which he led me was furnished with yellow embroidered draperies, a faded Oriental carpet, and a large bed piled high with quilts and covered with a yellow velvet spread. Boross *elvtárs* was biting his mustache, apparently waiting for my response to all that opulence. In a capitalist country I knew how to express my gratitude, but weren't tips forbidden in the Communist world? Still, I took a twenty-forint bill (eighty cents in American currency) from my pocket and held it out on my palm. Those gypsy eyes widened, and with an elegant gesture Boross *elvtárs* lifted the bill into an upper pocket of his vest. Bowing, he left.

I opened the window and looked out over the gabled, medieval roofs. The bluish silhouettes of mountains—the spurs of the Alps, already partly covered by snow—looked deceptively near. The scent of the approaching autumn, which starts early in that part of the

world, filled the clear air. From the moment my car had rumbled on Sopron's old cobblestones, forty-five years of absence had vanished. Now I felt I could not wait to see the town. I left my suitcase unpacked and walked down to the lobby. I had two and a half hours before the reunion.

The boulevard was now called Lenin körút. What had been a solid row of one- and two-story buildings was interrupted here and there by dark holes—ruins still, twenty years after the war. I looked in vain for the Café Hungaria, our hideout, where, in the back room, we boys had smoked forbidden cigarettes and played billiards—a deadly sin for pupils of the *Gymnasium*. Once, we were so deeply involved in our play we didn't notice Mr. Harsányi, our math teacher—the spy who investigated the illegal activities of the student body—standing at the door. I was no good in math but was excellent at billiards. Mr. Harsányi directed what I considered his cruel eyes at me while I was holding the cue. To my amazement, he challenged me to a game. I beat him three times in a row, although my hands were trembling. "*Éjnye, éjnye* [Look, look]," he cried, shaking his head. "I wonder how such a stupid boy can be so good at billiards." Nevertheless, from then on my marks in math improved. There was another dark hole where the building with the candy store had been—where we would stand about for long stretches of time, unable to decide which of the multicolored sweets we would choose. The lending library, with its Nick Carters, Sherlock Holmeses, Buffalo Bills, had given way to a dark hole, and so had the house where I had taken dancing lessons.

Not every landmark was gone. The *elökapu*, the entrance door to the medieval inner city, and the high, Gothic city tower, although riddled with bullet and grenade holes, both stood in place, and the baroque column commemorating a plague in the seventeenth century—a tall monument, striving toward heaven, an ideal target—also stood unharmed. But a block of houses only a stone's throw away had vanished, and in its place a triangular park had been laid out with grass and acacia trees. An uncle of mine, a physician, had lived, with his family, in one of those houses. He died of natural causes before the Second World War, but his widow and little daughter had perished in an extermination camp. Beyond the little park, I walked winding streets so narrow that one could touch the buildings on either side, and then I came to the house where I was born and spent my early years. Although the walls were pocked, the fine baroque ornaments framing the windows had not been touched. But the tall lime trees in the courtyard (Grandmother used to tell how a former owner, a bishop, planted them two hundred years before) had been hacked out, and there was now an unhampered view from the street to the arches on the second floor. I lingered until a stranger appeared at one of the windows and stared at me anxiously.

There had been three schools for boys in Sopron—my school, the Benedictine *Gymnasium*, and the Evangelical lyceum on the main square. The last two, badly damaged by bombs, had been left unrestored. I could guess that the new regime did not plan to revive ecclesiastic schools. Three hundred years old, both had taught Latin and Greek as their main subjects. My school had had a modern curriculum of French and German, as well as the sciences. In my day, the rivalry between my school and the two ecclesiastic schools was notorious, but seeing them now in their pitiable state I could feel only compassion.

I continued my walk to the Széchenyi tér, a square shaded by wild chestnut trees—our playground. On the stone benches entwined with plants we would place our jackets and books when we stopped on the way home from school to play soccer. At one side

THE ONE-LEGGED MAN

Once there was blood
as in a murder
but now there is nothing.

Once there was a shoe,
brown cordovan,
which I tied
and it did me well.

Now
I have given away my leg
to be brought up beside orphans.
I have planted my leg beside the drowned mole
with his fifth pink hand seven onto his mouth.
I have shipped off my leg so that
it may sink slowly like grit into the Atlantic.
I have jettisoned my leg so that it may
fall out of the sky like immense lumber.
I have eaten my leg so that
it may be spit out like a fingernail.

Yet all along . . .
Yes, all along
I keep thinking that what I need
to do is buy my leg back.
Surely it is for sale somewhere,
poor broken tool, poor ornament.
It might be in a store somewhere
beside a lady's scarf.
I want to write it letters.
I want to feed it supper.
I want to carve a bowstring out of it.
I want to hold it at noon in my bed
and stroke it slowly like a perfect woman.

