

20. Russian Encounters

By that time I was sick as hell. I managed to crawl out of that trench hole. I could only walk very slowly and had to stop to have a rest after a short walk. I was carrying my telescopic rifle and the bullets with me. I was alone. The healthy ones were far ahead somewhere, yet I kept on walking as best as I could. A feeling of total indifference came over me. I kept walking in the direction where I could still see some stragglers walking. Dawn came, then the morning. Then I thought I should rip off from my coat and cap all the insignia and colours, in case the Russians overtook me.

Shortly afterwards, walking slowly on an Austrian hillside ridge, away from the Russian direction, I saw two Indians. Imagine! There in Austria, two Indians wearing very neat, elegant German uniforms with silk turbans on their heads. It was a curiously exotic sight. "Were even Indians fighting in the German army?" I asked myself the puzzling question. I don't know what made me drop my telescopic rifle into a large bunch of thick bushes, but I did it without a thought. My curiosity was sharply aroused. I even forgot the misery of my sickness for a while. They were walking towards me from a distance. I had very sharp eyes. I saw quickly that they hadn't noticed me. I was the first to spot them. I started to walk towards them. This was an opportunity I couldn't miss. I wanted to exercise my English knowledge with them, as I was still curious to know whether my self-taught English could be understood and whether I could understand them.

We were nearing each other. One of the turbaned Indians was tall and stepping with infinite ease, softly and gracefully like a tiger. He had a handsome beard. He could have been about 30 or 35 years of age. His German uniform was so neat, it was as if it had just been taken out from a shop window. The other Indian was shorter and very light, about twenty years old, also wearing a turban and an impeccable German uniform. He was walking like a black

panther. And they were walking towards the Russians. I was walking away from the Russians. Obviously they were stepping out towards India or Pakistan. I looked at their footwear. They didn't wear boots like me. They were wearing some sort of comfortable sandals.

I said to them smilingly, "How do you do? Can you talk English?"

The younger one stepped close to me in a fluid, lightning-like movement. I saw something flashing in his hand, and the next instant I saw a curiously shaped knife put against my throat. I looked at him and he looked at me. I felt the keenest of sharp knife blades against my throat. What the hell was going on? I thought. I just looked at him steadily. He looked at me. His eyes weren't vicious. Indeed he was smiling at me with a snarl, like a panther who has caught an antelope unawares.

The tall elder said a few guttural words to him. The knife came off my throat, disappeared somewhere in his trousers, and they walked on without even looking back, as if I didn't even exist. A fast, fleeting thought came into my mind to grab my telescopic rifle from under the bushes and pick them off. But it was only a fleeting thought. And besides, however shocked I was to get a knife at my throat for having greeted them with a smile, they had spared my life. I felt no hate or hostility towards them, but I felt that trying to shoot them while they were walking, like clay pigeons on that relatively barren hillside, would have been a terrible act of cowardice on my part.

Please remember that my plight on the front line was a spiritual one mostly. I had to keep myself clean and pure, so that in the event of getting rapidly eased over to the beyond, I could look squarely into the eyes of whoever was there at the gate, St Peter or God. Cowardly acts were out of the question, so I waited until they disappeared, walking towards distant India, then I took out my telescopic rifle from the bushes and carried on walking in the opposite direction.

This curious behaviour of the Indians kept puzzling me for 44 years. Some six months ago my friend, Vic Fox, whom I saw buried last week and who was one of the last survivors of the English Second World War crack parachutist commandos, enlightened me about these two Indians that I met in Austria on the first day of peace on earth. He said they were Gurkhas hunting for kelpies, human heads. The British dropped quite a few Gurkhas in German uniforms to bag German SS Officers. Vic Fox said I certainly must have had a charmed life to survive their hunger for kelpies on that lonely Austrian hillside. It seems I wasn't a good enough prey for them.

