

*A 1956 Hungarian Freedom Fighter, escaping a death sentence inflicted upon him by the Soviet Army, makes a death-defying escape with his wife and baby daughter, seeking a small bridge, shrouded amidst swampy marshland, whose rickety planks wait to lead the family into a vast void called "Freedom."*

## **BITTERSWEET FREEDOM**

by Judith Bognar Bean

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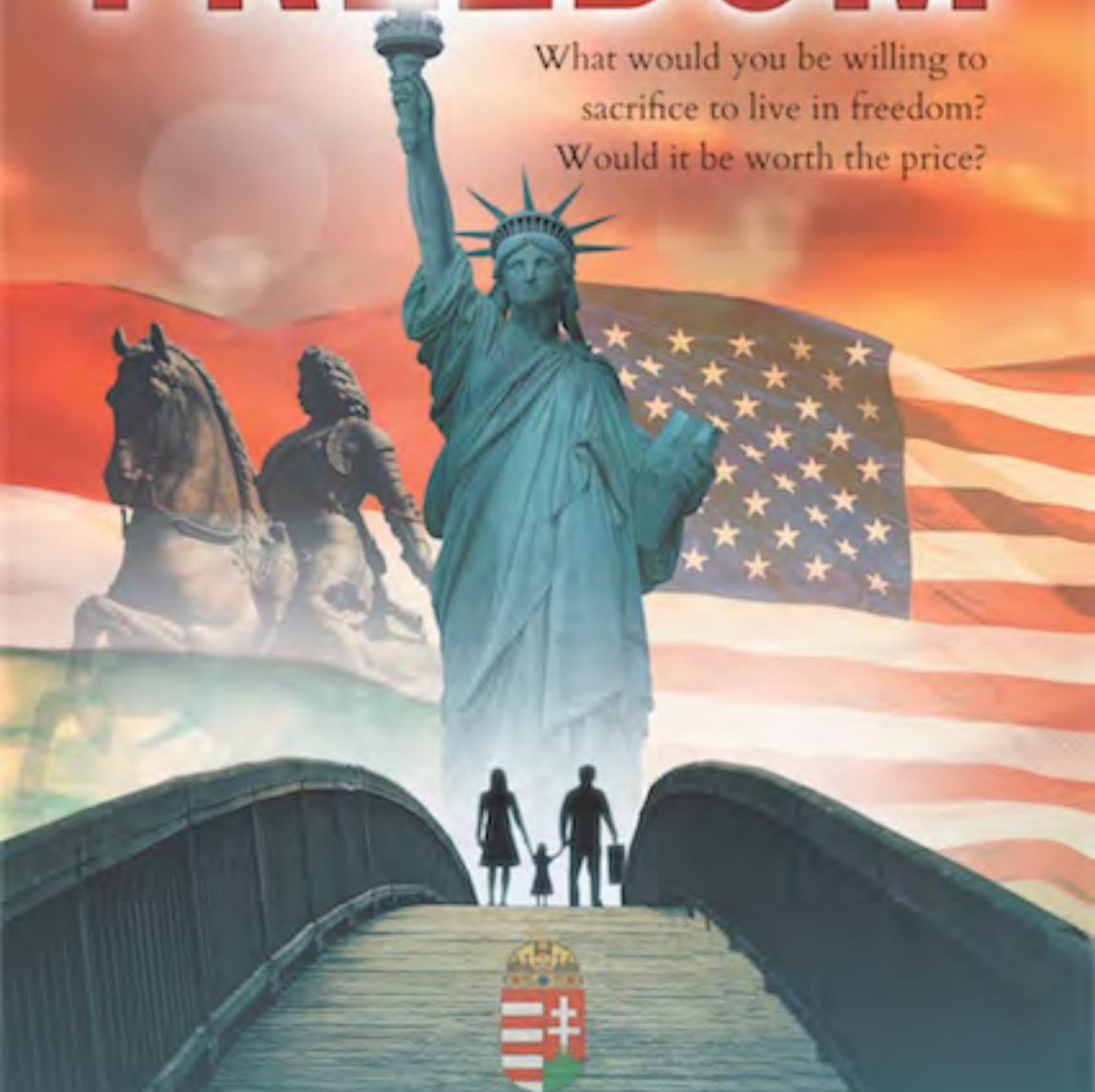
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# BITTERSWEET FREEDOM

What would you be willing to  
sacrifice to live in freedom?  
Would it be worth the price?



Judith Bognar Bean

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## REVOLUTION!

In the early 1950's Hungary's citizens were struggling to forge new lives after the war, but there was never a doubt Russia still ruled the country since "freeing them" from the Nazis in 1945. The evidence was everywhere - thousands of Russian troops and tanks still occupied the land, and the abhorrent Red Star of communist oppression remained mounted atop the country's major buildings.

The Russians had promised the Hungarian people a better way of life: better products, better wages, better medical care, better education, and a shorter workweek; however, many years later, life in Hungary was worse all the way around. A high percentage of goods produced by Hungary including vegetables, milk, mining products, machine goods, and more, were being sent to Russia for *their* enjoyment - enjoyment brought to them by the sweat of the Hungarian worker. The Russians had offered more of everything, but instead, the country was in a chokehold, slowly, but surely, strangling amidst mighty waves of oppression and destitution.

The communist authority seeped into every facet of Hungarian citizens lives with the creation of the AVO (*Allamvedelmi Osztaly*), Hungary's State Security Agency – the most dreaded and despised secret police. This police force was comprised of not only Russians, but also Hungarian citizens, who were given special treatment and privileges if they agreed to spy on their friends and neighbors. The AVO set up sadistic centers of torture to penalize those who disagreed with the new government. Many Hungarians were banished to Siberia and never heard from again.

The Hungarian people could no longer trust anyone, not even friends or family, fearing they were secretly part of the AVO.

In early 1956 the general population, and especially students, held many peaceful rallies of protest in the city of Budapest against Russian occupation, with thousands of citizens throughout the

country speaking out against the depravation of their liberty. Groups of freedom fighters were forming in secret. It was time to take back their country!

Jozsef was flagrantly outspoken against the Red Tyranny engulfing Hungary. His speeches against “the system” stirred up much dissent, empowering hundreds, then thousands of citizens to take his side. The people needed a leader, a hero, and the fatigued souls of the ravaged land were strengthened by Jozsef’s forthright views about establishing a new, free, self-governing Hungary. The country’s citizens did not think their demands were unreasonable. They asked only for the simple basics wanted by all human beings, but such thoughts were treasonous to their torturers: Freedom, food, fuel, and dispersal of the secret police and Russian troops from their country, as well as the reinstatement of their government official, Premier Imre Nagy.

Jozsef was blindly unaware that his speeches and movements were being closely scrutinized by those in higher authority, who were truly in a dilemma on how to “bring down” the young, hot-headed activist.

Jozsef’s musical talent was the pride of the country: he ranked as a highly admired, respected accordionist - considered a “National Treasure.” Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, had on many prior occasions, personally “*asked*” Jozsef to play *on demand* for his political functions in the Hungarian Parliament house, and on those occasions, Jozsef played hours on end for the Soviet elite, unpaid and unfed throughout each performance.

The Soviet government’s quandary regarding Jozsef was a simple one: if they “silenced” him, Jozsef’s political followers could create mammoth civil unrest, energizing, even further, the growing fires of resentment among the masses. They *last thing* they wanted to do was make Jozsef a martyr. Therefore, in lieu of the contributions Jozsef had made to the country through his musical genius, the government

officials agreed to give him a “mild punishment” for his outspoken behaviors; however, as far as Jozsef was concerned, they might as well have sent him to the gallows. His punishment? Jozsef was forbidden to play his accordion or any musical instrument for one year, and during that year, he was sentenced to work in the sooty chasms of the Tatabanya coal mines.

