

**A TALE OF SURVIVAL: FROM WAR RAVAGED
EUROPE TO THE PROMISE OF AMERICA**

By Thomas M. Kando
Sacramento, CA

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Did All this Really Happen?

The vast majority of the material is true. A few major stories are not true, or they are exaggerations of the truth: I wrote these as fantasies, some based on wish and some on fear. Every one of these fantasies is a plausible extension of what *did* happen, and a reflection of what was going on in my mind at the time, based on the closely related experience which I was truly having at the moment:

1. Perhaps the most important fib in this book is that I shook hands with Martin Luther King (chapter 48). I did not. However, much of what I write in chapter 48 *is* true: I did go to the poor people's march in Washington DC, which was organized by Martin Luther King, and which would have been led by him, had he not been assassinated two months before the march. I did meet Ralph Abernathy, King's successor as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and I did see Coretta King, Jesse Jackson and the other Civil Rights Leaders on the steps of the US Capitol.

Other "embellishments" and inventions:

2. My fight with German youngsters on the boat to America did occur, but it wasn't life threatening.

3. I didn't meet Mick Jagger and Bob Dylan. But Dylan's brother Dave Zimmerman *was* a good friend of mine, I played the flute for him, and the other stories about the Minneapolis Rock scene are true.

4. Vince Lombardi didn't lecture to my students, but he did recruit at my college.

5. I didn't bump into George W. Bush at Yale, although Yale did call me up as a job applicant precisely when Bush was a student there.

6. I didn't shake Ronald Reagan's hand. However, I *was* an organizer and leader of the Sacramento peace march, and he *was* the governor of California at that time, confronting what we were doing.

7. The Russian incident is exaggerated: I *did* get picked up and grilled, my camera was confiscated, etc, but the Russians didn't put me in jail.

8. I did not have dinner with William's famous football coach. However, we *were* members of the same department, my wife and I met him several times, and the shenanigans I relate *did* happen.

9. Eldridge Cleaver and I did not see the ghost of the white witch of Rose Hall. However, I was friends with Eldridge after he was no longer a terrorist, and we spent time together both in Jamaica and at my home in California.

For the rest, everything I told you about me truly happened, although some of the characters, events and academic departments have been mixed, to make for a more interesting story.

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Don't worry about your problem. Soon a bigger one will crop up
Hungarian saying

1. 1939. PARIS

On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later, France and Britain formally declared war on Germany. My future parents Edith and Jules Sander still lived in Paris at that time. At first, nothing changed. People began to hoard food and supplies, but there was no shooting, no invasion. Several months went by, during which life continued more or less normally in the City of Lights.

Finally, the Germans invaded France, and in June of 1940 they made their triumphant entry into Paris. Edith and Jules were there to witness it, on that dreary cloudy spring morning. Hitler's *Wehrmacht* paraded down the Champs Elysees, from the Arch of Triumph to the Concorde. First came hundreds of tanks, their caterpillar treads loudly clattering on the avenue's cobblestones. Thousands of infantry soldiers followed, marching in lockstep. Then came the cavalry, thousands of men on horseback, plus hundreds of horse-drawn vehicles. Throngs of Frenchmen crowded the sidewalks, most of them silent, some of them crying, a few brave souls shouting, "*Merde au Boche!* (Fuck the krauts!)" and, "*Salauds!* (Assholes!)"

After the end of the victory parade, the huge avenue emptied out, as the people of Paris slowly walked back to their homes, crushed by the sudden defeat, still unable to comprehend its consequences and implications. By late afternoon the majestic Champs Elysees was a vast, empty space covered with tons of horse shit left by the German cavalry, exuding a powerful stench.

Before World War Two, Paris had long been the Mecca for all artists, including my parents. My father was an aspiring painter, and my mother an aspiring photographer. They had moved into a modest apartment on the Left Bank. The vast colony of foreign artists in Paris included people from everywhere, for example Miro and Picasso from Spain, and Hemingway, Getrude Stein and the other Americans of the Lost Generation. Edith and Jules probably crossed paths many times with such historical figures when having coffee or Pernod at *La Coupole* or at *Les Deux Magots*, those well-known Left Bank and Montparnasse hang-outs. However, most of their intimate friends were Hungarian expatriate artists like themselves. Their youthful existence was creative and exciting, but hanging over it was the ominous cloud of imminent war.