After a couple of hours walking I saw some of our soldier mates grouped together in a grove. There was Ciuman Miklós, the machine-gunner, Gyerkó Tibor and some others. Ciuman Miklós started to laugh derisively when he

saw that I had ripped off the insignia from my coat collar and cap. Now that I was sick and lagging behind, some were furious at me. And what I observed then, to my utter surprise, was that Ciuman Miklós hated me. This was my feeling. Perhaps he had hated me ever since I had convinced him to come with me to rescue that huge leg of ham from the *Gasthof* between our lines and the Russian lines. We had got into such a hellish Russian shelling then that we were both close to either losing our lives or getting crippled down there. Perhaps he had hated me from then on, steadily and patiently.

I walked with the group for a short while. The Russians started to shell us. At one stage a shell was whining close, so I started to move to throw myself on the ground. The shell whined over our heads and I heard Ciuman Miklós' voice from behind me, full of sharp hatred, "Look at the brave man!" Just because I was starting to throw myself on the ground!

I was seriously and helplessly ill, so I told the group, "Look, I cannot walk fast. Just go and worry about yourselves. I will be all right."

So they left me. I was honestly relieved. I was strangely calm, while the others were all panicky, so it was a relief to see them and their panicky wildness go. I was alone, sick, weak, and very slow in walking, but calm. I could still look around at the landscape and draw satisfaction from the picturesque hilly surroundings. That Austria was truly beautiful.

I walked into a small village. There were lots of young Germans there, *Alpenjäger*. I was thirsty as hell. I walked up to a German officer and asked him, "Could you tell me where I can find some drinking water?"

He turned at me so furiously, shouting at me, I swear that if there hadn't been any other Germans there, I would have used my telescopic rifle against him. I just looked at him steadily and walked away.

Surprising, I thought, now that I am sick and I can hardly walk, everybody starts to abuse me. To this day I can't understand these responses. What was it? The natural response from the healthy towards the sick and miserable looking? Some violent, impotent hatred that was rampant now, seeing that all hopes of winning the war was utterly futile? Or was it the fear of retribution from the enemy that kept them violent and jerky? Well, I did what I could do to defend my country against the Russians and that feeling left me calm inside, despite being sick. Come what may, I thought, even when sick I could cope with the situation much better alone than within a panicky group that showed snarling, biting, fearful and hating faces everywhere.

The young *Alpenjäger* soldiers were singing, and one of them was playing a harmonica. It was a happy Austrian yodelling song and it cheered me up. We left the small village behind. There was a middle-aged Austrian woman walking some five metres in front of me and the group of young singing

*Alpenjäger*s were following some 50 metres behind, just coming out from a grove of trees. I looked up and saw a small Russian aeroplane diving towards us. The Austrian woman started to run towards the distant forest.

I shouted to her, "Not to the forest. Come with me into the stream!"

There was a sharp banked stream just where we were, but the Austrian woman kept running to the forest, which was five minutes fast run from where we were. I had to shout at her wildly, then grabbed her skirt and pulled her towards that small sharp bank. We jumped in and squatted there. I could see the pilot's face clearly. He machine-gunned twice up and down that gully. The explosions were very close. The Russian pilot was hell bent on shooting me and that Austrian woman. The bullets exploded a mere half-a-metre away on the rim of the bank, but then the aircraft left us.

The Austrian woman jumped so fast out of that stream, like a rabbit from the burrow with a ferret inside, and ran towards the town. I couldn't run. I walked as best as I could. The Austrian *Alpenjäger*s came out of their hideout from the grove, then started to play their accordion and sing. All was well again. Peace and violence alternated very fast in that scenic serenity of the Austrian landscape.

After about twenty minutes of walking I reached that town, whose name I have forgotten, perched on the top of a gentle hill. I saw that the town was full of soldiery. Flat-topped army trucks were everywhere with sides on, like tip trucks, loaded to the hilt with soldiers and civilians ready to depart. I was walking slowly towards them. The trucks started to move away, and then I heard somebody calling my name. I looked and saw the same sub-officer from Nagyvárád who had wanted to court-martial me a couple of weeks ago for taking over his command.

"Berényi," he shouted, "Berényi, come fast."

He was yelling and he raised his hand to the driver of the truck to stop him. My fast run turned out to be a slow walk. I simply couldn't put my legs forward fast. I was so overcome with that mysterious sickness. And imagine, I still had that telescopic rifle and ammunition with me. I had loved a good rifle from my wolf and bear hunting times. The truck waited for me. The sub-officer showed me an expression which may be called a mixture of pity, furore and compassion. Gyerkó Tibor stretched his hand to pull me up onto the truck.