Tatabanya, the small town where Jozsef’s godmother lived, was extremely poverty-stricken. Coal mining was the lifeblood of the town. Practically every man old enough to carry a pick and shovel worked in the mines. The working conditions in the mines were archaic, reminiscent of the early 1900’s in America, with little to no thought given to safety regulations.

Jozsef left for work as the first shining rays of the sun appeared over the horizon, joining the ranks of the town’s exhausted miners, lowered away to work in a darkness that was darker than any darkness imaginable. And, every day, he and his fellow miners waded through water seepage, fighting off hungry rats, and living in fear of instantaneous death if the cribbage supports failed, for if they did not hold, thousands of pounds of earth and rock would rain down upon them. Other deathly phantoms looming in the mines included methane gas and microscopic particles of coal dust seeping into the miner’s lungs. One volatile spark in a pocket of unseen methane gas could start a fire. There was nowhere to run if a fire broke out, every soul in the pit would be lost in seconds as the flaming inferno swirled its blazing fingers into every crevice of the grimy caverns. If the supports, rats, and fires did not quickly kill the miners, then most certainly, after years of inhaling the tiny specks of coal dust, many miners would die the slow death of a life-threatening respiratory illness.

Each day, Jozsef came home in the twilight of early evening, as the last golden spray of the sun’s rays lowered behind the mountains overlooking the town. He rarely saw the light of full day. How he missed the warmth of the sun’s heavenly body! It was cold in the

hollow fissures beneath the ground, but the coldness of living without his beloved accordion, the “sun of his heart” was even colder. *The damn Communists did not give me a death sentence – but, they hope I will die in this black hole to save them from hiring an executioner. I will show them. I will survive this. I will beat them. Someday, somewhere, my family and I will have a life in the sun!*

Despite the dangerous, demeaning work - a far cry from playing music in the glamorous parliament house, Jozsef was grateful for the many good friends he made in the mines, and grateful that he and his family were able to live with his godmother in her small, humble home.

His *punishment* also meant a severe decrease in wages, making it difficult to purchase even the bare basics for everyday living. The family scraped by on minimum foodstuffs, determined to keep their apartment in the outskirts of Budapest, hoping against hope, that somehow, they would be able to return to their little home one day. Over the past year, they had been fortunate in being able to accumulate extra furnishings, but now being forced to live in Tatabanya, they had no choice but to sell whatever they could to help with expenses, keeping only the baby’s mattress, their mattress, and the table and chairs in the kitchen. And, even if they had to eat weed soup again, they were determined to keep their little “accordion man.”

Erzsebet thanked God every day for sparing her husband’s life, but did *they* kill him anyway by confiscating his accordion? Erzsebet was devastated for Jozsef being sent to the mines, and not only worried about her husband’s physical health as he worked under such dangerous conditions, but worried as much for his emotional well-being. Music was the portal to Jozsef’s essence, the lifegiving elixir lighting his inner fire, the vital ingredient fueling his zest for life, and the inspirational force for his spiritual creativity. Jozsef’s fingers had touched the ivory keys of an accordion every day of his life since he

had been a small child. He would go crazy being torn from his instrument!

Everything they had struggled for had been taken away. Could the government be trusted to keep its promise to release her husband from the mines after one year? How could they possibly continue to make ends meet with their severely reduced income? Unfortunately, to her benefit and detriment, the reply to Erzsebet's questions would be answered from a most unlikely messenger.

Protest gatherings against the communist regime were increasing in number all over the country, with crowds becoming intensely more agitated and violent. Jozsef and Erzsebet could sense that something terrible was on the horizon.

Like pawns on a chessboard, they, and millions of others in their revered land of Hungary, were but little game pieces caught up in a game that would ultimately end in violence, blood, and death.

Tuesday, October 23, 1956, started out as a chilly morning. A light frost coated the shrubbery about the city of Budapest, and a hint of fog spread its misty tentacles above the ground. As the sun slowly rose, a cloudless sky promised a warmer than usual day for the time of year.

In the late afternoon, thousands of students, and workers, wearing red-white-and-green armbands (the colors of the Hungarian flag), held a protest march against the Soviet Government demanding democracy and reform.

The procession began at the Statue of Petofi (a beloved poet of Hungary), proceeding to the Statue of Bern, while singing the Hungarian National Anthem and the Kossuth Song. The student's goal was to gain access to the radio station on Brody Sandor Street to broadcast their demands for freedom and rally other nations to their plight.

The crowd eventually expanded to over one-hundred-thousand strong. In protest to the bonds of slavery imposed upon them by the communist regime, innumerable hands joined in the tearing down of a colossal statue of Joseph Stalin, the former leader of Russia, and greatly hated, ruthless dictator of the Hungarian people. The radio station, patrolled by the Hungarian Secret Police (AVO) allowed a few representatives of the protesters inside the radio station; however, after a few hours, there was no sign of the small group who had entered the building. Those waiting outside were concerned for the safety and welfare of the protestors inside.

The terrifying deeds of the AVO was one major reason for the Hungarian Revolt. This group of private police, through their works of systematic torture of rebels, created a constant climate of trepidation and dread. This, combined with the sore monetary conditions existing in Hungary, caused tensions to overflow into absolute insurgency.

The headquarters of the AVO was 60, Andrassy Street in Budapest, otherwise known amongst Hungary's citizens as the "Terror House," for within its formidable walls were chambers of torture. How convenient for the AVO – for this address had once been the command center for the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross faction during the time of the Nazi occupation of Hungary during World War II.

The mission of the AVO was to hunt out anyone: man, woman, or child even remotely against Russian rule of Hungary. The leader of the AVO was a Hungarian named Gabor Péter – a cruel man intent on finding "evidence" on those who were against the communist party. During the 1945 elections, the Hungarian Communist Party received only a small part of the vote, with the preferred Smallholders party receiving the winning vote. By the vote tally, Hungarians showed opposition to communist rule. But, Gabor was enraged due to the high votes given to the Smallholders party, and he intended to do everything necessary to force communist domination in Hungary. The motto of the AVO was, "Whatever it takes to make

them confess.” Many innocents were subjected to unspeakable acts of persecution including the pulling out of fingernails with pliers and people being dipped in tubs of hydrochloric acid.

Russian dictator Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s rule hoping to soften the revolt, and the AVO’s name was changed to the AVH (*Allamvedelmi Hatóság*) but changing the name of a skunk to a more pleasant-sounding name, does not change its odorous nature.

Initially, the police attempted to break up the crowd outside the radio station using teargas, but this only further agitated the masses who kept chanting for the small party inside the radio station to be released, resulting in calls for the assistance of the Hungarian army to disperse the crowds; however, the Hungarian army refused to fight against their own countrymen, and linked forces with the dissenters, supplying the desperate fighters with their personal firearms and ammunition. Night descended upon the chaos with the spattering sounds of sporadic gunfire sprayed upon the masses by the AVO. Hope arrived for the fighters when truckloads of desperately needed reinforcements of grenades, rifles and machine guns were delivered from the ammunition factory at Csepel Island and were distributed among the protestors, who returned like firepower against the enemy. In angry response, the AVO rained down a more intense barrage of bullets into the furious populace. A handful of fighters had been killed in the earlier fighting, but now, hundreds upon hundreds of Hungarians began dying – the florid, noble blood of the oppressed weeping into the streets. Refusing to be stopped, the multitude gathered forces and lunged forward to get past the AVO’s mechanized assault. Scores were cut down, but hundreds, and then thousands, using the crushing force of their own bodies, stoically pushed forward, overpowered the AVO, confiscated their weapons, and marched fearlessly toward the radio building, broadcasting their dire situation to all of Hungary and all the world.