When war was declared in September of 1939, Edith and Jules considered their options. They were not sure whether to return home to Hungary or not. Home is the best place to be during great disasters. And in this case, while France was at war, Hungary was still neutral, and it might stay out of the war altogether. Last but not least: Edith was now pregnant with me.

Wasn't it better to be home when delivering your first baby? They still had not made up their mind when they saw the German army march down the Champs Elysees nine months later.

The few weeks following Hitler's occupation of Paris were like a Roman Holiday for the Germans. Many of them deluded themselves into believing that they were welcome, and that the war was practically over. All of Paris' famous monuments were full of German soldiers acting like tourists.

Edith had her Rolleiflex and she took many pictures. She followed a couple of drunken German officers all the way up to Montmartre, where the Sacre Coeur cathedral sits like a crown on top of the city. As the two officers walked across the esplanade to take pictures of the church and of Paris, Edith managed to photograph them unnoticed, and then quickly disappear. Years later, this photo would become world famous. Today, it is on display at the Spinosa Museum in Budapest.

Edith and Jules were still pondering whether to return to Hungary or not, when the German authorities made the decision for them: A few weeks after their entry into the capital city, the Germans decreed that all aliens must return to their country of origin, under penalty of execution.

So they gathered their few valuables, packed their clothes into a couple of suitcases, and took the metro to the *Gare de l'Est*, the Eastern Railroad Station which services Eastern Europe.

By now, the war was in full swing, at least on the Western front. Most regular passenger trains had been requisitioned by the Germans for troop transport. Civilians often had to travel on freight trains. My parents were not about to enjoy the luxury of the Orient Express!

When Edith and Jules arrived at the cavernous Eastern Station and found out that they would have to travel in a box car built for cattle, not for people, Jules had a fit. "What the hell?" he shouted at one of the French officials. "You expect my pregnant wife to travel in cow manure? Do you know how many days it takes to get to Budapest?"

Of course, the French official couldn't do anything. He raised his shoulders nonchalantly and said, "*Eh, Monsieur, qu'est-ce que je peux faire, moi?* (well, sir, what can I do?)" adding, "*c'est la guerre! C'est les boches* (it's the war; it's the krauts)."

But Jules continued to gripe. "We are not animals, you know! You expect us to sit in this filth for a week? This is nuts!"

The French official tried to sooth him a bit, saying, "Look, *Monsieur*, the straw is fresh and clean, and there is a water container..."

Jules was about to continue harping and hollering, but a heavily armed German guard approached, asking, "*Was is loss? Was wohlst du?* (what's going on? What do you want?)"

Edith pinched my father's arm as sharply as she could and whispered, "stop it, idiot! You want us to get shot?"

So Jules regained his composure and explained to the German calmly that his wife was pregnant and that he wasn't happy about the "accommodations." Of course, nothing could be done, and they were simply ordered to get on the train.

At five in the afternoon, the train slowly began to pull out of the immense station. There were two steam locomotives pulling at least fifty cars, and at first it was almost as if they were unable to budge, like the little locomotive that first couldn't. The first fifteen wagons were comfortable passenger cars, all reserved for German troops. The rest were box cars full of people like Edith and Jules, as well as cattle and horses.

At least, people and animals did not have to share the same cars. That is, if you exclude pigs, goats and chickens, which were plentiful even in the box cars reserved for humans.

The trip to Budapest took five days. Every day, some people would get off and new passengers would get on. Many were farmers accompanied by animals. After a few hours, these animals would inevitably begin to urinate and defecate. Soon the passengers were traveling in unspeakable filth and stench. However, the worst was yet to come.

The Allied air raids had begun. Trains, of course, were prime targets, with all the troops and war materiel they carried.

My parents' train must have been somewhere in Southern Germany or in Austria when they experienced their first air raid. Sirens began to blare and the train came to a screeching halt. German soldiers came running towards their box cars, shouting, "*Heraus! Alle Pasagieren heraus! Schnell!* (Out! Everybody out! Quick!)"