We were squeezed against each other, all standing like sardines ready for the lid to be soldered upon us. Then the truck started to move. My telescopic rifle was squeezed in front of me. We drove fast – trucks following trucks, little cars and armoured cars, vehicle following vehicle – so close to each other that we seemed to be an endless row following the narrow gravel road

around countless hairpin bends. The dust blew away and then it enveloped us, depending on the direction of the curves. This was the craziest drive I have ever been on. I thought we were accelerating our chances to die in a pile-up far quicker than to be killed by the Russians. Fast as hell we went on that narrow gravel road into forests, out of forests, climbing, curving on hillsides, up and down, crossing rickety wooden bridges, and then a sudden stop.

The miles-long truck and car convoy stopped as if it had been turned off by remote control. There were forests on both sides of the road.

“Fast into the forest!” the commands were yelled out in German and Hungarian. We were so mixed by that time, there was a German on your left and a Hungarian on your right.

“*Schnell, schnell!*” they screamed.

And the Russian aeroplanes worked the convoy up and down. This is how peace on earth started after the last day of war.

Rushing into the forests as best as we could, I yelled to Gyerkó Tibor, “Let’s go a little further from here.”

The planes were flying very low. There was no defence fire. They shot up everything, hurling bombs till they exhausted their ammunition. Then they flew away to get ammunition and return as fast as possible.

We came out of the forest to continue our crazy run. I don’t know whether it was due to driving skill level A1, or some fluke miracle that there were no pile-ups. Little German jeep-like cars were passing us on the grass edges, racing like lightning. Many of the men in them were wounded. I saw a man stripped to the waist, draped across the back of the front seat, a red gaping hole in his naked back. Two Germans were holding him and doing something to their perhaps mortally wounded mate. Meanwhile their car kept on speeding.

I don’t know how many times we stopped to let ourselves be worked through by those Russian planes. They came back fairly fast. On my enquiry as to where we were heading so fast with the convoy, a German replied, “Right through to the Americans.”

The sun went down. Darkness fell. We were racing towards a large Austrian town. On the outskirts of that town tracer bullets were flying towards the sky from the nearby forests. Some Russians seemed to be advertising their whereabouts now, shooting streams of tracers towards the dark sky.

The Austrian town was lit up. This was the first time I saw in many long years what a lit-up town looked like! Throngs of people were everywhere, so we now drove slowly. Women cried, tears soaking their cheeks, and laughed simultaneously. Girls shrieked with laughter and kissed every soldier they could. There were “*Sieg heil*-hoorays.” Honestly, I thought for a while we had won the war. Such a grand welcome, cheering and tears of happiness could

only come to victorious troops. I have never been so much puzzled in my life as in that cheering and welcoming Austrian town. Love ran amok there.

We went through this town and shortly we were driving into another large village. It nearly passed for a town. I was playing with the idea of going with the troops over to the American side and to immigrate to America or Canada. Then to go out to the forests to be a fur trapper away from people, perhaps to marry a Canadian woman there, and turn Indian for a lifetime. But then again, I wished to go back to Hungary to see if my father, mother and brothers were alive or dead back home. I hated to think about going back to the Russian side, but that is nevertheless exactly what I decided to do when we reached that village. I remembered it. The trucks were on their way to Leoben, the town where we had had our miserable training and solid starvation for some time.

"Tell the driver to stop please!" I said loudly to the Germans. "I want to get off."

The driver stopped. I left my rifle with Gyerkó Tibor who was determined to go over to the Yanks, but I took my telescopic sight with me. I thought to sell it later on, or perhaps to take it home. I don't exactly remember why. I waved goodbye to Gyerkó Tibor and I was on my own once again.

All I wanted was to sleep. I walked up to the first door, knocked, heard some female voices say, "Come in!", and in I went. They were smiling and laughing as if they had drawn the lottery's one-million-dollar-prize ticket. Again that mad mirth. I was extremely puzzled. Everybody was happy as a lark.

"Come, come," they said.