The broadcast of the massacre spread rapidly. Disgruntled workers stormed factories where they had formerly made weapons for the

Russians, helping themselves to the arms held there, distributing weapons to the frantic hordes, and by late evening, over two-hundred thousand had answered the call to freedom.

The wrath of the Hungarian citizenship was fierce, and systematically, they sought out the evil adversaries who had snuffed out the lives of the valiant ones, shooting their oppressors and hanging the bodies of the “beasts” from trees and lamp posts in the city as a warning to all who would attempt to terrorize Hungary – “Leave or suffer the fate of your fellow monsters!”

But such demonstrations did not stop the cruel onslaught oppressed upon the people by the “Red Devils.” As the days of the Revolution would continue, individual revolutionaries would be chased down, unmercifully beaten, and left for dead. Thousands would be arrested and never seen again, and those trying to help injured freedom fighters would be fired upon.

The bloody Hungarian revolution had officially begun.

The news of the revolution spread within hours by the radio broadcasts to the small town of Tatabanya, where the men of the town found themselves in dire straits. With the massive unrest in Budapest there was no way to collect their pay that week from the office in the city. It would be suicide for anyone traveling the roads to Budapest to collect the payroll for the miners. Despite the ongoing revolution, goods could still be obtained if money was placed into the palms of “the right people.”

Jozsef’s blood boiled with insurgence. Was it not enough that he and his fellow miners were already living on substandard wages? Would there be no end to the death of fellow Hungarians as they relentlessly fought with every measure of their might to stave off the insane madness of the Red Army?

There had been too many losses in his life, too many losses for his loved ones and for Hungary, and Jozsef could not help but recount them all in his anger towards the Soviet swarm.

When would the suffering stop? When would the hunger stop? No one had enough to eat, except those who pledged allegiance to the communist party. The country remained in shambles since the end of World War II. When would the beauty of Hungary return? So many friends and family had been brutally exterminated during that war – his own beloved grandfather dying in the war's bombing raids, and now, at this very moment, the barbarous, inhuman Soviet Army was in control of his country!

Was it not enough *they* had taken his Hungary, taken his government, massacred his Jewish friends, taken his music and livelihood from him, taken his wife's land inheritance and the life of her grandfather and his grandfather, bombed them out of their homes – *they* had taken everything!

In the early afternoon of October 24, 1956, after a prior restless night of soul-searching, Jozsef stormed out the door of the Tatabanya mining office in a fit of antagonized rage. A ragged motorcycle with saddle-bags draped across the fender of the back wheel was parked outside. Jozsef did not know who the cycle belonged to, nor did he care. Without even checking if there was fuel in the tank, Jozsef mounted the bike, engaged the engine, and pulled off in a noisy cloud of tawny, golden dust, and exhaust fumes. Above the noise of the cycle, Jozsef shouted out to his coalmining friends as he rode past them in the streets, "I am going to get your payroll money - if it is the last thing I do!" The shocked and astonished men watched Jozsef ride away on the tattered cycle. Some began to cry tears of fear for their brave friend, and others cried tears of shame - for their own cowardice in allowing Jozsef to strike out alone and defenseless against the certain hellfire he was to encounter. And, some simply cried. Then, out of all the cries of despair, came the comforting strains of the Hungarian National Anthem, as the workers joined

voices to rally hope within the walls of their own haggard souls, and to steel Jozsef onward, their eyes following a crazy young man riding away on a set of suicidal wheels bound for Budapest.

Jozsef had given no thought to the precarious and unstable situation in the city. He was unarmed and unprepared for the Armageddon ahead. As he approached the outskirts of Budapest, dark plumes of smoke rose from the many fires set off by explosive barrages projected from Soviet tanks, and the explosions rendered by countless Molotov cocktails used by the revolutionaries against the invaders. The Freedom Fighters used a glass bottle half-filled with gasoline, or some form of alcohol, such as methanol or ethanol. They would stop-up the mouth of the bottle with a cork, or anything that would create an air-tight seal, with a cloth rag affixed around the mouth of the bottle. The rag would first be soaked in flammable liquid. Just before using it, the rag would be lit, and the fighters would then throw the bottle at the target. On impact, the bottle would shatter, spilling the flammable liquid over the target, igniting the object.

Amid the chaos of the burning city was the irrefutable sound of rapid gunfire and Jozsef knew it meant his fellow citizens were dying. Sudden nausea gripped him, and despite the cover of a cool, cloudy day, steamy streams of sweat exuded from his body. With gutsy determination, he drove the cycle into the midst of the fray, steering his way amongst the acrid odor of fuel and smoke. He swerved his bike between colossal tanks, enemy combatants and Freedom Fighters, his ears painfully aware of his countrymen's bloodcurdling screams as they breathed their last. Countless times, projectiles narrowly missed striking the young vindicator. Armed Hungarian men and women were all about, in the streets, atop tanks, behind buildings, on the tops of buildings, and lying on the ground - shooting at the enemy and nearly shooting him! The air was smoky from gunpowder and burning buildings. The dead and the dying were behind him and in front of him, as he indefatigably pushed forward, determined to make it to the payroll office – if it was still there.

The door to the payroll office was hanging half off its hinges. The payroll staff, not knowing what to do, or where to go, was holding out in the back of the building attempting to avoid the pandemonium in the streets. Jozsef skidded his cycle through the narrow doorway breaking the hooks off the door causing it to fall inwards. Without shutting off the motorcycle engine, he shouted to the payroll master, "Hurry, give me the pay for the mine workers!" The paymaster stared incredulously at Jozsef's sweaty, grimy face and dust-ridden clothes. How had he survived the assault of bullets and "tank fire" all the way from Tatabanya? He remembered Jozsef as a young boy when he and his father performed accordion concerts, knowing all too well why Jozsef was condemned to the Tatabanya mines.

With no doubt in his mind that the young musician's request was a veritable one, the paymaster scrambled to the safe, and stuffed stacks of currency into the saddle bags, not even bothering to count if he had overpaid the workers. Rather the mine workers get the money than the enemy! Jozsef sent forth a relieved look of thanks to the paymaster, revved the motorbike's engine to the mechanism's limit, and once more whipped the steel beast into the melee of despair.

During the fleeting time Jozsef had been inside the payroll office, conditions in the streets had deteriorated rapidly, buffeting a new terrifying reality against Jozsef's already frayed nerves - how was he going to stay alive for the almost forty miles back to Tatabanya!

Insurmountable chaos encompassed Jozsef's surroundings as he plowed his cycle through, and around, jumbled heaps and piles of fiery rubble, as showers of angry bullets whizzed over his head. But even as he swerved about the mayhem, Jozsef's only thought was a wish for silence, deafening silence, to block out the hundreds of agonizing screams and cries of tormenting pain as maelstroms of piercing bullets penetrated their brave targets.

Jozsef's heart was convulsing without mercy within his chest, the pumping of his own blood echoing erosive swishing noises in his

ears, as the stifling odor of scorching smoke and caustic chemicals engulfed his nostrils and throat, sending feverish, searing heat into the depths of his lungs. As hard as he tried to hold his breath for relief, he eventually had to exhale, having no choice but to breathe in more of the toxic mess. But far worse, was the heaviness in his gut, the sick feeling of revulsion as he twisted and turned his cycle around, and in-between, the mangled, bloody remains of hundreds of men, women, and small children strewn in the streets.

The pitiless conquerors had mowed down everyone and anyone in their path. Many wounded victims begged for Jozsef's help as he jettied past them. God forgive him - he could not help! He could not stop! If he stopped to help the wounded he would end up a fearless, dead hero, no good to anyone. Hell had come to earth!

