ESCAPE

"The war will be over some day, and we have to make sure that when it is, this child will have good nails, good teeth, and good hair."

"Run, Vera, run! Run as fast as you can!" I was ten years old. On that moonless night, Mother and I had traveled on a train to a bleak station far from our Budapest home and were now running through thick, dark woods.

"Faster, Vera!" she kept urging. "Faster!"

I ran as fast as I could over barely visible roots and around shadowy tree trunks. For what reason, I had no idea.

Only later did Mother explain. Like so many Hungarians before us, we were trying to escape by running through the woods and jumping onto the train after it passed passport control, slowing down around a curve before continuing into Austria and freedom. But I could not run fast enough. We could not catch up to the train and were left behind; so we had to go back to Budapest. I knew it was all my fault.

Now, more than four decades later, it seemed like a dream as we stood alongside Secretary of State Warren Christopher on a cold, gray, cloudy December morning in 1994. I was back in Budapest, standing on the tarmac of Ferihegy Airport with my husband, Donald Blinken, the United States Ambassador to the Republic of Hungary. We were awaiting the arrival of President Bill Clinton aboard *Air Force One*. Just five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, historic changes were sweeping across Hungary and other former communist countries in Eastern Europe.

Heavy cloud cover enveloped the airport. Soon, far in the distance, we heard the thunderous rumbling of a jet approaching and, a short time later, the loud squeal of airplane tires touching down. Even on the ground, visibility was poor and we couldn't quite make out the jumbo jet. A few moments later, a gleaming white airliner appeared out of the grayness and slowly taxied toward us. The large black letters on its side proclaimed: United States of America.

This stunning and dramatic vision made me feel like a character in a novel. Only this was real, as Donald kept reminding me, and welcoming President Clinton as his ambassadorial husband-and-wife team in Hungary was the culmination of our uncommon journey. How had that frightened little girl trying to escape Soviet-occupied Hungary come to find herself in such a place?

BUDAPEST

My return to Hungary took many turns, and begins with my mother, Lili. The youngest of three sisters, she was vivacious, outgoing, and lovable. She had blonde hair and the most beautiful bright blue eyes that sparkled whenever she laughed, which was often. She was thin and petite, 5-feet 4-inches in heels. Her first husband died in an automobile accident after one year of marriage; left with few resources, she supported herself by giving French lessons. Her charming personality soon caused two men to fall in love with her: Jozsef Ermer and Paul Flesch. Jozsef was a banker of medium height, with brown hair and blue eyes; his demeanor was formal and serious, hiding a keen sense of humor. Paul was the son of a rural veterinarian who yearned to be a doctor. He was unusually tall for a Hungarian, six feet, three inches, a gentle giant of a man. When laws were passed prohibiting Jews from attending medical school, Paul went to Austria, learned

German, completed medical school, and passed his qualifying exams. Upon returning to Hungary and passing the exams again, this time in Hungarian, he began an internship in pediatrics.

Lili chose to marry Jozsef and was determined to have a child. With war threatening to erupt in Europe, her cautious husband thought the times were too dangerous to bring a child into the world. Fortunately for me, Lili got her way. Her marriage to Jozsef and my birth, along with the passage of anti-Jewish laws and Germany's saber rattling, drove Paul to emigrate to America.

I was named Veronica but have always been called Vera because Mother thought it was a diminutive of Veronica. Actually, they are two entirely different names, and started my early duality. Mother loved me so much that she wanted to be everything to me. To prove how much she wanted me, she often recounted the exchange in which Father said this was not the time to bring another person into the world. I honestly believe she had no idea that she was inadvertently imparting the impression that Father *didn't* want me, as if she had selected me beforehand and he had rejected the choice.

We were a happy little family in Budapest, but on March 19, 1944, life changed irrevocably. An infection behind my ear, which today would be cured by an antibiotic, had required the removal of the mastoid bone. While recovering at home after the surgery, I began to bleed through the bandages, and Mother quickly set off with me to the hospital. Our progress was suddenly blocked by crowds of people, and we saw regiments of German soldiers and armored vehicles moving in formation down the wide boulevard. For a child, frightened by the bleeding and unable to get to the hospital, this threat was very personal. Hungary had become part of the Axis Powers after Germany promised to restore the two-thirds of Hungarian territory lost after the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. Now, the Germans were occupying Budapest because they had discovered the Hungarian government was secretly negotiating with the Allies to switch sides.