Mother and grown-up daughter invited me in. I couldn't take my eyes off the daughter. She was beautiful and blonde, and mirth was laughing forth from her blue eyes. As beautiful as an angel, I thought.

"Could I have a wash and then sleep in your stable?"

"Yes, naturally." They poured water in a large wash dish and gave me soap. I had a good wash.

"Would you like to eat something?" they asked.

"No thank you. I am sick. But tomorrow morning, perhaps two hard-boiled eggs." They showed me a good place in the barn. I literally fell into the nice smelling hay and gracious oblivion enveloped me.

When I woke up next day, I heard voices and peeped out from a square opening on the barn's stone wall. There were elegantly and cleanly dressed officers out there on the Leoben concrete highway. Too cleanly dressed to be Russians, I thought. Their caps were very much like some Western nation's officers' caps – French, English or even Yank. I went into the house, knocked and entered. The ladies inside were still cheerful, but this was an artificial cheerfulness.

“Who are those soldiers there outside?”

“They are the Russians,” they said.

The young lady was so compassionate towards me, she nearly kissed me. She gave me a bag and said there were three boiled eggs inside and some bread. I was melting under the love radiating from her eyes, and gave her my telescopic sight quickly.

“This is quite valuable. Please take it.” She took it from me, tears in her eyes.

With the three eggs and bread, I went out onto the street as soon as I saw no Russians around. I struck out towards the east, meaning towards Hungary, somewhere in that direction, crossed the river and headed for a village. Sick as hell, I was walking slowly – mind you, in German uniform! I really should have asked the girl in the house for some civilian clothes, however the girl was so beautiful, she made me forget about everything else. I reached the village.

I walked up a narrow street. Suddenly I heard galloping horses. Russians were riding down the street as if they were in a race. They swerved around the garden yard of a *Gasthof*, brought their horses to a dead stop and jumped off. My eyes were agog. I never cared much about horses, but these were certainly excellent horsemen. They didn’t care a hoot about me in German uniform. Soon the Russians disappeared into the *Gasthof* to *zabrálni*, as I heard it said – to “loot”.

I saw a cart coming up the hill drawn by two nice-looking horses and half-loaded with stuff. Four Hungarians in Hungarian uniforms were on the cart.

“Where are you going, countrymen?” I asked.

They said, “To Hungary.”

“Could I come with you?”

“Come if you wish,” they said, and three of them got off the cart to lighten the load for the horses pulling uphill.

I still had the German uniform coat on. As we reached the end of the village, still going slightly uphill, we saw Russians around an armoured car bogged in the mud. One Russian yelled to me furiously what sounded like, “*Nyemecki, pridzyi suda, y___!*” I recognised the ugly swear word I had yelled over to the Russian megaphone from our front line some four or five days before.

“He wants us to help push the thing out of the mud,” one of the Hungarians said, and he turned furiously to me, “and he thinks you are a German. Better be careful.”

So we jumped over and pushed the armoured car out of the deep mud. I was sloshing mud myself. I thought they would either take me as a prisoner or

shoot me on the spot. They were looking at me so furiously, but they hopped into their car and buzzed off.

My Hungarian countrymen turned on me wildly, "Take that bloody German coat off, at least!" Which I did, and chucked it away.

I was in a shirt now, which wasn't an army shirt. It was my original shirt from Transylvania bought by my father one year ago. My father was always careful to buy good, lasting material. We were still climbing slightly uphill, pushing the cart gently to help the horses. There was a passing thought in my mind. These Hungarians were obviously well organised with horses and a laden cart to go back to Hungary. "*Zabrálni*" went both ways.

We cheerfully reached the top of the hill sitting on the cart. There was a level road in front and then a descent into a hollowed-out landscape. The horses were gaily trotting. I had high hopes of reaching Hungary. But when we reached the rim of that large hollow where the road started to descend, all our hopes evaporated. In fact, I thought we would never reach the other side of the meadow down there, let alone Hungary. The whole place, some two kilometres in diameter, was swarming with Russians. Their horses were grazing in the background. We couldn't turn back. It would have looked suspicious. So we kept going, sitting on the cart planks, the two horses drawing us slowly, because the driver applied the brakes to the wheel.