But what kind of a man would he be if he did not try to help? How would he ever live with himself - if he did live, to live with himself? He had to do something!

Jozsef slid the cycle behind the remains of a disempowered tank, landing beside the body of a thin girl, probably not more than fifteen or sixteen years of age, her disheveled blonde hair streaked red from where scraps of shrapnel had cut through her skull. Jozsef lurched his head from the view, his unbelieving eyes wanting to escape the tragic waste of such beautiful youth.

Screaming shots rang out from above, most likely from one of the upper story windows of the surrounding buildings.

Jozsef then watched in horror as young boy, not even in his teens, carrying a machine gun, ran toward the cover of his hiding place behind the tank. The boy stuttered and stumbled as bits of steel entered the softness of his young form. His body fell only an arm's length away from Jozsef - the young hero's innocent ruby essence spewing over Jozsef's face and clothes, officially knighting him, "Freedom Fighter."

Raw with rage, Jozsef grabbed the boy's weapon and ripped off the extra set of bullets encircling the boy's neck. Jozsef took aim towards the sounds of sniper fire coming from the upper window across the street. As his shaking finger pulled the trigger in rapid succession, the riveting recoil of the rifle butt tore into his shoulder after each successful strike.

In the meantime, dozens of screeching tanks had entrenched the street, their cannons aimed to take down buildings filled with the counterfires of the desperate masses. Jozsef frenziedly glanced about for a way to stop the brutal behemoths of death. His eyes latched onto the waist of the dead girl - two grenades were fastened to her belt. They would have to do. Grabbing the grenades, Jozsef left his protective shelter, and then, ducking low, he zig-zagged his way through the mayhem of smoke and bullets, grabbing onto the ice-cold tracks of a tank with an open turret. He pulled his way up to the opening, yanked the pins out of both grenades, and threw them into the hold. Within seconds, he was on the ground, tumbling, rolling over and over, landing behind a shielding mound of fallen rubble as the earsplitting thunder of his triumph blasted the atmosphere.

He had to get out! Fast! He had no more ammunition, and he had to find his way back to Tatabanya before nightfall!

Guided by unseen powers, Jozsef's "payroll cycle," miraculously escaped the *Gates of Hell*, arriving safely back in Tatabanya before the last streams of daylight shed their glimmer over the tiny town, where the sweaty and blood-spattered hero was immediately surrounded and greeted by an assemblage of jubilant, cheering miners and their families. Intoxicated cheers of elation resounded in Jozsef's ears as he victoriously cast the leather satchels holding the fruit of the men's labors into their exhilarated hands.

Jozsef's beaten body and mind could take no more. His knees broke beneath him as the adrenaline powering his cause rapidly faded away, and as the realization of what he had done in the past few

hours crashed in on him. How in the world had he accomplished what could not be accomplished? His body trembled as the memory of the exploit overwhelmed his senses. Had he died, what would have become of his wife and daughter? He did not even remember making the decision to do what he had done.

Jozsef had won his own private war that day, however, it was a small victory in the greater scheme of things, but a victory all the same.

Erzsebet, holding little Judit in her arms, ran out to meet her husband, crying hysterically, "My Jozsef, my love, why did you do it? Why did you leave us? I thought you would be killed! I thought you were dead!" Waiting all day to know if her husband was dead or alive, and unbelieving that he *was* alive, and was here with her in the flesh, was too much for Erzsebet's worn mind to assimilate, and she gratefully allowed herself to collapse against the haven of her husband's bloodied chest.

The miners assisted the war-torn Jozsef and his little family home. Upon seeing her precious boy, the godmother's face beamed bright with love and pride. "Now, now, Jozsef, come in. Wash. Rest. Eat. Everything will be good now! You are home and safe with us. You are the bravest man I have ever known."

Late that night, as the mining town celebrated their financial victory, Jozsef and Erzsebet escaped to a shed behind the godmother's tiny hut. There, within its cold, bleak walls, lying on a narrow cot, and covered with only a thin, worn blanket, they lay entwined as Erzsebet held Jozsef close to her breast, showering him with butterfly kisses over his entire body, unbelieving her Jozsef had returned to her unblemished and unscathed.

No words needed to be said between them. Their love for one another said it all. And, after nothing was said, and everything expressed, they fell into an exhausted slumber.

The next day, Jozsef returned to The City, valiantly fighting alongside thousands of the country's courageous revolutionaries, battling to destroy the detestable abomination spreading over their land. Jozsef prepared Molotov cocktails, and, with the aid of fellow combatants, threw countless bottles of liquid lightening against enemy tanks and vehicles. He and other fellow revolutionaries tore down Hungarian flags containing the symbol of Russian oppression overlaid upon the brave colors of red, white and green, cutting away the hated insignia, as well as tearing down the crest of the despised Red Star adorning the buildings of Budapest, and then, riding with countless other fighters upon confiscated Russian tanks, Jozsef held the Hungarian flag, now barren of the ugly Russian motif, high over his head to show the enemy they would no longer be victims of their treacherous rule. Jozsef seized rifles from the dead fingers of the enemy, and pried weapons from the arms of his slain companions, as he fought his way through the streets of Budapest, opening fire upon any Russian soldier in his path, pushing forward into the embattled fracas with a countenance of fiery anger and unbridled rage, with only one burning thought – "Freedom for my country!"

Across the land Freedom Fighters took hold of Soviet tanks, weapon warehouses and government factories, and the fighting between the insurgents and the Russian Army increased in intensity.

A Budapest prison was captured by the Hungarian warriors and all political prisoners were released, and at long last, the public was shown the truth about the tortuous beatings inflicted within its walls.

Because of the increasing riots against the government, as a patronizing gesture, Russia gave in to the people's demands, reappointing the Hungarian-born Imre Nagy as the new Prime Minister of Hungary and Janos Kadar as foreign minister, attempting to appease the protestors.

Then the Russian army pulled out of the country allowing Imre Nagy to allow the formation of a new government. Moscow also released

Cardinal Mindszenty from a Russian prison, an enormous “sacrifice,” as the doctrine of communism “outlawed religious thought,” viewing religion as “capitalist.” However, the Soviets hoped that by releasing Mindszenty, one of the most religious men in Hungary to criticize the Russian government, the revolt could be quelled.

The Hungarian people were overjoyed, and for twelve, resplendent days, they danced and sang in the streets celebrating the defeat of the Soviet occupation of Hungary. The head, atop Stalin’s statue, toppled by the angry crowd which lay on the ground, was decimated as the victorious fighters cut the statue’s despised face into pieces. But their days of celebration were numbered.

On October 31st, 1956, Imre Nagy, used his newly given power to announce Hungary’s withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. As for the Russians, this was the “straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Then, the unthinkable happened. At dawn, on Sunday, November 4, 1956, the screeching metal of one thousand Soviet tanks roaringly crashed their way into Budapest to “restore order.” This marked the beginning of suffering for untold numbers of Hungary’s populace. Those fighting for Hungary’s freedom would now pay the ultimate price: thousands would die, and thousands would be forced to leave their beloved homeland towards havens of safety.

Hungarian radio desperately put forth broadcasts imploringly begging help from the United States and from the United Nations, beseeching the world to castigate the Russians for their actions toward Hungary. The Hungarian radio announcer’s last message to the world ended with the chilling words, “We will hold on to the last drop of our blood.”

Messages from President Eisenhower of the United States, were heard over the radio, expressing his feelings of deep sadness for the Hungarian people. The president said, “Hungary can count on us.”

