

THE WINGS OF DEFEAT

MY mother's relatives had not wanted us to leave Hungary. "Nonsense!" they said. "Why go to Italy, where people starve and where they have air raids every day? You know that here you will never go hungry. And the Russians will never cross the Tisza."

This was what they said around the first of September, 1944. Earlier, it had been "... the Russians will never cross the Carpathians." The Russians had done just that, though, and my father had written from Italy that he wanted us to be together, in case our victorious armies should slip up somewhere and let the barefooted muzhiks into Budapest. Actually, Father had never believed in a German victory after he had seen in a newsreel Hitler's reaction to hearing that France had surrendered. When the Führer jumped up in the air among the trees of Neuilly, slapping his thigh, Father was shocked. "That idiot will never conquer anything. Can you imagine Julius Caesar or Napoleon carrying on like *that*?"

My father had started his career in the Foreign Service under Franz Josef, and, as a result of a deep disinterest in politics, he still had his job under the Hungarian Nazi regime of Szálasi. At this time, he was counsellor of our legation accredited to the Italian Social Republic of Mussolini. The Italian capital had been moved from Rome, which was now uncomfortably close to the front lines, up to the little resort town of Salò, on the shores of Lake Garda. The foreign missions had also been dislodged from Rome, and they made their headquarters in the Albergo Grand'Italia, in Bellagio, a small town on Lake Como. It was there that my mother, my five-year-old sister Marika, and I were expected. My two brothers were in the Army (one of them was later killed in the defense of Budapest), but I was a red-headed boy of ten, and was going to have a great time out of the war.

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Max S. ...

THE train trip from Budapest to Venice was a young boy's dream. Trains leaving Budapest for Italy had German escorts to protect them from attacks while crossing Yugoslavia, and a German soldier was stationed in our compartment. The bridge on the Danube at the Austrian border blew up a few minutes after we passed. When we got to Vienna, the bed in my room at the Hungarian Embassy was still covered with the debris of a Venetian chandelier and a window, both of which had been

shattered by bombs the previous night. Outside, a streetcar with a huge rafter stuck perpendicularly through its center stood on its tracks like a speared animal. When we left the Ostbahnhof at dawn the next morning, our train passed between long lines of military vehicles still gloriously ablaze in the gutted station. In Yugoslavia, the train was constantly assaulted by Cetnik guerrillas lurking on the hillsides, and while we huddled under the seats our German escort answered the guerrillas' fire from our compartment window. For hours, the only things I could see were the soldier's boots and the hand grenades stuck in his boot tops. Empty brass shells flew all around, and I filled my pockets with those that ricocheted under the seat. At Mestre, our train finally succumbed to bombs from a score of British Vampires, and I even got a piece of shrapnel in my left knee as we ran toward the station's bomb shelter.

My father's car was waiting for us in Venice. There were very few other cars around—private cars had long ago been requisitioned by the military—and we sped through Northern Italy with our eyes and ears on the alert for planes. When we spotted any tiny speck in the sky (often it turned out to be only a bird), our chauffeur made a ninety-degree turn and drove across fields and through puddles into the protective shadow of a tree, or into a haystack. Even so, we had our share of machine-



gun bullets from the wandering Allied fighter bombers before we reached Bellagio, twelve days after leaving Budapest.

My father was waiting for us in the lobby of the Grand'Italia, and we were ushered across luxurious rugs and up to our small suite on the second floor. I was put to bed, and stayed there while doctors debated whether or not to amputate my leg. Finally, perhaps influenced more by my father's forceful empiricism than by scientific theory, they decided against the operation, and in three weeks I was climbing the rocks in the hotel's huge formal gardens, with both legs intact.

BEFORE the war, the Grand'Italia had been the Great Britain, and under the hastily painted new name one could easily read the old. It was a large, pompous Edwardian hotel, and the offices and staff quarters of the dozen embassies and legations of the Axis fitted quite comfortably into its rooms. The British Vampires left us alone there, although their arrival was constantly expected after we had the chilling honor of being singled out by

Winston Churchill in one of his speeches over the Voice of London. Mr. Churchill said, more or less, that he knew how much the diplomatic corps of the Axis in Italy was enjoying itself in a hotel in Bellagio, and that he would take good care to contribute to their enjoyment.