On Christmas Eve, 1944, nine months after we watched the German Army enter our city, awareness of the war became inescapable even to a child. Mother and I were dressing for a family dinner to be held at her sister's house in Buda, in the hilly, residential area across the Danube from our apartment in Pest. Father planned to meet us there. I had stubbornly insisted on wearing a favorite dress that was late coming back from a seamstress and, as a result, we were delayed leaving the apartment. Bypassing the heavily damaged Margit Bridge, closest to our home, we had almost reached the bridge to its north when planes suddenly attacked, killing everyone on it. We fled in terror. Mother's hair soon turned white, and she always believed this was caused by the shock of our close call.

Soon afterwards, German authorities commandeered our Hollan Street apartment building and turned it into a temporary hospital. Father had not been able to cross the Danube and we had no idea where he was, yet we had to leave our home. By now, Pest was overcrowded with people fleeing from the countryside, all desperate for shelter from the fighting and the frigid cold. Somehow, my resourceful mother found an apartment at 2 Becsi Street, overlooking Erzsebet Square.

Mitzi, my nanny, was with us because her husband was in the Army. In her wonderful Teutonic way, Mitzi kept me very busy. It was a harshly cold winter and we had no heat, but the layers of clothes I wore at all times were no obstacle to Mitzi, who was always washing some part of me with very cold water, and saying, "The war will be over some day, and we have to make sure that when it is, this child will have good nails, good teeth, and good hair." I bless her for that.

As the Germans retreated and the Allies advanced, the fighting reached Pest. Each block was fought for, each street became a battleground, and the fighting was house to house. There was looting, the stores were empty, and, like everyone else, we had no food left. As a last resort, Mother would run the few blocks from Becsi Street to the hotels along the Danube where food was sometimes still available. It was a very dangerous run, but she always took me with her. "If we are going to die," she would say, "we are going to die together." We lived with constant fear and hunger.

Later, deep into the siege, to keep us from starving, Mother began to interpret for the Germans in exchange for food. While interpreting, she would always ask, "Where are you coming from?" They replied with the name of one or another section or street in the city. In mid-January, a wounded German soldier said he had just come from the front.

"How far away is the front?" Mother asked.

"Erzsebet Square," the soldier replied, and pointed to the street. The fighting was literally in front of our house.

Budapest was pounded by bombs almost daily and each time the sirens sounded, we had to rush to the basement, which had been turned into an air-raid shelter. We often had to spend long hours in those tight, dark quarters. A dim candle or two substituted for the electrical power that was an early casualty of the siege. Mother, Mitzi, and I had been assigned seats on benches along a wall; other occupants filled benches in the middle of the room. A typical little girl, I tired of sitting in the same place every day; so, on one occasion, a very nice older gentleman and two other kind people sitting next to him on a bench in the middle of the room offered to change places with us. Suddenly, a bomb struck the apartment house next door, setting it on fire and causing a wall in our building to collapse. Everybody sitting along that wall, where we had been sitting just moments earlier, died instantly.

We threw ourselves to the floor with our arms covering our heads as the rubble fell on us. Through a gaping hole in the wall and ceiling we could see the fire raging in the adjacent building. All the adults knew that the Germans were using the building behind ours as an ammunition depot. If the fire reached it, the whole block would blow up. We were desperate to find a way out, but mounds of debris blocked us, and we thought we would soon die. Miraculously, a heavy snow began to fall, putting out the fire. The snowstorm and a child's whim had saved our lives, but three people had died for doing something nice for a little girl.

On January 16, 1945, Soviet soldiers entered our air raid shelter. They had come to liberate us, and one of the soldiers came over to shake my hand. Even stranger than his desire to shake the hand of a little girl were the wristwatches he wore all the way up his arm. Most of the Soviet advance soldiers were from rural areas, had never seen wristwatches before, and didn't know that they had to be wound. Whenever a watch stopped, they threw it away and grabbed some more. Meanwhile, the Germans had retreated over the remaining bridges into Buda and then blown them up. The battle would continue on the Buda side for another month, until the Soviets finally overran the last Germans, who were holding out in the royal castle on the hill above the city.

