

Max Thorek, *A Surgeon's World; An Autobiography* (New York: Somerset Books, 1943); 13-21.

PART 1: PRELUDE TO AMERICA

Chapter 1

FIRST MEMORIES

Between soft layers of goose-feathers, I lay sleeping—a three year old boy, safe in the safest sanctuary in the world, my home. Warm under my covers, with added warmth reaching my cold little toes from the porcelain stove with its bright tiles of yellow, red and white, I had peaceful dreams, shadowed only by the perplexities of a child beginning to discover a world outside the safety of home, not always kindly, not always safe. Dreams floated into my slumbers—of the old gray gander who hissed me down by the river bank, my baby buttocks bare for his nips; of the neighbor's dog that barked at me and showed his teeth; of hurting tumbles when a careless step made the ground rise up and trip me; of surprises and dangers around the corner when I ventured away from my home. But those dreams had the undercurrent of security. I was at home. I was in my bed. I had, between me and the perplexing world, those ever-loving, ever-watchful guardians—my mother and my father.

Home had its shocks and surprises for an exploring boy, it is true. The roar of my father's voice when I reached for the lamp shining on the table or attempted an attack on a certain instrument case, or investigated pungent pots of herbs brewing on the fire, could make me quake in my boots. But the roar was followed by a smile. It was not as terrifying as the hissing gander and the snapping dog. It was, as I dimly sensed, in some mysterious

way part of the protection which home gave me, part of the assurance that harm could never come to me there.

Suddenly fear invaded my sanctuary, borne by a sound new to my ears, a sound which made me stir uneasily in my sleep, a sound which, growing louder, more insistent, moved me to terri- [end page 13] fied trembling. Outside in the street drums were beating loudly and menacingly. I could not escape that primitive sound. Drums! Drums! Drums!

Something in my protoplasm reacted with violent and unreasoning panic. I fell out of bed and lay screaming on the floor.

That moment retains today in memory all the freshness of present experience. I live it over and over again.

Mother comes running. She bends down and picks me up. She holds me close, deriding my fears, trying to awaken my courage. I keep on crying. I am afraid, really afraid for the first time in my life.

Mother carries me to the door and quickly opens it. Encircled in her arms, I look out. The street blazes with spring sunshine, so bright my sleep-filled eyes blink blindly for a moment. In the window-box, a pink flower nods in the breeze. In doorways and on window-ledges, cats are sleeping, serenely indifferent to the strange insistent sounds. But every dog in town, irritated by the primordial call that comes down the cobbled street with its gabled houses, is barking in loud protest. My old enemy, the ancient gander-was

it perhaps his ancestor who hissed to save the city on the Tiber?-is leading his harem away from danger.

Drums again! A mother's love battles with the fear she sees in the eyes of her first-born son.

"You are just a little dunce," she whispers, as she holds me close.

Down the street men are marching. Their polished boots gleam in the sunshine. Their scarlet trousers and blue coats are more splendid than anything I have ever seen. The hypnotizing rhythm of their stride makes me interrupt my screaming to watch.

"They are katonák," my mother tells me, repeating the word, which means soldiers in Hungarian, slowly, so that it may sink into my consciousness, teaching it to me as she has taught me the name of cat, chair, spoon, my mouth, my bed, my milk, the water, the sun. Katonák... In the hands of one of the men, marching beside the group, I see a pair of sticks. I watch him in interested wonder. With these sticks he is beating steadily upon his red-tassled drum. I am thrown again into childish chaos.

My mother pets my cheek. Into my ear, she whispers those soft jumbling sounds which mothers have used since the first [end page 14] days of the human race. She fights against the fear of her child.

"Look, you little fool! See the pretty Huszárs! Hear the music! Hear the Rákóczy! Listen! Isn't the music of that little *trommel* pretty! Father must buy you one like it, and I will make you a fine red and blue suit to wear when you play it."

Memory begins for me from that day. It begins with the staccato rhythm of drums, with the primitive fear stirred by the primitive throbbing sounds which speak directly to the beating of men's hearts. It begins with the comfort and the reassurance of my mother's voice.

Since that long-ago morning, the sound of drums has woven itself into my life as a minor theme. Whenever I have heard, in some luxurious and opulent home in Europe or America, the snare drums roll out the percussive refrains of Meyerbeer's *Huguenots*; whenever I listened to the martial music as men marched to war or home from war, the sound of drums has always power to carry me back across the years and across the miles, back to my first encounter with terror, back to the shelter and protection of my mother's care.

Aesculapius had marked me for his own before I was out of the cradle. His staff and twined serpents were the aegis of our home, and his healing art was practiced by both my parents. Into our tiny cottage, along the path that led from the cobbled street, came an endless stream of visitors-Jew, Catholic, Protestant, Turk, Magyar, Tartár, Greek, Bulgarian, Rumanian, Russian - ready to share our food, including those Hungarian cabbage pastries "*kaposztásrétes*"-the thought of which can make my mouth water even

today-but even more ready to talk. It seemed to me that there was always discussion going on in our home, before the fire on winter evenings, in the flower-sweet garden in the summer.