A surge of hope spread amongst the Hungarian people upon learning the United States would support their cause, but their elation quickly dissipated when it was realized they were only being offered moral support, as no tangible help appeared from the West. The Great United States of America did not come to their aid as the Hungarians believed it would.

But aid to Hungary was not as simple to give as it appeared. After much exploration on how the United States could help Hungary, the American government realized the geographic location of Hungary was not ideal.

Hungary was surrounded by other countries controlled by the Soviets. If the United States helped Hungary they would have to fight their way through many Russian-controlled countries, which could possibly lead to an all-out war with Russia.

America and Russia both had nuclear power arsenals. The thought of going into combat, with the knowledge of this reality, made the consequences of such an action too hazardous to contemplate. The United States considered an economic boycott of the Soviet Union, but the Russians would not care, for it ravaged what resources it needed from the countries it occupied.

To further complicate matters, Hungary's revolution was unknowingly ill-timed, for the United States was involved in the Suez Crisis – a matter needing more urgent attention than the revolution in Hungary.

The number of lives lost during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution were beyond comprehension. The revolutionaries, ranging in age from seven to ninety, fought the enemy with anything they could make and find: homemade grenades, rocks, clubs, and bottles filled with gasoline.

These fighters were everyday people with no military training engaging in desperate acts for desperate times. If conquered by the Soviets their freedom would be lost. They had nothing to lose for without freedom there was no life. Fighters barely in their teens, many younger, without regard for their own lives, crawled onto tank tops throwing *Molotov* cocktails down the turrets. In the bravest of acts, many young people strapped several grenades to their bodies, throwing themselves into the bellies of the iron monsters, obliterating their lives as they decimated the depraved murderers within.

Jozsef's tormented eyes witnessed the ruthless killing spree and immense savagery set upon his people by the impudent, heartless Red soldiers, as they resorted to even slaughtering Hungary's helpless wounded lying in the streets.

But the thirst of the captor's bloodlust was still not satisfied, as they proved by reveling in more of their disgusting delights, causing Jozsef's stomach to turn-over in revulsion, as he observed the *Evil Ones* tying the slain remains of Hungarian revolutionaries to their monstrous tanks, dragging the heroes sacred bodies through the avenues of Budapest as a warning to those who would oppose the enemy's might, as well as spitefully hanging the bodies of Hungary's patriots on the bridges spanning the Danube River.

Even Hungarian citizens who had aided the Freedom Fighters in any form or fashion were taken to railroad stations and shoved into overcrowded cattle cars for transport to somewhere in Russia for execution – most were under the age of twenty.

The conquerors shot everyone and everything in their sights, and the populace watched in horror as Freedom Forces consisting of the very old to the very young, were sought out and lined up against buildings, only to have their lives extinguished by the deafening bombardment of machine-gun fire. Despite their best efforts, the Freedom Fighters were not winning the battle. They were under-armed, under-fed, and out-flanked. Many Hungarians had already

fled the country, with the United States sending planes and ships to Austria and Germany promising asylum to the refugees who could make it that far.

But Jozsef and Erzsebet had held out, praying for a miracle that would never come, and by the second week of November 1956, except for a few isolated incidences of a skirmish here and there, the fighting was at a standstill. The Soviets had won.

Jozsef and Erzsebet went to check on their Budapest apartment – to see if it had survived the conflict.

*The hell with the coalmine!*

The lower half of the building was riddled with the sprayed pattern of new bullet holes, now haphazardly mixed in with the ones remaining from those inherited from “The War.” The windows on the lower level were shot out; however, their apartment on the third floor, was miraculously spared. Glass was cracked in the window panes, but everything else was still there. There really was not much for anyone to pillage as their dwelling was practically barren upon their departure.

Leaving Erzsebet and Judit in the apartment, Jozsef went out, and with a “few connections,” gathered a meager amount of bread, some scraps of vegetables, paprika, eggs, and unbelievably, milk for little Judit. From these paltry rations, Erzsebet made a huge pot of watered-down soup that could last for a few days. Refrigeration was not a problem. The weather was cold, allowing the soup to be kept on the flower box outside the kitchen window to prevent spoilage. A little coal was still available for their stove, and at night, they pulled their mattress next to it for warmth.

The week of November 12, 1956, with their country in tatters, and the enemy crushing hope for any decent kind of life, Jozsef and Erzsebet thought hard about their future. They had very few options

in their favor. Each was thinking the unthinkable and unspeakable – they must leave the country, but how and when was the pressing question. One thing they did know: there was a high likelihood that they would either be killed or captured by the enemy during their escape, but what was life if you could not “live it” anyway? What was life if you were told what to do, when and how to do it, never being able to trust friends or family, and knowing your children would be educated (brainwashed) by “the system” to conspire against their own parents “for the good of the country.” No - they did not want their little girl to go through life in that way. They decided they would rather die together than live forever repressed.

With mortality staring them in the face, they chose to have a family portrait made by a photographer friend. Their reasoning was this: they would give the photographer the address of Jozsef’s parents and have the photograph mailed there. If they made it to safety they would later contact Jozsef’s parents and give them an address to which they could send the portrait; however, if they died, then at least their parents would have one final picture of them as a family.

Their friend had offered them a complimentary family portrait session many times, but they never seemed to have time to take up his kind offer. If the studio had survived the Revolution they would make the time.

And it had survived. They dressed in their best clothes. Jozsef wore his gray suit, and Erzsebet, a dark blue suit with a white blouse. Judit wore a pale pink dress with a background pattern of white flowers. Erzsebet placed a small cameo necklace about Judit’s tiny neck and curled her daughter’s silky blonde hair with pipe cleaners and did the same to her own hair.

With Judit in his arms, Jozsef and Erzsebet walked the short distance to the photography studio with the solemnity of a funeral procession, each thinking the same thought: this may be the last photograph they

*BITTERSWEET FREEDOM*

would ever have made together, for perhaps, in a few days they would all be dead.

Jozsef and Erzsebet sat on the photography bench with their little daughter cradled between them. Judit was tired and leaned her head against her mother's shoulder. Try as she might, Erzsebet found it impossible to smile, her somber eyes reflecting the thoughts of her tortured mind and soul. How was her little girl going to survive such an arduous escape? Would they all die? Her morbid contemplation was captured by the clicking sound of the camera's shutter.

This was it: the family was now forever captured in this one immortalized moment in time. For better, or for worse, only God knew their fate.



*Our family portrait made a few days prior to escaping from Hungary – November 1956*

In the early evening hours of November 16, 1956, there was an urgent pounding on their apartment door. Jozsef's cousin, Ferenc was standing in the hallway, shaking with cold, his eyes wide with fear. "Jozsef!" he breathlessly let out, "They are starting to round up the

leaders of the Revolution and executing them – *you* are on the list - they will be coming soon to get you!” Jozsef had known it was only a matter of time before “they” got around to him.

The breath was crushed out of Erzsebet. She stood frozen at the doorway, her eyes glued on Ferenc. Deep in her heart she knew what had to be done, but this soon? The thought of what was to come sapped the strength from her legs. Tears welled in her eyes. She leaned her back against a wall for support, and with Judit in her arms, slowly lowered herself and the child to the floor.

The family’s very existence in Hungary was rapidly disintegrating, as the world they had been born into suddenly shattered and splintered around them, scouring away all evidence of their presence on *Magyar* soil, for the road that had led them to this point in time was being rapidly decimated behind them, being savagely consumed by the unrelenting appetites of both fate and destiny, with no passage back to their prior existence, forcefully urging the three towards an unknown realm seething with every imaginable risk and peril.

It was time to disappear into the shroud of night - it was time to run!