What the Soviets would do afterward to Hungary and the other countries of the region was tragic, but in those first days we were grateful to them for reaching us before we died. Unaware of what the future held, at that moment we truly felt liberated. After our liberation from the Germans, Mother's first thought was to search for Father. She assumed that he had been caught on the Buda side on Christmas Eve. Thinking his brother might know where he was, Mother dressed us both in all the clothes we had to protect us from the terrible cold, and we ventured outside to find my uncle.

We found the city in ruins. Many buildings were only heaps of brick, stone, and plaster, and every window was shattered. In front of one building rows of dead bodies were piled up. The building had been a holding center for Jews awaiting deportation. Before retreating, with no time to ship them to concentration camps, the Germans shot their captives and stacked the corpses outside. As Mother and I walked on, I bumped into someone I thought was sprawled in the street. He failed to respond when I excused myself.

"He is not very polite," I told Mother. "He didn't say anything."

"He can't," Mother replied. "He is dead."

We walked on and saw people crowded around a dead horse. They were carving it up for food.

To our great joy and relief, we found Father at my uncle's apartment. He had indeed been caught on the Buda side, but later walked across the frozen Danube to look for us at home. Nobody knew where we had gone, so he went to his brother's apartment. Only six blocks away from us during the siege, he might have been in a different country until the Soviets fought their way from his street to ours. He and my uncle had somehow acquired a single, extraordinary food supply: a very large sack filled with chunks of white sugar. This was the first nourishment Mother and I had eaten in several days. Not very good for the teeth, but we were overjoyed to have it. That sack of sugar would sustain us for quite some time, and to this day, I always have at least ten pounds of sugar at home—just in case.

My parents and I started back toward our old apartment in a heavy snowstorm. Beside me on a child's sled were our few possessions. Father pulled the sled along Szent Istvan Avenue, a once-grand boulevard now dark and heavily damaged. Not a single vehicle was on it, just people like us walking or pulling children and belongings on sleds. Mother had been deprived of cigarettes during the war, but had now located a few and wanted to stop for a smoke. Father put the rope down and courteously went over to light her cigarette. At that instant, a stray bullet whistled down through the space where my father's head had been a few seconds before. An act of providence had spared him. I still have that bullet.

Our apartment was miraculously undamaged, and its contents were mostly intact. We pushed most of the furniture back into place and tried to resume our lives. For the first night in weeks, although hungry, I went to sleep in my own bed in my corner room on the top floor of the six-story apartment building. A few hours later, the German bombers sounded overhead and then explosions rocked the city. One bomb struck the roof of our building, slicing off a corner of my ceiling. The bomb landed alongside the building without exploding. Heavy rain poured through the gaping hole in my bedroom, but I was alive. Earlier, my childish whims had kept us off a doomed bridge and away from a deadly wall collapse. Now, for the third time, I had been miraculously saved. Years would pass before I would begin to wonder why.

Whispers among survivors said the Soviets were savages, raping and murdering wherever they went. It was to our horror, therefore, that the next night several Soviet soldiers looking for a place to sleep chose our apartment. My mother's perfume bottles had somehow survived the war. Perfume was another item most Russian soldiers had never seen before, and thinking it was a kind of whiskey, they drank it down. Of course, the perfume burned their throats terribly and they became enraged. Their anger threatened to turn violent, but they left us alone. Late that night, I peered through a keyhole into our living room, where the soldiers were sleeping on the floor with their guns beside them. It was a frightening sight.

The soldiers soon left our apartment in the morning and we were safe, but we were also very hungry. We had nothing to eat, and the only available food was in the countryside. Father feared being rounded up by the soldiers and sent to a Russian labor camp if he went outside, so Mother made her way to the country by train. Often the trains were so overcrowded that she was forced to cling to the roof of a rail car. As always, Mother showed remarkable ingenuity and courage.