Had I recognized my predestination then, I might record that I listened to those discussions with eager interest. I did not. They were disappointing and often boring to me. I felt neglected and left out while my elders talked.

Sometimes the talk began with promise. Someone would mention the appalling news from the hunting lodge of Mayerling, about Crown Prince Rudolph and the beautiful Maria Vetsera. [end page 15] Someone would bring bright vivid pictures of life in far-away cities. I was all ears. I could have listened all night. But inevitably, just as my interest was at fever pitch, the talk would turn. It would run into speculations as to why so many people should die of *Bauchfellentzündung*. (We know today that it is due to perforation of the appendix.) Or it would become an argument about the best way of treating typhus or how to use or discard leeches. Or it would swing from bright gossip about the great and near great to stories of an unfortunate Hungarian physician named Semmelweis. Always and forever, medicine! These men and women seemed unable to talk of anything else.

The provincial Hungarian stork left much work for my mother. She was called to the hovels of the river-bank and to the mansions of the rich. It seemed that babies were always coming. Short, erect, beautiful and slender, with her thick, brown hair parted in

the middle and drawn softly to the nape of her neck, my mother looked in her youth like the Madonna the artists painted. And her goodness, gentleness and patience had something saintly in them which contrasted with the more vigorous irascibility of my father.

Father could have sat for a portrait of Mars-majesty, beard, and all-and he had all the fierce dignity which the prophets of old ascribed to deity. Every child in town, including his own sons, dwelt in genuine fear of his wrath. He was a skillful man and a good Aesculapian disciple for all his severity. Like all his contemporaries, he had to depend on his five senses to guide him in his diagnoses. He shared the faith of his colleagues in such treatments as cupping, bloodletting, leeches, cataplasms, clysters, and he never dreamed that many people who died of "bowel inflammation" could have been saved had some wise man discovered appendicitis earlier. No doubt the greenest medical graduate today knows more of the science of medicine than Father ever dreamed could be known-so great have the strides in that science been in the past fifty years-but he ministered with conscientious skill to his neighbors and kept, throughout his active life, an open-minded interest in the discoveries and advances being made in the medical world.

Very early he began to make me understand that he expected me to take up his staff and mantle when he should be ready to lay them aside. And unconsciously I absorbed some of the medi-[end page 16] cal and surgical knowledge of our household. Watching my mother, time after time, pierce ear-lobes for the heavy earrings that Austro-Hungarians loved, I became adept in using the needle to prick the blisters that came on tender heels

from the rubbing of a sabot or a knot in poorly carded wool. I learned deftly to dig out splinters imbedded in any section of the human anatomy. My skill in extracting thorns was most often drafted to relieve the paws of limping beasts. I even aspired to the removal of "dirt in the eye."

Among the Tatra Mountains nestled my native town. It was only a day's travel from Budapest and from Vienna, but in the days of my youth those cities seemed as far and strange as the North Pole. Few of the ten thousand citizens of the town traveled far from their homes, and the community life had a stability which not many communities retain in this day of rapid movement.

Weaving and leather tanning brought the town its livelihood. (Sometimes a shift of wind in Chicago, bringing with it the effluvia of the stockyards, touches my nostrils with recollection of the pungent odors of those tanneries, and I can see again the workmen walking the cobbled streets of my home town.) Weaving, however, was only beginning its transition from the home to the factory, and it is the home industry which I remember most vividly as characteristic of the life of the community in which I spent my boyhood.

Our home, like most of the village homes, had its loom where wool for the sturdy Jaeger was spun. Jaeger, in the eyes of most villagers, stood second in importance only to religion. Every peasant's home-most of the homes of the scholars and gentry as well-had its loom. Day after day, old men and women plied their gnarled and wrinkled fingers to spin and weave the all-important cloth. Carding the wool was a familiar, homely task.

Knitting needles clacked with the vigor of contending creeds. It was a sloven household which did not turn out its own Jaeger. And once spun and woven, the prized cloth saw long and strenuous life. It began as underwear for a grown man or woman. Then it was cut down, handed down from big to little household members, until the last shred saw duty as a baby's belly-band, or a [end page 17] lad's ear muffs. We lads all wore our Jaeger belly-bands in the "big" years, but we dispensed with shirts.

No traveler coming into that town in those days, however could ever have noticed first the evidences that men and women toiled for their bread and butter. Modern towns, with their towering smokestacks, emphasize the economic aspects of men's lives. My town did not. My town was conspicuous for its churches.

For those who found life's chief solace in Almighty God, Franz Josef's land was rich in outward signs and tokens of religious faiths and convictions, various, often hostile and clashing, but all speaking of man's concern with the things of the spirit.

Over the magnificent, stately edifices of the Church of Rome ruled from the cloistered Vatican, towered that indomitable aristocrat, peerless diplomat, and far-sighted humanitarian-Leo XIII. Between Leo's thumb and fingers with the legendary fisherman's ring, was long held the leash that kept in check the dog of war. His strength and his influence were truly and deeply felt in the great Catholic churches which dominated our little mountain town.