As we got nearer, we saw a big German Maklenburg horse walking slowly through the meadow, in front of the Russians. This kind of German horse is huge and is used to drag an enormous weight. A Russian officer stepped close to the placid walking horse, drew an enormous pistol and shot the horse in the head. Almost instantly blood started flowing from the horse's mouth, but the horse kept walking on as before, a stream of dark blood gushing from his mouth. By that time we were parallel with the horse walking in our direction, and the Russian officer looked at us with that huge pistol in his hand. He looked at us vacantly, as if his eyes had been made out of glass. We just went on slowly, continuing to sit on the cart.

One of the Hungarians whispered to me sharply, "You will get us killed once, wearing your German ski trousers and mountaineering boots."

We tried to look unconcerned, peaceful and detached. Then we saw that all the Russians there on that meadow, a couple of hundred of them, were hopelessly drunk. It was a very uncomfortable feeling. We didn't dare to look back at the officer with the pistol in his hand. I was anticipating a bullet smacking into my back any time. Then from the corner of our eyes, without turning our heads, we saw the Russians gaping at us with empty, expressionless eyes. They were handing big buckets around. They were drinking out of the buckets like horses, but tilting the buckets into their mouths. These were very

big tin buckets which they used for watering their horses. Drinking vodka from those buckets! Hell, in this drunken stupor they may start target practice on us just for fun, I thought.

This was an agonisingly long cart ride. Our horses themselves savvied the ominous feeling. They just pulled us on sadly. The Russians gazed at us as if we were the will-o'-the-wisps of their delirium. We finally slowly left them behind, and slowly, ever so slowly reached another down-grade section until the Russians disappeared in the background. The tension of my countrymen in Hungarian uniforms turned to vicious anger.

"You would do us a favour if you dash off in your German trousers," they told me. "You will have us all killed."

I was weak and sick, but all of a sudden I saw the light. Yes, they were right. I couldn't do it to them, so I said, "Well, God bless you all," and started to walk at a tangent away from that blasted road into the nearby forests. When I looked back from a distance, I saw their cart. Two Russians were there in the process of unhitching their good-looking horses. You cannot burden your travel back home with possessions. You have to travel light like me, I thought.

I hadn't eaten anything during the last three days. I thought I would try a slice of bread and an egg. The bread felt like rough sandpaper on my tongue. I could hardly swallow the boiled egg. It nearly choked me. There were a couple of farmhouses scattered close to the rim of the pine forest and the mounting landscape. I could hardly walk. I made my way to a farmhouse and asked an old chap if I could sleep there somewhere in the barn. He put me to bed in a small room close to the stable with no animals in it. I fell into bed as I was and pulled an old, horse-smelling blanket over me, mainly to cover my German mountaineering trousers. I fell instantly into blissful oblivion.

I couldn't have been asleep for very long, when a hand was shaking my shoulders violently. I could hardly surface. There was a torch shining in my eyes. An angry young Russian face was behind the torch and a pistol muzzle on my forehead. Goodbye, Joe, I thought. But the shot never came.

A sharp loud voice instead, "*Partizan, y___*." That ugly swear word was used as fluently as the word "bloody" in Australia.

I said groggily from my sickness and sleep, "*Nye partizan. Magyarski. Idyan domo.*" I had learned a few words in Russian from that north Hungarian chap from the Czechoslovakian border. I was trying to say, "I am no partisan. I am Hungarian. I go home." He contemplated me with hard, but not unkind eyes. I was looking straight into his eyes. He said a parting "*Y___*" to me and bolted out into the darkness.

While he was bolting I noticed in his torch light some worn and patched overalls hanging from a rafter in the empty stable. I sneaked weakly out of

bed, took down the overalls, pulled off my German trousers and pulled up the overalls. They were a perfect fit. I kicked the trousers well under a big pile of hay and went back to bed where I slept like a log.

In the morning I couldn't see the old Austrian chap there, so I slipped off in his overalls. I was walking towards the pine forests. Blast the roads, towns and villages. I thought I would disappear into the mountains and forests. They were really the best place for me. I felt at home in the mountains and forests like a Winnebago Indian. When I reached the forest at the foothill of a mountain I saw a small path there and a clear brook at the edge. I lay down and drank from the clean pure water, walked into the forest, lay down on a walking track and fell asleep again in the soothing forest surroundings.