⁂

The Hungarian Communists who had fled to Moscow after their failed coup at the end of World War I now came back to Budapest and took control of the government. Foreseeing that the end of the war would be followed by Soviet domination and repression, Mother urged Father to arrange our family's emigration, which would have been possible just after the war. Not given to rash action, Father told her he thought the harsh times were only temporary. If things got really bad, with the help of his good friends and banking connections in Great Britain, we could escape to London. Soon, however, the government began to nationalize companies and financial institutions, among them father's bank. He returned to join his brother at his family's export-import company, where, on a cold winter day in 1947, Mother was visiting him when government officials entered.

"We will have your keys," they said to Father.

Everyone knew what that meant. The company was being nationalized. Mother had already stopped wearing red nail polish, having been warned that the "bourgeois" color would bring undue attention. Now, when she went to put on her fur coat, an official said, "No, that stays, too." Mother walked out into the freezing cold, knowing that her coat would end up on the shoulders of the man's wife or girlfriend.

In 1948, the Communist Party openly took control of the government. All land was collectivized, industry was nationalized, and a "planned economy" was imposed.

⁂

In the spring of that same year, Father became ill although Mother and I were not told how serious his illness was. By summer, Father was hospitalized, Mother was spending all her time with him, and I was sent to a friend's country house at Lake Balaton. In August, though, I was told that Father was getting better and that he and Mother were coming to visit.

The night before their planned arrival I had a very strange experience. My friend Marika and I were sleeping in separate beds in a corner of the room with a wall behind her bed and a wall to the side of mine. A tremendous banging in that side wall woke me up in the middle of the night. Frightened, I woke Marika and asked her what was happening, what was causing the noise. Marika heard nothing. "You're imagining things," she said. "Come on, we'll change beds." We changed beds, and Marika went back to sleep. I soon heard the noise again, this time coming from behind the bed to which I had switched. After awhile it stopped, but it took a long time for me to get to sleep because I was so excited about seeing my parents after such a long separation.

The next morning, we all went to the train station to meet my parents. Instead, my mother's eldest sister, Aunt Erzsike, stepped off the train. She always had played a motherly role in the family, and now she took me for a long walk. She told me my father's condition had suddenly worsened, and he had died the night before. I am convinced that he came to me during the night to say goodbye.

Hoping to shield me from the loss, Mother kept me away from the funeral, which was held before I returned to Budapest. Because I had never seen Father looking ill and was never taken to his grave, I never completely accepted his death; something felt uncertain, unfinished. In my young mind, I imagined Mother's phrase "He left us" to mean that he had left because he didn't want to have me in the first place and perhaps now he didn't like me. When I told her this later in life, Mother was devastated, realizing that she had innocently used an unfortunate phrase to add to my sense of unresolved emotions and loss.

⁂

Thirty-four years later, in February 1982, Mother was in the hospital dying. She was in a coma, and the doctors said she would never open her eyes or speak again. I would not leave her side and was sitting by her bed looking at her and crying when her eyelids suddenly fluttered open. She stared at me with those clear blue eyes, looked around the room, and asked, "Am I still here?" Speaking in Hungarian, she then looked at me lovingly and said, "Don't cry. It's all right. There will be more of us there to look after you." She closed her eyes and never spoke again. I am convinced that, just like my Father in 1948, Mother came back from another place to say goodbye.

⁂

Mother saw Father's death at forty-four as a sign that she had been right about wanting to leave Hungary. Why else, she asked, would God have taken such a fine man so young? By the summer of 1948, however, the Communist government had sealed the borders, condemning its citizens to life imprisonment. That was when Mother began seeking a way to escape, testing possible means, like our futile run to catch the train before it crossed into Austria.

Mother had always spoken openly to me, but now she began to keep things to herself. If I had known her objective was escaping from Hungary, I would certainly have approved. Even though I liked school, it felt oppressive: All education had been recast in accordance with communist ideology and Soviet needs, communication had been cut off with countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and Russian became the only foreign language taught in the schools. Even as a child, I disliked the authoritarian orders and the many restrictions placed on what we could do. I disliked the drabness of the Little Pioneers' tan uniform and red scarf. I also resented being responsible for the grades of our building concierge's lazy daughter. Communism, we were told, meant share and share alike, and supposedly we all were born with equal capabilities.