To me, a boy on the threshold of life, those Romanist churches were holy places because they held statues and pictures, understandable to any faith, of the Mother, always with the Holy Child in her arms, often at her breast. Countless times I have stood before them and before those roadside shrines, so numerous in the Tátra, where the Madonna waits patiently for votaries. Crudely carved from wood or stone, stained with the dust of year and the grime of highways, these shrines are enriched by the prayers of the penitent and the tears of the forlorn. For me their compelling interest was the soft-eyed Madonna, holding her child as Mother at home held little Philip.

Philip was my younger brother. I thought he cried too much. Yet he hushed promptly when my mother, opening her bodice loosed to his mouth that blue-veined alabaster globe, holding for her child the fountain of life. To the shock-headed boy that was I, this almost automatic action of practical maternity held a much magic as lay in the legends told by huddled old crones of the town, or between the covers of the Brothers Grimm. Here indeed, was "Little Table, spread thyself."

Later, when I was a man grown, to me as to others stood this ubiquitous, commonplace gesture of fulfilled womanhood. In my [end page 18] boyhood days, in my native town on the Austro-Hungarian border, a nursing bottle was a symbol of shame! Although it was well known that in the imperial palaces of Vienna and Budapest wet-nursing was a well-paid profession, the true mothers of the Dual Monarchy nursed their own children. The Catholic images of Madonna and Child stood in my childish mind as symbols of this holy mystery I felt in my home.

The Catholic religion dominated our town, but did not monopolize its devotion. Less pretentious than the cathedral but signifying a faith older than Christianity, a faith whose annals hold bloody records of relentless, ceaseless persecution, the Synagogue drew its own faithful followers. In our town the Synagogue was of Moorish design, built upon a mound. In it the men worshipped below. Women were permitted only in the balcony. The sexes were not allowed to intermingle at prayer.

Judaism found expression also in the *Yeshivah*, which met in a one-story building, stove-heated, poorly ventilated, with many of its windows broken and its floor only partly boarded so that the ground was exposed in spots. This Talmudic school is the oldest institution of Jewish learning, higher in rank than the *Chedar* or the *Talmud Torah*.

Burning devotion marked the pale faces of the *Yeshivah Bachurs*, who consecrated their lives to the study of the *Talmud*, following their holy study by flickering candlelight through the long nights. Inexorable sadness permeated the atmosphere. Mysticism, sorrow, and poverty met there every night. With heroic tenacity and self-sacrifice, the Faithful held fast to their traditional belief and remained true to their God. In an abyss of destitution, self-denial, and abnegation, they never for an instant doubted the wisdom of their way of life. "Does not life quickly pass?" they argued. "It is the *Olum habu*. (the hereafter) in which every righteous son of Israel is apportioned a share, that is the important goal-the goal beyond the grave."

Even Martin Luther had his handful of stout followers in my Tatra Mountain town. They fought the Reformation over and over again. John Calvin and John Knox left their imprint in these Hungarian mountains. I remember one native called "Calvin," and Scotland meant Knox to all of us. The Protestant minority was, of course, anathema to the Catholic majority as it had been everywhere in Europe for centuries. Communicants of [end page 19] both faiths sought the same God, whom they called God of love and mercy, and they reached out to him with hands stained with the blood of their fellow men. It is tragic to record that, among my earliest recollections, are memories of the religious hatreds of our town.

A boy's choice of his church was, of course, in Hungary as, everywhere in the world, made for him by his parents. We possessed no veto power in the domain of religion. Each of us went to the church of our parents for the same reason that we went to school- because we could not escape.

Most of us would have gladly escaped the school if we could, and stringent disciplines went against the grain of our freedom-loving souls. The currently discredited maxim, spare the rod and spoil the child, operated in full force. And woe to the lad who happened to be in the class of a sadistically inclined schoolmaster.

Our secret world, the world in which we really lived, was the world of play. The scent of spring in the air brought to us the same truant impulses felt by boyhood the world around. When the ice was melting in the Vág and the Árva and life was stirring in the thawing

earth, we were irresistibly moved to forget church and school and run out into the sun to greet the world as it sloughed off its winter garments. There were snails to watch, hares and leverets to chase, and robins, wrens, and thrushes to startle. If we went far enough and high enough and had enough luck, there were water ousels. If we could not actually catch carp and trout with our hands, at least we could frighten them.

Closer home there were hoops to be rolled over the cobbles of the marketplace, with a troop of dogs and younger brothers and sisters at our heels in full cry. Cats were made to be chased by boys. New chickens and kittens and puppies, calves, lambs, pigs, and kids gave us endless delight. We played with balls, like other boys of other lands, but our balls were made from ends of yarn, or from a bit of kidskin or tanned leather stuffed with hen or goose-feathers or combings or linters my parents used for dressing wounds obtained by separating the threads of linen fabric, made into fluff called *charpie*.

Thus the years passed. While the elders sat at the table or in the pleasant courtyard at eventide, eating and arguing as the sun [end page 20] gilded the grape arbor, and the advancing dew distilled a softer fragrance from the pine furs, I grew up. There came the spring when I had nice trousers of huszár red, with hand-moulded silver buttons, and the old cobbler Lukás made scarlet-topped boots for me, I was ready to meet my destiny.

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