## ESCAPE!

The Red Warmongers had succeeded in obliterating the Magyar's once fruitful homeland, and in their victory the "iron hand" of communist oppression clamped its choking hold about Hungary, suffocating the hopes, dreams, and lifeblood from the captives held within its borders.

Thousands had made the difficult decision to leave the country for a wondrous place called "Andau." Andau -where freedom was real and waiting - waiting for those with the courage and strength to make the perilous journey.

Ferenc had given Jozsef and Erzsebet a crudely-drawn map outlining their route to Andau, Austria, including instructions about the "freedom truck" pickup route run by an underground network to take as many citizens to freedom as was possible. Ferenc looked at his dear cousin, his boyhood friend, and companion. How he would miss him, but on this momentous evening, his mission was to assure safe passage for his beloved friend and his family. As much as Ferenc wished Jozsef could remain he begged him to leave quickly, "Jozsef, there is no time left, you must go. You must leave tonight and very soon!"

The enormity of the situation was incomprehensible. Jozsef and Erzsebet had hoped the United States would come to Hungary's aid, and now, with Ferenc's disastrous news, even if help came from the West, it would be too late for them. They had to get out now! Erzsebet's heart twisted as if massive steel chains were squeezing the blood from its arteries. With tear-filled eyes she pleaded to Jozsef, "I *must* say goodbye to my family - my mother - my father!" Her face grimaced, its stressed contours reflecting the pain in her soul. "No, no, my love," Jozsef insisted, "There is no time for goodbye. We can tell no one we are leaving. No one! Once we leave there is no turning back. Someday, somehow, if we survive our escape, we will see our families again. I promise you. We will." He held Erzsebet close to

his chest, stroking her hair, softly whispering in her ear, “It is time now, we must go.” Jozsef knew his political actions had put his family in harm’s way. The secret police *would* find him and *them*!

Despite the price they had to pay – to leave their country, their home, Jozsef and Erzsebet would not have done things differently. The Soviet regime had made their lives intolerable and things would not get better.

Jozsef and Erzsebet’s reasons for leaving Hungary were the same as the nearly two hundred thousand people who would make their exodus to borders of freedom. Since the communist party had taken control of Hungary in 1948, and until Stalin died in 1953, the people had lived under a ruthless and harsh dictatorship. Innocent people were falsely accused of “crimes” against the State. Orphaned children were taken to State orphanages to be raised as “Good Communists.” Many of Hungary’s political leaders were put to death. And worst of all, no one could be trusted, not even family. By the early 1950’s, most of the domestic products produced by the Hungarian people were confiscated and sent to supply the needs of the Soviet Union. The Hungarian people were producing plenty, but with the current system, they were slowly starving.

Upon Stalin’s death, Khrushchev, the new Soviet leader, condemned Stalin’s actions, and there was a slight decline in the cruel and callous treatment of the Hungarian people. But it was not enough. People continued to live in constant fear, for the heartless and vicious acts of the government were still in place.

As Jozsef and Erzsebet speculated on their plan of escape, they thought of their little girl. She was so very small and frail for her age of two-and-a-half, the result of an inadequate diet; and no wonder, with all the rationing in place, a family was fortunate to get a loaf of bread and cooking oil to last them for a week! Both parents shared the same unsaid fear: How was their little girl going to survive the journey? How long would it take them to reach the Austrian border?

What if something caused delays and they missed their truck? They had so little food to bring with them! How many belongings could they possibly pack? How were they supposed to carry their small child in the cold inclement weather walking over miles of territory exposed to patrolling Russian troops? How was she going to stay warm? Would they be captured? Would they all die, and how? So many questions invaded their thoughts, but there was no time to ponder over the answers.

Erzsebet's mind swam in circles as she glanced around their simple apartment. Suddenly, the gray, drab walls glistened as if made of gold. Despite its plainness, it was beautiful, because it was *their* place. They had worked themselves into utter exhaustion to keep the apartment after Jozsef was sent to the mines. When they left here tonight, what would become of their home? Who would move in? Erzsebet's eyes glazed with tears, but her thoughts quickly snapped back to the situation at hand, her mind whirring frantically. What would they pack for their journey? They had only two sets of arms, and one set of those arms had to carry the child.

Adrenaline suddenly surged through Erzsebet's body, quickening her senses, prompting her to dart about the apartment, madly sifting through drawers and cabinets. She gathered bread, a loop of dried sausage (*kolbasz*), and a small, glass bottle of milk, wrapping each in a thick cloth to protect the precious cargo. There was not much else to pack in the way of foodstuffs. She grabbed personal items: Judit's coat, hat, gloves, boots, and scarf, and the same for her and Jozsef.

Jozsef collected their identification papers to be shown on their arrival at Andau, secured their professional certificates to prove they were college-educated people, and gathered his personal music books and original, handwritten pieces of sheet music. Erzsebet checked the closet. On the floor, wrapped in a thick bundle, were at least one hundred love letters: the sweet moving stanzas of unashamed confessions of love that she and Jozsef had left for each other under their "Special Rock." But tonight, under their surreal circumstances,

the lovely spring night under the Acacia tree seemed to be a dream dreamt an eternity ago. The inviolability of their love existed in those letters and how she cherished them!

In the kitchen, Jozsef was packing his already over-stuffed attaché case with important documents, as well as filling the knapsack with the food Erzsebet had put together. “The accordion player!” shouted Erzsebet. They had almost forgotten their “Royal” Herend treasure. After all they had gone through to obtain “him” the thought of leaving without the player was inconceivable. She gathered a bed sheet and rolled the small statuette in the pale linen.

Erzsebet hurriedly dressed Judit in her winter clothes. After she and Jozsef donned their coats and boots, Jozsef placed the heavily-filled knapsack on Erzsebet’s back and placed the attaché case strap over his shoulder and across his chest.

The love letters! Erzsebet remembered they were not packed! But where was she going to put them all? She had no pockets in her coat and neither did Jozsef. If there had been time, she would have ripped out the lining of their coats and sewed the love letters inside, but there was no time to spare. Jozsef and Erzsebet stood frozen in place, their eyes flashing anguished looks towards one another as to “what must be done.” After taking one last lingering look at the bundle holding dozens of enchanting love poems, intimate sentiments, and beautiful expressions of their undying devotion, they each took turns placing a handful of letters into the fiery belly of the coal stove. With stuttering breath, Erzsebet spoke her thoughts aloud, “If...we cannot take them with us... then...no one else will have them!”

The parchments of love burst into a brilliant red flame, igniting instantly in the fiery furnace, just as their hearts had burned immediately for each other the moment they had met. It only took seconds for their “love” to be obliterated into nothingness as Erzsebet watched on, her slight shoulders shuddering from the cries of regret ripping through her body. How much Erzsebet wanted the luxury of

being allowed to have a good, hard cry; and how much she wanted the comfort of collapsing into Jozsef's strong arms, to hear her husband murmur words of love and support, but there was no time! Jozsef pressingly grasped Erzsebet by her shoulders, "My *Edes*, listen to me, there will be more letters, I will write you a love letter every day of your life, but right now, please do not cry. I love you, but we must leave *now!*"

Ferenc was waiting in the hallway outside the apartment to escort the family to a safe area where they were to begin their journey. Jozsef gathered Judit in his right arm. With his left arm around Erzsebet's waist they walked out the door of their apartment. Jozsef looked straight ahead, his mind filled with the many things needing to be done in a few hours.

But, upon exiting the apartment door, Erzsebet looked back over her shoulder, wanting one final look at their home. Stinging tears blurred everything into a shapeless, colorless mass. *I should never have looked back. It strangles my heart.*

Unbeknownst to Erzsebet, Jozsef had conspired with Ferenc to set-up a "Booby-trap" at the door of their apartment. After the family set out on their journey, Ferenc returned to the apartment, setting devices in place that would make sure the *Evil Ones* would breathe their last when they opened the apartment door.