Mother assumed that the appropriation of both my father's businesses meant we were on the government's watch list. Thousands of citizens considered untrustworthy were on the list by then. The secret police couldn't send everyone to Siberia. Instead, people who got caught trying to escape were forced to report on others; you became a *besugo* or "whisperer," in other words, an informer. The secret police, however, wouldn't believe you if you accused strangers. One had to denounce people one knew, friends and neighbors, which created an atmosphere of tension and betrayal.

After nearly two years of failing to find a slit in the Iron Curtain for our escape, Mother was losing hope. Unexpectedly, the government provided a way to slip through when it passed a law in 1949 ordering all foreign citizens to leave the country. Giorgio Benzoni, the Italian ambassador, a friend of my parents, came to Mother in early 1950 with an escape plan: He would arrange for her to marry an Italian widower whom the law was expelling from Hungary. She and I would leave with her "husband." Because the marriage was being undertaken for humanitarian reasons, the Vatican would annul it once we were all safely out of Hungary.

I first learned of the plan the afternoon my mother came home with an Italian widower named Leo Comis. A good-looking, dark-skinned man with gray hair, he spoke Hungarian with a heavy Italian accent and owned a pastry shop in Budapest, where he had lived a long time. He and his son were now returning home to Piave di Cadore, a small town north of Venice. Mother introduced him to me as her new husband and my new father. Angry and appalled, I broke into tears. At first, I refused to speak to her, and then I wanted to know how she could betray my father's memory by getting married so soon after his death, and to a man who didn't even speak proper Hungarian.

Fearing that keeping the truth from me might destroy our relationship, Mother explained that Leo was helping us to leave Hungary, so we could go to America. The marriage wasn't a real one and would last only a short while. Wanting my friends to understand that my mother wasn't being unfaithful to my father's memory, I informed them the next day that she was getting married as a ploy for us to escape to America. Then I proudly reported to Mother that I had upheld her honor. My poor mother must have been horrified. With everyone in Hungary being forced to inform on everyone else as the price for their own freedom, she immediately diagnosed a terrible virus that required my staying home—and having no contact with my friends because I was extremely contagious. At the same time, concerned that our neighbors would begin to grow suspicious about why Mr. and Mrs. Comis were not living together, Leo and his son moved in with us, which added to my emotional turmoil at the prospect of leaving home forever for a destination that was only a name to me.

These events took place during a dreadful time in Hungary. As in China's Cultural Revolution, which sent city inhabitants to farms in the countryside, Hungary undertook a mass relocation scheme to switch the "disloyal" and "rebellious" city bourgeoisie with presumably more loyal country peasants. We knew several families who were given just two hours to pack up whatever they could and move out of their houses to distant farms. The government then divided their houses into tiny apartments and moved in several country families who shared the kitchen, Soviet style. Mother thought there was an imminent possibility that we, too, might be forcibly relocated to live on what we forever afterward referred to as the "chicken farm."

Although Mother's marriage was for humanitarian reasons, there was a financial side to it as well. We were very fortunate. Mother's sister Manci and her Greek ship-owner husband, Dimitri, who lived in New York, made it financially possible for us to leave Hungary by transferring funds into Leo's Swiss bank account. Letters full of hidden meanings shuttled to and from New York regarding our escape plan. "The package will be arriving shortly at the snowy country" meant Leo's payment had been wired to his Swiss bank account. Much of the communication went through my grandmother in Budapest. She was a great letter writer and, to her credit, kept her three daughters closely connected during the many years of separation.

In April, the newly-formed Comis family finally went to the Western railroad station for our trip to "our new home in Italy." My grandmother, Aunt Erzsike, and her family came to see us off. No one knew if we would see each other ever again. At the last moment, I heard Mother whisper to her sister something I was too young to decipher: "Take good care of her if they send her back." Only many years later did I find out its meaning. Mother did not allow Leo to adopt me because the Catholic Church would annul a marriage but not an adoption. She was adamant that my father did not die at the young age of forty-four for his child to be somebody else's daughter for the rest of her life. So, I remained Hungarian and, being under age, was included on my mother's new Italian passport, but only as "Daughter—minor." The risk was that if the border guards requested my papers and learned that my last name was not Comis, they might force my now-Italian Mother across the border into Austria, but send me, her Hungarian daughter, back to Budapest.