Hardly had I fallen asleep, human voices again. A hand shaking me. When I opened my eyes, there they were again. This time two middle-aged Russian soldiers were looking at me and grinning. I noticed their yellow decaying teeth. They were grinning at me slyly, questioningly. They were wearing dirty old uniforms and caps. I pointed my thumb at my chest, telling them as I lay, "*Magyarski. Idyan domo.*" They just looked at me, grinning with empty eyes. The eyes were not grinning. They were unarmed which was strange, so I took out the two boiled eggs and a few slices of bread I had from the day before yesterday, and offered it to them.

"Are you hungry?" I asked in German. They looked the type who could have murdered me in the forest for a couple of eggs and a few slices of bread.

One said to me in a slight amazement, "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?* – Do you speak German?"

"Yes."

At that they started to talk busily with each other in Russian and kept on saying, "*Sprechen Deutsch. Dobre, dobre, dobre.*"

Obviously they were pleased to see that I spoke German which they obviously couldn't. They ate my egg and bread. They left me one egg and a slice of bread, but I told them somehow in sign language to eat it because I was sick. I thought they were former prisoners of war. They tried hard to explain to me something in sign language, but I was so sick and tired and indifferent, I didn't understand them.

When I got up and started walking, they followed me. It looked like I was stuck with them. We were walking slowly on the mountain path. I grinned at them. They grinned at me. It meant we were not going to kill each other. Not that I could have killed a chicken in the shape I was in. Walking very slowly – I had to stop many times – we got onto a forest path on the flank of a mountain meadow which was full of flowers. The path was barricaded from the meadow

by a log fence. Following the path, leaning on the thin log railing, we reached a hillside farmhouse.

Beautiful surroundings. Green pines. Meadows full of flowers. A deep valley with a mountain stream singing songs down below. And then I noticed another hiker coming from a different path of the forest wearing a large, stylish Tyrolean rucksack. To my delight, I recognised him. He was also a past member of the First Hungarian Ski Battalion. He was a Székely. We were happy to see each other.

He asked, "Who the hell are your companions?"

"Two Russians. They can't speak German. Probably former prisoners of war."

We were all full of smiles to show each other what good boys we all were. My friend's name was Balázs. He was from Górgényszentmiklós, 35 kilometres away from my home town. He couldn't speak German either, so we were all stuck together.

The question was, how to get food for the four of us. When we crossed a flowery meadow slightly uphill, we saw a 25 to 35-year-old man in shirt and trousers behind the fence. Lots of nice roses. And there was a young woman, talking, laughing and eating. They came towards us and we talked over the fence. They were very friendly Austrians. I came down to the essentials.

"My friends are hungry," I said.

"We are just eating Kaiser morsel. Do you want some?"

"Yes, that would be very fine."

The woman went into the house and brought us a whole baking tray full of kaiser morsel, a popular Austrian dish, popular even in Transylvania. My mother used to prepare them occasionally. It is sprinkled abundantly with sugar. The two Russians bored into it, Balázs likewise, and I even had some of it.

I asked the very friendly and educated couple – they were speaking distinct educated *Hochdeutsch* which was the German I had learned in school – if we could sleep somewhere in the barn. They were not only kind and lovely and considerate, I could feel there was another quality behind them, a sort of spiritual and humanitarian quality. I felt instantly close to them, as if we had been long lost friends.

They took us to a comfortable shed, gave us blankets, and they prepared hot wine with spices for me to drink. Honest to god, bless those people and their offspring. Such people make life worth living. I could have kissed their toes I loved them so much. The Russians were quite enjoying themselves in our company. They were happily plotting away in their lingo. We slept so peacefully

that night in the scented hay, fanned by a meadow breeze, we thought even the angels of heaven envied us.

Next morning was one of those glorious mornings with silvery wisps of mist over the deep valleys, and the sun shone to generate myriads of pleasing scents. This morning fairies waved their wands to create the illusion of heaven on earth. I was able to eat the breakfast this charming Austrian couple prepared for me. Balázs gave me some sugar cubes from his rucksack. I began to feel better, convalescing from that blasted disease.