Lady, lady,
why have you left me?

I did not mean to frighten her.
I wanted only to watch her quietly
as she worked.

—Anne Sexton

"What's the unit price on this?"

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of the square was the twin-towered fifteenth-century Dominican church from which the yearly Corpus Christi procession would start, scenting the whole town with incense. One tower remained intact, but the other had been broken in half by a bomb hit. The structure looked like an invalid leaning on a cane.

Then I turned a corner, and it seemed as though I had been leading up to this moment. Often through the years—in Paris, on the Ivory Coast, in New York—during the most trying periods of my life, I had seizures of insomnia when, to calm myself, I would conjure up a tiny octagonal square and an old cloister of the Ursuline Sisters overlooking it. In the middle of the square was a spherical baroque fountain, topped by a fragile Madonna and Child standing on a serpent. That was all. Leaning on the rim of that fountain, I had waited for my first love (her name was Rózsi) to emerge from the cloister, which had housed a school for girls of "better families." Through the ornamented Gothic windows, the tinkling of the piano had sounded (better girls had to learn to play an instrument). Now the Ursuline cloister had disappeared, and so had the fountain with the Madonna. I closed my eyes, and for a moment saw it as it used to be.

I looked at my watch—in half an hour I had traversed the realm of my childhood, which once had seemed an enormous territory. There was plenty of time to visit the Jewish cemetery, on the outskirts of town. The district leading to it was that of the *Bohnzüchter*—the Bean Growers—so called because of the cranberry beans they had cultivated in the vineyards. They were well-to-do people, Germans, who had immigrated to Sopron at the time of the Reformation. They had retained their language, and in my day their sons comprised half the student body of the *Gymnasium*. As most of the Germans in lands bordering Nazi Germany had done, they became Nazis, and at the end of the war retreated with the German armies, leaving their possessions behind. Their baroque houses were now occupied by Hungarian peasants—men wearing little round hats, and women in bright red-and-white dresses.

THE cemetery was on a hill. Looking beyond the low fence that surrounded it, I could see that, unlike most Jewish cemeteries in lands occupied by the Nazis, it had not been desecrated. Nothing was changed except that the small morgue at the entrance had been replaced by a huge building—in recent years, judging by the clean white-washed walls and the shining golden dome. Above the entrance door was an inscription: "This house was dedicated by Jewish communities of the Diaspora to our Martyrs."

The building contained only a stone bench and, on the wall opposite the entrance, a marble plaque that reached from the dome to the floor. At the summit of the plaque I read the names of the last rabbi of the community, Pollák Miksa, and his wife. Underneath, arranged alphabetically in seemingly endless columns, was name after name. I recognized the names. They were my elders, my teachers, the companions of my childhood—two thou-

"What makes it especially hard for me being a nobody is that I happen to be an egotist."

sand men, women, and children of the old Jewish community. I came to the name of my Aunt Eszti, the sister of my father, and I could read no more. I sat on the bench and wept as I had never wept in my life.

In the silence that followed, I could almost hear my heart beat. I began to think. I had prepared myself for this long before, but from thousands of miles away everything had looked different. It was good that I had come, I thought—these moments had given me a feeling of participation I had not had. But they also made me feel I must retreat, leave town as quickly as possible—slip away from the hotel and return to Vienna. The other members of the class of 1920 could celebrate without me.

OUTSIDE the hotel, Boross was standing with another man. He caught sight of me and rushed forward, lifting his arms in a gesture of relief. "Thank God, *doktor úr*, you're in one piece!" he exclaimed. "The principal and I began to worry."

The man I took to be Mr. Laky embraced me. "We've hunted for you all over town," he said. "Where were you hiding out?" He held me at arm's length. "But you look much younger than I expected."

He himself, in his too tight blue suit, looked not much older than a *Gymnasium* graduate—a tall, handsome man with sky-blue eyes. He peered at me. "You look tired," he said. "Too much walking. Come, let's get a bite to eat. We've not much time left."

He took my arm and led me toward the dining room. I was still numb, and made no protest. In a minute, Laky and I were seated at a table covered with a red-green-and-yellow checkered cloth. The smell of goulash pervaded the air. I was not hungry, but I felt a burning thirst. While I drank a beer, Laky asked questions about my trip and said repeatedly how happy he was to see me—until the very last he had been apprehensive that something would prevent my visit; I was, after all, a doctor. But now that I was here he and everyone in town would do their utmost to make my stay enjoyable.