Those expelled by the Communist regime were not allowed to take out of the country any valuables, including jewelry, but Mother was not leaving without the treasured ring Father had given her at my birth: a wide gold band with the initial *L* for Lili in pavé diamonds. Once aboard the train in our sleeping compartment, she hung it on a necklace around my neck and slipped it inside my pajama top. Then she gave me a sleeping pill. If I were asleep, I could not be questioned. I awoke as the train was pulling into Vienna and heard that we had successfully passed through the Hungarian border checkpoint; we were out of Soviet-occupied Hungary, and we were free. On the station platform, Mother purchased oranges and bananas. Never before had I tasted—or even seen—an orange or a banana. They were heavenly.

Our euphoria was short-lived. As the train was traveling through the Austrian countryside, it suddenly stopped. Through the window Mother and I could see Soviet soldiers marching toward us. Both of us were sure the Hungarian authorities had learned of our escape and sent word to take us off the train. Mother knew that they could force her to continue onward and send me back to Hungary. Our hearts were racing, but we tried to appear calm as the soldiers moved through the train toward the "Comis family." A Russian soldier took Mother's Italian passport and began to study our photographs. The soldier looked sharply at us for what seemed like forever. Then he snapped the passport shut and gave it back to Mother. The soldiers moved on, and the train soon started moving again.

A little farther on, the train suddenly stopped again in the middle of a field. This time, British soldiers came aboard and wanted to see our passports. Mother asked one who spoke German what was going on. He explained that we had left the Soviet zone and were entering the British zone. We had been so isolated in Hungary that we were unaware that Austria had been divided after the war into four zones controlled by separate allied forces: the British, the Americans, the French and the Soviets. Our train had simply gone through routine passport controls. We were safe and we were free. We later learned from Aunt Erzsike that shortly after we left Hungary, the authorities seized our apartment with orders to relocate us to the countryside. We had escaped with little time to spare.

ZURICH

When the train reached Zurich, Mother and I said goodbye to Leo, whose obligation had ended after we crossed the border from Hungary. He and his son continued on, home to Italy. We took a taxi to the only hotel in Zurich that Mother knew: the elegant and stately Baur au Lac, where she had stayed with Father in happier times. The sensation of riding freely through a bustling, colorful city after gray and gloomy Budapest seemed surreal to us.

Anxiety soon returned. Mother immediately phoned her sister Manci in New York, who had been expecting the call for days and was overjoyed to hear that her little sister's escape was successful. The two had been unable to speak with each other since the outbreak of the war because in Hungary phone calls abroad were problematic. They could be made only at the post office, and were reported to the Ministry of the Interior, who undoubtedly listened in on them. We had expected Manci to fly to Europe on the very next plane, as she had assured Mother, in code of course, that she would take care of everything from then on. On the phone, however, Manci said, "I'll get there as soon as possible, but you and Vera are going to be expensive for me, so I'm going to travel on one of Dimitri's freighters. I don't know how long that will take. It may be a month or so."

Mother was devastated, but could not say so. She was embarrassed to tell Manci that we had no money because we had only been allowed to take out of Hungary the equivalent of a hundred dollars. What to do? To conserve cash, we had all our meals at the hotel and charged them to our room, stalling for time. A chance encounter at our hotel briefly lifted Mother's spirits. She was happy to meet an old friend from Budapest, the pianist George Feyer. George left Hungary right after the war and made his way to New York, where he gained renown performing at the famous Café Carlyle in Manhattan. Mother told him how despondent she had become at our seemingly hopeless situation in Zurich, and of my homesickness for Budapest. "You should bend down and kiss the ground you are walking on because you are free," he said, his voice rising with emotion. He was so right.

In desperation, Mother telephoned Leo in Italy to ask if he would send us some money, which she would pay back when Manci arrived. Like the Italian ambassador, people always wanted to help Mother. The charm that radiated from her once again stood us in good stead. Instead of sending money, good, kind Leo came to Zurich himself, paid our hotel bill, and took us to Venice, even stopping off in Milan to take the homesick child sightseeing. Remarkably, Leo was being family to us.

VENICE

In Venice, Leo gave us some money and found us a room at the Wildner, a small, reasonably priced hotel near St. Mark's Square, with a view of the Grand Canal. Venice thrilled me; the world was much larger and more beautiful than I could have ever imagined in war-torn Hungary.