The Austrian couple were afraid Russians would come again up to their mountain domain. Some of them were quite vicious, they said, as if I hadn't known that. They said that they had had a Volkswagen car, and they had buried it under a huge haystack, but one day a Russian stuck his bayoneted rifle into the stack, discovered the Volkswagen, and an officer drove it away amid hoots of hilarious battle cries. The Russians had already stripped them of domestic animals and everything they could drive away. They had nothing left, except what they could successfully hide. The Russians never even left them a watch by which they could measure the time. They were guessing the time by the position of the sun.

We thought we had better move from that Austrian alpine Shangri-La. Indeed I couldn't have pictured nicer natural surroundings for some humanitarian squatters with ecological ambitions to settle in. And the right squatters for that enchanting alpine scenery were of course that lovely and kind couple that I can never forget. They gave us detailed descriptions of the alpine mountain trails and tracks, how to get down to a small village where there was a railway station – I think this village was Frohnleichten and we will give it this name, though it may have been one of the other villages nearby. We studied a map there. The easiest way back to Hungary was to catch a train to Vienna Newtown, through the Semmering Tunnel which was the longest railway tunnel in Europe at that time. This would take us closer to the border near Sopron, the Hungarian university town.

So then, with heartfelt farewells we parted from those charming people. Balázs was wearing tidy civilian clothes, and with his Tyrolean rucksack he looked like a happy-go-lucky mountain hiker. I, in the patchy overalls, looked like a farmhand or an amateur mechanic. The two Russians looked like what they were, two mysterious Russians in worn-out, dirty Russian uniforms and army overcoats. The amazing thing was how utterly friendly we became as a motley group. A couple of days had moulded us together into real friendship. We had no hang-ups at all about delusions of enemy or friend. We had become friends.

After a nice scenic walk on full stomachs – I had managed to eat some

eggs that morning – we reached a spot on the mountain from where we could see Frohnleichten. The two Russians got very excited. They kept on showing us that the Ruskis down there in that town would cut our throats. Suddenly it dawned upon us that they were army deserters. They literally became pale, very frightened, and when we just kept on walking towards the town, they ran away from us, putting their fingers on their foreheads to deliver us the clear message that we were insane. The whole blasted world was insane anyway. A few more or less didn't make any difference.

We continued on towards Frohnleichten. Only a kilometre or more separated us from the railway station when we got company. It is amazing how coincidences work. Another chap joined us, one of our front-line friends. He was in fact the man who had gone over to the Russian trenches in the plain light of day, and ordered a Russian machine-gunner to shoulder the machine-gun back to the Hungarian front line. Well, imagine, he joined us at the outskirts of Frohnleichten and, what's more, he said he had a firm knowledge of the Russian language. Balázs and I could only use the vocabulary of a dozen words. We were rejoicing. We asked our new companion how he managed. Quite well, he said. He carried a well packed rucksack, too. I was the only one travelling light. I only had a handkerchief in my pocket.

As we were rounding a street corner we heard a sharp whistle and, looking in that direction, we saw a tall Russian soldier with a pistol in his holster beckoning to us.

"Pridzyi siuda!" he said, which I understood as – Come here!

Running away would have been our undoing. It just wasn't possible under the circumstances. His bullets would have overtaken us wherever we had tried to run to. There was only one alternative – toothy smiles. We had started to become experts in this. There was an enthusiastic camaraderie among the locals and the Russian conquerors, simulating faith in the communist revelation. So then, toothy smiles. We bared our teeth to each other, come what may.

"Who are you?" the Russian was asking, smiling like a grizzly bear.

"Magyarski," we said. *"Idyem domo. – We are going home."* *Domo*, or home, had a soft connotation. It melted hearts. All of us, including grizzly bear, wished to go home.

"Ah," he said.

Our newly found friend could speak Russian nearly fluently. So grizzly bear said, smiling like a Santa Claus, that there was a canteen in Frohnleichten where they issued passports enabling us to go back home to Hungary. We acted as if we were bursting with joy.

Our newly found friend said quickly, bubbling with happiness, "I'll go to the railway station and bring all my friends to that camp."