As he talked on, I wondered how I could interrupt to tell him I was not staying. He talked excitedly about how Sopron had developed since the war—from rubble. And new industries and several schools were on the drawing board. After the siege, the city had been left in a state of near extermination. The city fathers had even contemplated erasing the few structures that remained and rebuilding it. "What would you have thought, *doktor úr*," he said, "if, instead of your familiar medieval buildings, you had found skyscrapers!" He laughed heartily. But then his face turned earnest and he spoke of the new school system. The educational privileges of former middle and upper classes no longer existed. More than ninety per cent of the students were sons of peasants and workers. "In your time, how could I, the son of a coal miner at Brennbergbánya, have studied in a *Gymnasium* and at a university and become a principal? You, an old anti-Fascist, must certainly approve of what has happened—no?" He scrutinized my face for a sign of dissent and then smiled. "But we have kept what was good in the old system—the foreign-language courses, the old curriculum, the *Matura*. . . ." He looked at his wristwatch and said reluctantly, "We must go, *doktor úr*, and there is still so much to talk about."

The school was only a few blocks from the hotel, and we set off at a brisk pace. On our way we passed the former country club, a landmark of the town. Two giant red flags emblazoned with hammer and sickle flew from the eaves. It was now the House of Culture.

"Last season," said Laky, "we had the Budapest Philharmonic here. Thousands of people came for the concerts—Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Kodály, Bartók. By the way," he asked anxiously, "do Americans appreciate Kodály and Bartók?"

My school looked dilapidated and its gray façade had lighter patches here and there where it had been repaired, but otherwise it was exactly as I knew it. I began to recall the names of my classmates—Ambrus, Becker, Böröcz, Drobnits, Heller . . . How many would I find here? One-third of the class had been Jewish.

As we approached the school, boys and girls rushed past us, dressed in their Sunday clothes, hair combed neatly and glistening from a wetting down. They greeted their principal respectfully and looked curiously at me. It was traditional for the entire school to participate in

the reunion ceremonies, but it seemed odd to see girls in these environs. In my day, the *Gymnasium* admitted boys only. "Another change for the better," Laky said when I remarked on it.

We made our way across the schoolyard framed with poplar trees. The auditorium was on the second floor, reached by a broad staircase. As we climbed, I could hear a clamor of young voices. The spacious hall was unchanged, and for a moment I felt lost in time. Would our old principal, Mr. Wallner, a man with the mustache of a grenadier, appear on the dais and harangue us about the virtues of his former students—old men sitting behind him?

The pupils sat in rows, moving restlessly and chatting. In one corner of the hall, near the door, stood the group of men I assumed to be the new generation of teachers, thirty to forty years old—mere youngsters compared with my venerable teachers. Laky took me by the arm to guide me in.

"Where are the other graduates?" I asked.

Laky stopped, looked at the floor, and then lifted his eyes sadly. "You are the only one," he said. "No one answered but you." He had written to everyone at his last known address. He had waited and waited for replies, hopeful until this last day. "I didn't dare tell you before now."

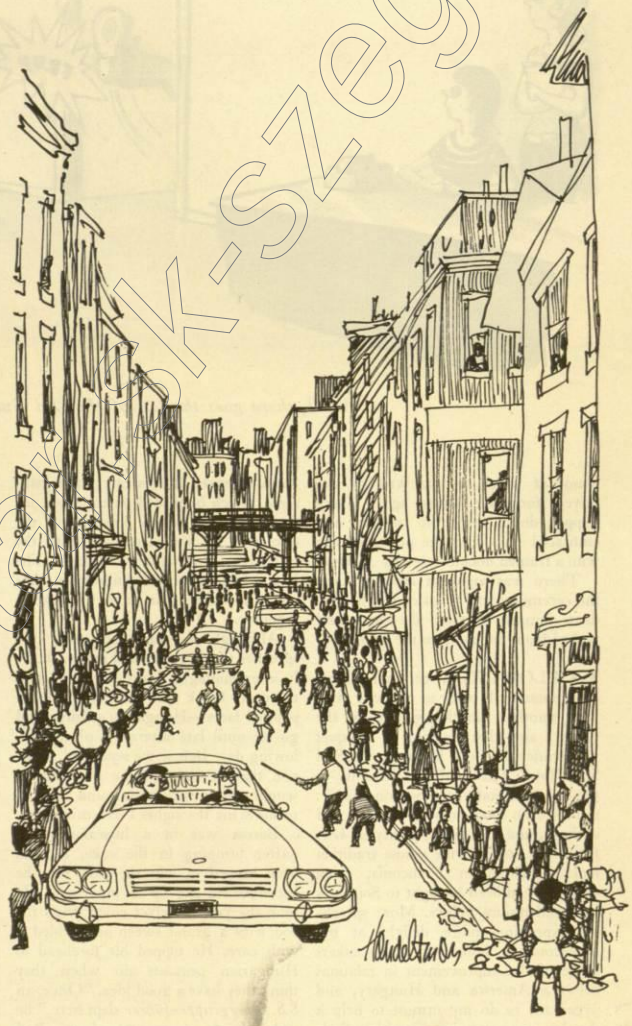
Once again he took me by the arm and led me toward the waiting group of teachers. They came forward, and suddenly all eyes in the auditorium were turned on us. There were vigorous handshakes, applause, and shouts of "*Éljen!*" ("Live long!") from a hundred young girls and boys. The solemn sounds of the national anthem, "God Bless Hungary," filled the large hall. I sang also—I had not forgotten one single word of the long text I had sung from the time I had learned to speak. Laky escorted me to the dais. A young girl with a red bow in her blond hair mounted the three steps to the dais and presented me with a large bouquet of field flowers while the music teacher played an étude of Kodály on the harmonium.