On the cold, foggy evening of November 16, 1956, the Jozsef and Erzsebet Bognar Family closed the door on their life in Hungary, their birthplace, the land of their ancestors, the place where Jozsef's music and rhapsodies had taken hold - the Citadel of their Love.

The life they had hoped to build was never to be, at least not on Magyar soil. With heavy hearts the reluctant fugitives began their trek into the great unknown.

Several families embarking on the same pilgrimage crossed their path, and like Jozsef and Erzsebet, carried all they owned on their backs, in their arms, and in their hearts. To avoid detection by Russian troops, many parents had given their little ones sleeping draughts to suppress their whimpering and cries.

It was a slow, chilly, damp, five-mile walk to the check-point where Ferenc had instructed them to wait for a Russian Army truck (stolen by the Freedom Fighters) to transport the refugees the nearly one hundred miles to Andau – a distance impossible to walk in one night. The truck was their lifeline.

The family and other refugees rode in the back area of the truck for seemingly countless hours, before coming to a stop near a wooded area approximately fifty miles from the Austrian border. Everyone disembarked. The driver gave the group a general heading to follow through a dense set of woods where they would meet up with another truck on a different section of road.

Erzsebet, and Jozsef carrying little Judit, including the two other families, disappeared into the sheltering embrace of a tight cluster of trees.

The cool, foggy night was becoming more frigid, their circumstances made even more dismal by the muddy ground left from a prior rain.

The weather was the best and the worse scenario: the fog made it difficult for them to spot Russian squads making rounds in the area; however, the fog also served as a protective veil to avoid being seen, and that *was* a miracle considering there was nearly a full moon! After several hours of walking in the black gunk, their feet became numb due to the cold and damp.

Judit started to cry, and no wonder - she was just a little girl who was cold and hungry. How could she possibly understand why she was in a dark forest at nighttime and not in her bed? Jozsef held her close

and whispered a Hungarian nursery rhyme to quiet her, “Little squirrel, little squirrel, he climbed up a tree. He fell down ... he fell down ... and he broke his knee. Oh, oh, oh, oh, nice doctor man, please make the little squirrel well again.”

The family trudged onward, albeit slowly, for the forest floor was sticky and sludge-like, making each step an effort. The black-brown ooze seeped over the cuffs of their ankle-high boots, permeating their socks with the near-frozen mush. Judit tired of being carried, fidgeted in her father’s arms, but Jozsef refused to set her down into the cold slush. He pitied her discomfort.

The other passengers who had disembarked from the truck with them must have fallen behind or become lost, for Jozsef and Erzsebet suddenly became acutely aware of no longer being able to see or hear them.

They walked on through the thick trees in the direction pointed out by the driver. It was eerily quiet, not a sound of life stirred about them, except for the sucking sounds made by their feet as they stepped in and out of the sticky mud.

Then... out of nowhere, high-pitched, blood curdling, gut-wrenching screams of men, women and children resounded through the placidity of the imperturbable forest, signaling the angels of retribution to swoop down and carry their torn, broken souls into the chambers of Heaven, to forever leave behind the caustic, razor-sharp echoes of gunfire that had extinguished the final spark of life from their bodies.

*Why was it a crime to want to live in Freedom? Why was it an offense to yearn for the clean winds of free air to flow through your lungs?*

The Red Tyranny had consumed their homeland of Hungary, the occupiers laying down the law of the land, having determined that any thoughts of freedom, any thoughts of not wanting to live under

the Iron Fist of the Soviet Regime, any thought of free enterprise was a travesty unto itself, an abomination so great, so filled with debauchery that one should no longer be allowed to draw another breath. The distant, hellish-red glow of reverberating machine gunfire jarred Jozsef and Erzsebet into a burning, all-consuming, profound panic, for now, the nightmarish demise of their companions would certainly become their reality as the mordant, scathing voices of the patrolling Russian soldiers approached their inept hiding place. There was no way to go back now, no safe way home, and even if they could go back home, there was no home left to go to.

Witnessing the terrifying murder of their countrymen churned Erzsebet's bowels, and try as she might not to vomit, her plagued mind was in no condition to control her ravaged body, and she relieved her retching gut behind a nearby tree.

*This is no time to lose control!* Jozsef repeated over and over to himself. But Jozsef's addled, crestfallen body refused to listen to reason, and then, as he stood immobilized by dread, riveted in place beside his ailing wife, Jozsef's bruised psyche separated from his deadened bones.

Jozsef found himself swirling above a sanctuary of graceful tall timbers, gratefully reeling, blissfully floating away to a more peaceful place upon the elusive arms of cool, invisible winds. It was all so beautiful, fantastically beautiful, to lose all track of one's loathsome surroundings; it was so peaceful and beautiful to be able to escape to an enchanting place far from the realities of an ugly world.

Indeed, Jozsef's alter ego was pridefully working a marvelous illusion of beguiling deceit about him, blanketing his essence under a velvety cloak of fraudulent armor. And, Jozsef exulted in its facade, reveled in its comfort, and basked in its protection until ... Until the shrieking wails of little Judit broke the magical mirror of his haven into a thousand pieces - her cries had sealed their death sentence!

Shaken from his self-aggrandizement, Jozsef heaved off his cumbrous mantle of betrayal, berating himself, hating himself, and despising himself - how could he have been so incomprehensibly irresponsible to let his guard down at this, the most critical, the most perilous moment of their lives? If the enemy found them now, it was because of him... and because of his flippancy, an agonizing end awaited those he loved more than anything in the world, more than life itself. The weight of his sin catapulted the piercing weight of a million-ton dagger through his chest, causing his knees to fold beneath him as he bent into the soil of the slimy earth.

*No, no, no! We will not end this way!* As a last dogged attempt to save his family, Jozsef vaulted into the deranged actions of a madman, grabbing Erzsebet's arm, viciously tugging and pulling her and little Judit behind a thick stance of timber, a trembling finger placed upon his lips signaling them to be silent.

As she held her bawling baby daughter close to her petrified heart, sickening shudders of an inky-black, faceless, soulless doom clouded Erzsebet's terrified mind, as it unwillingly flashed grotesque images of three, ravaged, bullet-riddled bodies sprawled about the forest floor, the last warm, oozing remains of their valorous blood gathering thickly about their lifeless remains, as the viscera of the earth beneath them inhaled the crimson-colored juice of their trickling souls, the burgundy liquid seeking to nourish the buried seeds of the forest, perhaps to reincarnate into the veins of forest-green seedlings and saplings that would one day live again in the warmth of the sun - for no one would ever find them here, in this thick, muddy muck to give them a decent burial. No one.

Hardly able to take in even a shallow breath, Erzsebet dropped her knees into the slush of the cold, brown ooze, clasping Jozsef and her crying baby daughter close, whispering an anguished prayer of desperation towards the moon-filled sky, "Please God, be merciful - take our souls swiftly and do not let my baby suffer!"

Jozsef was not so quick to give in. Determined to save his family, he drew in a deep breath, as an uncontrolled animal instinct for survival overrode his fear. He snatched Judit to him, and with all his might covered her mouth with both his hands, as he tucked her tiny head under his coat, into the deepest depths of his armpit to muffle her whining.

The vociferate voices in the distance were coming closer *and* louder. Judit struggled under her father's coat, but Jozsef gripped her even tighter, burying his daughter's face deeper under his arm. Then Judit became silent. The family squatted in the cold sludge behind a dense set of brush to avoid detection by the shadowed soldiers who had halted in the opaque, misty darkness, no more than thirty feet from the crouching family.