For this member of the diplomatic corps, the best thing about life in Bellagio was that I didn't have to go to school. The imponderables of war were one excuse for keeping me out of the congested and chaotic classes (suppose they *did* drop a bomb?). Another was the fact that, officially, I still didn't speak Italian well enough. My knowledge of languages was in those days scandalously rudimentary for a diplomat's son. When one day the lady secretary of the Danish Minister, stand-



ing on the pier and squinting out toward the lake, asked me, "*Est-ce que tu vois le bateau?*" I answered, in what I thought to be a passable Oxford accent, "I don't speak English." I can still see her watery blue eyes pop as she swallowed hard in disbelief.

Father didn't mind this sort of thing. He had started life as an officer of the Hussars. In the halls of the Wienerneustadt Academy, the future defenders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were not encouraged to like bookish pursuits but to learn to ride horseback under all conceivable conditions. My mother would have liked me to continue with school, war or no war, but the indifference of the male members of the family was enough to discourage her from drastic action, and she contented herself with trying to interest me in reading. Her efforts were not successful; there were too many day-to-day wonders at hand.

The inmates of the Grand'Italia alone offered endless material for entertainment. Colonnello Ranconi, the Fascist militia agent whom the Italian Social Republic had charged with our security, was an inefficient young dandy who never endured the bulge of a revolver under his well-tailored coat. He spent his days languorously propped against the lobby desk, twisting his waxed mustache and exchanging lewd remarks with the bellboys. He was usually to be seen with a sickly-looking blond young lady, whom my parents didn't even try to pass off to me as his wife. The head of the Hungarian Mission, an ex-Army colonel, had made his hotel suite into a military stronghold. The radiators were converted into sub-machine-gun racks, the window sills were upholstered with sandbags, and the doors were reinforced with thick



oak planks. He announced to all his colleagues that his suite would be open to them in the hour of peril, when the partisans rose, and vowed that neither he nor his guests would be taken alive by the barbarians. A member of the Bulgarian Legation had an old copy of Nostradamus, and he kept turning out beautiful predictions about the future course of the war, which proceeded undisturbed by Nostradamus. Another source of interest was the young male secretary of the Croatian Mission, who had a romantic profile and a fast sports car. Every few weeks, a multilingual stenographer had to be revived after taking too many sleeping pills on his account. And since the war precluded professional entertainment, the wives of the diplomats organized all manner of shows for their own and their husbands' solace. We had an undue number of recitals for voice and piano, in which an ambassador's wife would finally have her chance to sing Wagner to an audience. Fortunately, the diplomats, who sat straight-backed in the gilded hall, had been trained in stamina and politesse.

FASCINATING as the people in the Grand'Italia may have been, none of them were anywhere near my age, and after a few weeks I started wandering outside the gates of the hotel's park to make contact with the natives. Because of the war, there were no tourists, and the only boys I could find were a group composed of the sons of small hotel- and shopkeepers. It wasn't easy for me, a foreigner with red hair, to join the gang, but after several fights, in which I defended the honor of the Magyars, and of Julius Caesar, Leonardo, Columbus, and other red-haired men, I was accepted into the circle. Members automatically became part of a secret society, with predatory functions, called the Silver Hawks. Each of us had a wooden dagger painted with chrome, and we were invincible. Soon we didn't have anybody to fight against; the other gangs in the area had either

joined us or disbanded. This created an untenable situation, in which peace and monotony prevailed, and we were forced to resort to internecine war. It was decided that we needed a new leader, and three or four secret sub-societies worked under cover to elect him. The elections lasted a long time and almost cost me two incisors, but after the first ballot I had the situation in hand, and started remaking the society after my image. I had hardly elected Italo, my best friend, to the position of Lieutenant General when a sudden coalition was formed against the new tyrant and his protégé, and at the end of a last bitter engagement Italo and I were thrown out of the ranks.

After this debacle, we more or less had to leave town and take to the hills, which were less infested with Silver Hawks. One of Italo's uncles owned an empty villa, with a large garden, just outside Bellagio. This became our refuge in exile. Italo was living the war more than any of the other boys I had known. His father managed the Hotel Metropole & Suisse, and was high in the local Fascist hierarchy. Italo himself—dark, wiry, with large, dreamy eyes—told me that he had hand grenades under his bed, ready to drop on the Allied soldiers if they should try to enter the hotel. We spent long afternoons lying under laurel shrubs in the garden, talking about how much better the Messerschmitts were than the Spitfires, the advantages of the Italian *mitra* over the Sten guns, and the awesome power of the V-1s. But inactivity was not for us, and we soon devised a new way of fighting.