Mother tried to be frugal. Seeing a café that announced a low price for *café con panna*, she ordered it for us. Knowing French, but not Italian, she assumed that with our coffee we would get bread (*pain* in French). What the waiter brought out was coffee with whipped cream. Bread, it turned out, was *pane.* One inexpensive way we occupied our time was by teaching each other English from a book. Among the few phrases we learned were "I don't speak English" and "Please speak slowly."

Less than a week after we arrived, Manci phoned to say she was flying to Milan and would be arriving in Venice by train in two days. Mother had told me many stories about my glamorous aunt, including that we had an identical birthmark on the side of our legs. My first sight of this vision stepping down from the train, however, far surpassed anything that a shy little girl from postwar Hungary could have imagined. She was the most glamorous, most elegant, most striking being I had ever seen! Aunt Manci had auburn hair, a stunning smile, and a dramatic presence. I was transfixed by her big, full skirt, which was the style that year, the shimmering blouse with long puffy sleeves, and her chunky gold bracelets. Just for traveling! That this divine goddess and I could share a birthmark felt overwhelming.

Sweeping into our Venice hotel like Auntie Mame, Aunt Manci instantly and permanently changed the lives of her two penniless relatives as if she had waved a magic wand. She paid all our bills and soon moved us to the elegant Grand Hotel des Bains on the Lido, the resort island between Venice and the sea. With the summer season approaching, Manci was sure that awaiting Mother's annulment from the Vatican would be far more enjoyable by the sea. Eventually, Manci admitted the real reason for her delay in leaving New York: clothes. Knowing the hardships Mother had endured in Hungary and the risks she had taken to escape, Manci was embarrassed to reveal that she had delayed her trip because her summer wardrobe was not ready. As soon as it was delivered, she was on the next plane to Europe and us. Clothes and her appearance were very important to Aunt Manci.

The Korean War broke out on my birthday, June 27, 1950. Many Americans in Europe immediately headed home. Sure that another world war was about to start, Manci's husband Dimitri kept phoning and sending telegrams, imploring her to come home. "Absolutely not," she told him. "After what my sister has been through, I'm not leaving her and her child behind." In August, the Vatican granted Mother the annulment of her marriage to Leo Comis. The United States had set quotas for the number of persons from each country allowed to emigrate there. The quota for Italians was quickly filled and there was a long waiting list. Because so few people were able to escape Hungary, the Hungarian quota was empty. Now that both Mother and I were Hungarian again, America would accept us. Our problem, however, was getting there. The Korean War had put a strain on flights and shipping, so Aunt Manci decided we should go to Paris, Her husband had an office there, and they would help us obtain transportation to America.

PARIS

The Champs Elysees with all its lights was the most dazzling sight Mother had seen since before the war, and certainly the most dazzling that I had ever seen. It took us a long time to summon the courage to cross that wide, busy boulevard. Aunt Manci had installed us all at the luxurious Georges V Hotel and bought us new wardrobes for our new lives in America.

One afternoon Mother and Aunt Manci were having drinks at the hotel with me tagging along when Jolie Gabor entered. She and her beautiful daughters, Zsa Zsa, Eva, and Magda, had left Hungary before the war. My mother knew her from Hungary, and Aunt Manci from New York, where Jolie had a jewelry store that had become very successful selling replicas of famous designers' jewelry. I still remember how impressed I was when a telephone was brought to our table. Zsa Zsa was calling from Hollywood to ask her mother what she should wear to a dinner party that evening and which dinner partner she should concentrate on.

NEW YORK

In August 1950, Mother, Aunt Manci, and I finally sailed for New York on the *S.S. America*. Even the ship's name proclaimed not only my destination but my destiny. An early-season hurricane made the trip difficult but could not diminish my excitement or my apprehension. Except for Niagara Falls, I knew nothing about America, and Mother knew little more. Frightening to contemplate as I stepped off the ship and onto a New York City pier was that I was a stranger here, without roots and without a home. I was a homesick little girl, but I knew that Communist Hungary was not the home I wanted.

Uncle Dimitri had not seen Mother or me since I was born. Naturally, Mother was very concerned about how he would receive us,