Laky stood at the rostrum, turning the pages of a manuscript. His face was flushed; he was nervous. The students, who had been standing, noisily settled in their seats. It was silent in the hall as Laky began his speech. "Comrade teachers, students, I herewith solemnly declare open the forty-fifth-anniversary reunion of the graduation class of 1920. . . ."

Hungarian orators are enthusiastic and lengthy. A speech of two hours is regarded as a short one. In his tribute to me, Laky began with the year 1912, when I entered the *Gymnasium*.

I looked down at the youngsters. I recalled how we hated these ceremonies—the reunions, the countless national holidays. I watched the young faces turn repeatedly to the sunny windows.

Laky's speech had reached the years of the revolutions after the First World War, in which, he emphasized, I had taken part as a leader of a great cause. He described as if he had witnessed it (he was born ten years after the event) how I was expelled from school. "But Richard had not lost courage," he went on. "Away from his homeland, his friends, everything that was dear to him, he started a new life—a life of great achievements. What else could have been expected of him, who in school was a paragon of scholastic excellence, and uncompromising in his fight against the dark powers of reaction? It is now my privilege to present to him the



"I can remember this neighborhood before it became uninhabitable."

"Well, there goes the last of the Old Guard!"

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honor of which he was wrongly deprived forty-five years ago." Laky stepped down from the rostrum and embraced me. Then he presented me with a framed document—my *Matura*.

There was vigorous applause, and the ceremony was at an end. The students jumped up from the chairs and rushed from the hall into the courtyard.

FOLLOWING the ceremony, a reception took place at the city hall, with another lengthy speech by the mayor, and that evening a banquet was tendered in my honor at the Red Star Hotel. The meal was delicious, in the best tradition of the Sopron cuisine: a thick bean soup, roast goose with red cabbage, and, of course, plenty of *kékfrankos*, a strong wine whose tradition had originated in Franconia, from where it had been brought to Sopron a half millennium before. More speeches expressing more delight at my homecoming. Some of the speakers spoke of the improvement in relations between America and Hungary, and urged me to do my utmost to help it develop into a genuine friendship. Suddenly on the threshold of the dining room appeared Boross carrying a giant *torta*, which he placed on the table, indicating by a gesture how heavy the cake was. It was decorated with the Hungarian and American flags. The latter, I could see, was improvised. Absently I counted the stars: fifty-six altogether.

Although I was exhausted, the speeches would not end. Finally, shortly after midnight, Laky suggested that the party break up. There were disappointed faces—Hungarian affairs could go on until late afternoon of the following day. Before we separated, Laky said that at eight in the morning he would call to take me around Sopron, to show me the sights I had missed.

Boross was in a hilarious mood (after bringing in the cake, he had been invited to join the party) as he accompanied me up to my room. He took the yellow velvet cover from the bed with a grand sweep and folded it with care. He tapped his forehead as Hungarian peasants do when they think they have a good idea. "Once, an *S.S. Obergruppenführer* slept here," he said. "Later, a general of the Red Army. And now an American doctor. Good night, *doktor úr!*" He laughed with gusto.

I tossed for a long time before I fell asleep, and then my sleep was interrupted by bad dreams. In one, I found myself at the cemetery. There in the middle of the marble plaque I saw my *Matura*. I awoke; it was only three. Before long, pale daylight filtered through the curtains. At five, I got up and dressed. I took a prescription blank from my wallet and wrote a note to Laky—a few words of excuse explaining that I had miscalculated the time of my departure from Vienna. I left the note downstairs on the desk of Boross, who fortunately was still sleeping. The morning was brisk. I started my Volkswagen, and soon I was travelling on the road to the frontier.

I never again dreamed of my *Matura*. —RICHARD BERCZELLER

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8:00 p.m. WFMT (98.7)—Concert by the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Bonwit Teller in the Drake Oak by Brook Motel.
—*Radio listing in the Chicago Sun-Times.*

A night off for Eugene Ormandy.

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