IT all started one day when Italo, using a regular notebook page and some glue, showed me how to make a small tridimensional tank, complete with turret and gun. I suggested that we might try to build some other war machines with paper and glue. We found out that, besides tanks, we could manu-



facture all sorts of ships, cannons, trucks (these were rather awkward-looking), and planes. In a crescendo of enthusiasm, we decided to prepare two armies, one for each of us, and sally forth in war against each other.

The next day, we divided the garden between us. The place was ideal for our purpose. There were several large, irregularly shaped lawns surrounded by gravelled walks. The gravel was declared to be water, the lawn land. Our machines could move a given number of feet on land or water, according to the nature of the equipment, each time one of us had his turn. It was like a gigantic chess game, with an unlimited number of pieces and possibilities for movement. The only disagreement arose over who was to lead which army. We both wanted our forces to represent the Axis, but after much arguing I accepted with reluctance the role of Supreme Allied Commander.

We then started accumulating our equipment. For weeks, we mass-produced armored cars, ships, and planes, each piece marked with an emblem. (We were modern enough not to bother with individual soldiers.) I emblazoned

mine with the American star, the British concentric circles, the Russian hammer and sickle; Italo decorated his with *fascio* and swastika. By the time the declaration of war was due, our prolonged and purposeful preparations had aroused the attention of friends, ex-friends, and outsiders, and all were pleading to be admitted to the game. But we were stern; we refused to explain our rules. When finally the hostilities started, we had our strategies worked out in detail. Battalions moved silently, by devious routes, toward enemy continents. If, for instance, I brought three of my pieces to within six feet of an enemy weapon, I was entitled to throw three stones (one for each piece within firing range) at the enemy tank or gun, while Italo, in this case, could answer with only one

shot. When a piece was hit by a stone, it was out of combat; at the end of the day we burned the disabled equipment and rushed home to prepare some more. We were slowly depleting all the surplus copybooks that had been in stock at the bookstore for years and were intended to last till the end of the war.

As the days went on, we found that if we quit early in the afternoon, descended to the town square, and there started to discuss, in an offhand manner, the latest developments on our front lines, a large crowd of boys would congregate to listen. We knew that they envied us, although they tried to conceal their curiosity, and that was heady knowledge. Sitting on the rim of the fountain, Italo would say, "Three American armored battalions were destroyed by forces of the Brandenburg Division on the Greek coast. The Allied beachhead in South Africa has been annihilated today by the Luftwaffe. The Axis invasion forces are well entrenched in Scotland, and an armored spearhead is moving south toward London." In a flattering silence dense with expectation, I would then ascend the rostrum with my version of the facts: "A convoy of American transport ships and carriers is cutting off the supplies of the Axis forces in England. The end of the invasion is near. Marshal Zhukov has just entered Ankara, and will soon be moving with his troops across the Mediterranean to attack the rear of the German lines in Africa. . . ." Meanwhile, the grown-up population sitting at the café tables was listening to far more fantastic reports on the radio.

OUR game lasted all through the long spring weeks. Neither of us actually won it in the end. We interrupted it because the old half-mentioned

threats of real attack had suddenly assumed imminence and weight. The Allies were advancing daily on all fronts; the Italian partisans had left their mountain retreats and were patrolling the outskirts of town. I now spent my free time planning an escape route from my window, in case the partisans should suddenly seize the hotel. With a few acrobatics, I could get from the bathroom to the jagged roof of the building, and from there slide down to the wild forest that began in our back yard. And from there I could perhaps make it to Switzerland. I felt a little guilty about leaving my parents and sister behind, but I couldn't expect them to run over roofs and cross the Alps, and I didn't want to be trapped and tortured by the partisans.