A few moments, that felt more like hours passed, when at last, the faceless enemy strode in the opposite direction, disappearing into the foggy gray banks of mist. The fading sound of a car engine in the far-off distance confirmed the interceptors had departed, but that meant the road to their truck connection had to be near!

But, Jozsef and Erzsebet could not move, their minds and bodies bereft of strength to rise from their groveled position. After an unknown lapse of time, Jozsef's consciousness launched him into a morbid reality, nearly strangling the life from his heart, as a sickening revulsion spread throughout his limbs - *He had forgotten about Judit!*

Jozsef's bleary eyes nearly blinded him as he moved to gently disengage Judit from his armpit. His little girl's eyes were closed, and her body hung limp in his arms. He had smothered his daughter! Erzsebet glared upon her baby's sagging form as Jozsef helplessly held out their child to her. Her lungs ached to scream out the painful denial of her baby's suffocation, but the prior intense encounter had paralyzed her vocal cords.

Her husband could not have suffocated her baby – he loved her beyond all reason! Her baby cannot be dead! *Dear God...no, not my baby...let her live, she must live!* With stifled movements of halting uncertainty, Erzsebet rested the flushed cheeks of her wind-chapped face against Judit's thin chest straining to hear a heartbeat. "Jozsef!" she hoarsely whispered, "Look! See! – Judit's stomach is going up and down! Our baby is asleep... she is breathing, she is sleeping... she is *only* sleeping!" Holding their child between them, the exhausted and terrified young family huddled close to one another on the wet, frigid, forest floor. "My baby girl, forgive me for hurting you!" Jozsef's guilt-ridden figure shook heavily in-between deep groaning breaths of remorse and repentance, his hot tears of relief tumbling onto the face of his sleeping daughter.

The young father covered his little girl with a thin blanket pulled from the knapsack, cradling her close to the warmth of his chest. No longer able to hold in the stinging lacerations of her emotions, Erzsebet wept heavily, her expended and rattled body shuddering from the abhorrence of all that had happened in such a short stance of time.

After regaining their fortitude, Jozsef edgily scanned his watch. An hour had gone by! "Hurry Erzsebet, hurry! We must make it in time for the truck!"

The family continued their flight, picking up their pace through the unwelcoming woods, at last coming upon the road leading to their pickup point. One other couple also met them there, informing Jozsef and Erzsebet of a family positioned only about two hundred feet away from their location being captured, forced into a Russian truck, and taken away.

The unmistakable roar of an engine boomed through the deceiving tranquility of the evening signaling the cautious defectors to retreat to the safety of the tree line. The truck appeared to be the same one as

before, but was it? Was it supposed to be another type of truck? The vehicle stopped.

The moon was high, and by its light, they could see it was the same man who had transported them earlier. The driver called out from the vehicle to the unnerved group, "Hurry, we do not have much time - get in!" Jozsef was apprehensive. It could be a trap! The driver could have been captured and forced to drive to the pickup point to gather escapees while Russian soldiers hid in the covered back compartment waiting to capture them.

Despite his misgivings, Jozsef knew the remaining distance to Andau was too far to walk in what few hours of darkness remained. Soon, it would be daylight, and the cloak of night was necessary to elude their pursuers. They had to take the chance. Jozsef cautiously pulled aside the canvas covering the back of the truck. It was empty! The reassured refugees clambered inside and within seconds were on their way.

After seemingly endless hours had passed, the vehicle made a hard stop jolting all on board awake. Jozsef rubbed his eyes, "I wonder where we are?" With cold, stiff bodies and throbbing heads, the passengers disembarked from the rear of the truck into the ominous solitude.

The faint light of daybreak barely illuminated the dispiriting landscape. In every direction there was nothing more than a wide expanse of desolate, marsh-like, swampy land. The driver pointed his finger "Go that way, you will see the bridge." With those last words he drove away. The earth was soft and oozing with wetness. The last remnants of a dissipating fog swirled about them, and with each step, their feet sank even more deeply into the gooey soil of the wetlands, but they no longer cared, their emotions too raw, and their bodies too depleted to worry anymore about cold feet or wet clothes.

Erzsebet had fed Judit milk, earlier, so she was pacified and sleeping in Jozsef's arms. Despite feeling nauseated from all they had gone through, the couple had forced themselves to eat the *kolbasz*, knowing they needed its sustenance to maintain their energy.

With exhaustion pressing upon every molecule of their being, the family stumbled forward, but then, without warning, Jozsef stopped abruptly in his tracks, his finger pointing to a dreamlike image up ahead, "Look, Erzsebet!" Out of the billowing mist, the ghost-like forms of a few, then several more, and then even more, sodden men, women, and children, emerged, each making their way towards the promising icon of hope awaiting the spent travelers. The glowing sun rose higher in the early morning sky, spreading its feathery, bright, powdery-pink streaks of a new dawn across the horizon. *It must be God sending a ray of light for us to follow*, thought Erzsebet. And He did. The Bridge of Andau was directly in front of them!

As the life-giving star spread its first yellow, warming rays upon the icy earth, faintly illuminated forms of fellow Hungarians materialized upon the planks of the small, ramshackle, rickety, wooden bridge spanning the narrow Einser Canal.

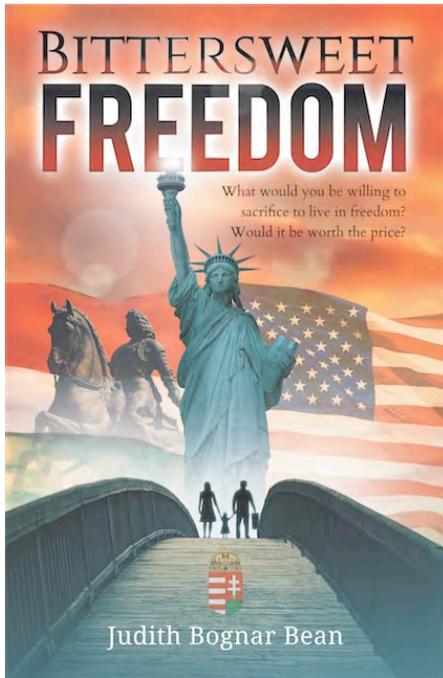
Jozsef and Erzsebet hearts fluttered with a rush of eagerness and excitement, as a surge of exhilarating energy spread through their expended limbs, urging them to join the hundreds of pairs of shabby, muddy shoes marching upon the beams of hope stretching into the free border of Austria. Jozsef spirited little Judit to his chest. And, holding Erzsebet's hand in his, they ran on frozen feet toward the narrow stretch of wooden supports.

Then...they were there - standing at the threshold of a New World.

The realization of all they had been through bared down on their enervated, distressed bodies. Erzsebet flung herself into the sanctuary of Jozsef's arms, their baby held between them - crying tears of joy for the new life awaiting them, tears of mournfulness for all they

were forced to leave behind, and tears of eternal thanks to God in the blessed heavens. “Come Erzsebet” Jozsef euphorically proclaimed, “This is no time to cry! All the crying time is gone! It is time for us to live again, really live! We made it! We are free!”

The unknown *Realm of Freedom* was a mere footstep away, and with little Judit standing between them, Jozsef and Erzsebet grasped her tiny hands and stepped onto the bridge of dreams.



*A 1956 Hungarian Freedom Fighter, escaping a death sentence inflicted upon him by the Soviet Army, makes a death-defying escape with his wife and baby daughter, seeking a small bridge, shrouded amidst swampy marshland, whose rickety planks wait to lead the family into a vast void called "Freedom."*

## **BITTERSWEET FREEDOM**

by Judith Bognar Bean

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