As the situation grew more uncertain, my parents tried to keep me within the walls of the garden, and I didn't see Italo any more. Later, I heard that his father had been found in a boat drifting on the lake, shot to death, with a message from the partisans pinned to his chest. I never knew whether or not this was true—there were so many wild stories going around—but the last time I saw Italo, at Sunday Mass in the little old town church, he and his mother were wearing black. He looked much older, and his eyes were sunk deeply under his brow. Leaving the church, I could have had a chance to talk with him, but instead I walked with my eyes on the ground, in too much of a panic even to greet him, so I never found out.

Ominous signs multiplied. Colonnello Ranconi, the Fascist militia agent, and his blond lady disappeared one day, never to be seen again in Bellagio. A company of Schutzstaffel was supposed to come from Salò to patrol the Grand'Italia and watch over our safety, but instead we heard that the Germans had bypassed us on the other side of the lake and were headed for home. Nobody knew what to do. Our Minister had a haggard look, and stopped talking about resistance unto death. (Later,



when the partisans had control of the town, he offered his military training and his machine guns to them, and could be seen on the beach, firing at floating beer bottles, while colorfully dressed young guerrilla recruits watched.) Startling news was heard every hour and contradicted just as often. Tales of partisan ferocity and mass slaughters were followed by assurances from the German Ambassador that a terrible new bomb perfected by Hitler was about to change the course of the war. While, officially, everybody still had to believe in victory, plans

for fleeing to Switzerland were brewed behind closed doors in every room. But no one dared to be the first. The danger of being caught by the partisans in the Alpine passes was the most powerful deterrent. As long as we all stayed together, it was hoped, they wouldn't do us much harm.

On April 13, 1945, I remember, we were all sitting in the dining room of the Grand'Italia, reminiscent of a watered-down Hall of Mirrors, waiting for our meagre dinner to be served by swallow-tailed waiters. In the polite silence of a hundred hungry diplomats, a radio was broadcasting the usual story of qualified victories when the voice of the announcer stopped for a long interval. Then it started again, brisker than ever, "Yesterday, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the American President, was found dead at his desk in his winter home at Warm Springs. . . ." The neutral silence became filled with intense interest, and we all looked at each other, trying to guess what was the proper thing to do. My French-speaking friend, the Danish Minister's secretary, suddenly stood up. A spinster of around forty, with a geyser of fuzzy blond hair, she was considered by everybody an importunate scatterbrain. She threw her napkin on the table and exclaimed, in a choked voice, "*Un très grand homme est mort.*" Then she rushed from the din-



ing room. At this, everyone looked down at his empty plate. "I tell you that woman will get herself into trouble eventually," my father muttered to us. But the incident ended there. We had our dinner quietly, and the German Minister, who was a man of good taste, did not try to toast the event as a German victory. After the war was over, we learned, to our enormous surprise, that the secretary had had a transmitter concealed in her trunk, with which she had kept the Allied Intelligence in nearby Switzerland informed of our moves.

THE days rolled on in haphazard confusion throughout April. We never knew whether the Germans or the partisans were in control, but on the first of May the latter seemed finally to be in charge of the town. They didn't set foot in the garden of our hotel—probably because they didn't know what to do with us—and we were too afraid to go out. Information filtered in to us through the employees of the hotel, who now all wore red foulards and looked at us with exaggerated disgust as surviving specimens of a regime that had become *ancien*.

On May 8th, we were startled by a sudden burst of gunfire. The whole population of the town seemed to be crowded on the lake shore, where the partisans were firing their surplus ammunition into the water. The fusillade went on till sunset, and was duplicated in every village on the lake. That was V-E Day for us, and we hoped that they would use up all their ammunition in the festivities. We now began to await the arrival of the Allied Armies. The thought of being captured by them was far less frightening than that of being at the mercy of the mercurial guerrillas.



Every morning, when I woke up, I went to the window to see in what respect the world had changed during the night. I was still determined to try my luck across the Alps, if the change should be for the worse. The final sight that I remember seeing from my window was a dozen armored cars surrounding the park and hotel. Each one had a star on its turret—that star so familiar to me from having drawn it hundreds of times on my own paper tanks. Everything was quiet. I thought the soldiers must have arrived on tiptoe during the night, and were now watching me from their ambushade. I went back to my bed on tiptoe and hid under the covers, trying to adjust myself to the feeling of being a prisoner.

—CSIKSZENTMIHÁLYI MIHÁLY