So everyone jumped out and onto the track, whereupon they were all ordered to crawl underneath the train. Bombs came raining down, but they all missed. The closest explosion Edith heard must have been three hundred meters away. Eventually, the all-clear signal was given and the train resumed its course.

They arrived in Budapest unscathed five days after leaving Paris. Hungary was a strange place at this time. It was deceptively prosperous, and they felt very lucky to have been expelled from war-torn France and sent back to their home country.

The country was still at peace. They were astounded by the cornucopia of foods on display and available in every store and marketplace. You could buy goose liver pate, salami, produce, the best wines and just about anything else for a trinket anywhere in Budapest.

This was because once the war had begun, Hungary - traditionally one of Europe's breadbaskets - could no longer export anything to Western Europe and to many of its other markets. So there was a glut of agricultural products, to be either consumed by the Hungarians themselves or to be left to rot.

Little did Edith and Jules realize that in the coming years the ravages of war would be incomparably more horrific in Hungary and elsewhere in the East than in Paris. By 1945, Paris had been spared and France had lost a few hundred thousand lives. But Budapest looked like Hiroshima and Hungary had lost a fifth of its population. So in 1940, Edith and Jules were actually jumping from the frying pan into the fire without knowing it.

However, for the time being, before all hell broke loose, Edith and all other Hungarians could gorge themselves on every conceivable type of food for practically nothing.

This was very lucky for me, because at that moment, I was thrashing around inside my amniotic sac.

And so, I was born on April 8, 1941, just a few months after my folks returned to Hungary from Paris. As a result of the nutritional fluke just described, I was a healthy 8-pounder at birth, not the starved war baby you might expect.

This is not to say that my birth was uneventful. As it so happens, Edith went into labor during an allied air raid. My father managed to rush her to the Jewish hospital in Buda, but when they got there it was totally deserted. Not only was there no obstetrician, there was nobody, period. People usually don't like to go to work while bombs are falling.

Edith went into labor, and for twenty four hours she pushed and tried, while Jules was panicking and running around frantically, trying to find help. He finally got a hold of a rural midwife, and he dragged her to the hospital and forced her to help. Thus, both my mother and I survived a dangerous and difficult delivery which, according to some psychologists, may have

shaped my character.

About two years later, in May 1943, Edith completed our family by giving birth to my twin sisters Susan and Elizabeth, under conditions that were far worse yet.

2. 1944. LAKE BALATON, HUNGARY

As the allied bombing of Budapest intensified, my family decided to evacuate the city and go underground somewhere on the shores of Lake Balaton.

On a snowy winter morning, a large group gathered outside our house on Budapest's Hill of Roses, and they began the trek to the lake, about two hundred kilometers from the capital. They would look for an area that was already under Russian control. The group included me, my parents Edith and Jules, my grandparents, my twin sisters Susan and Elizabeth, my aunt Ica (pronounced Itsa) and her fiancé Ferry, some other toddlers, and several Jewish friends traveling as gentiles with false papers. Many years later, I would be astounded to discover the origins of those papers. These people all moved to the South shore of Lake Balaton, where they spent the entire winter and the following spring.

Sometimes my father and I would stroll on the snow-covered beach, and we could hear a distant buzz. I asked my dad what it was, and he pointed towards a neat symmetrical formation of small, glistening, gold-colored objects very high in the clear blue sky, saying, "Those are American airplanes flying to drop their bombs on Budapest."

"Why?" I persisted, inquisitively (I wasn't quite four years old yet). "Are the Americans going to bomb us too?"

"No, Tom," my father reassured me. "The Americans are our friends. They are helping the Russians defeat the Germans. Soon all the Germans will be dead or gone, and we'll be able to go back home."

That winter, Lake Balaton - Europe's second largest - was the location for the war front between the Germans and the Russians, and they fought on the ice.

It is difficult to imagine the horror and the magnitude of the Eastern European winter war of 1941-45. For example, in order to relieve the German siege of Leningrad (which lasted three and a half years and cost three million lives) the Russians built a railroad over frozen Lake Ladoga - a vast, 100-mile long lake to the East of Leningrad (now again St. Petersburg). The winter was apparently so long and so cold that it made sense to build a temporary rail line on top of the frozen lake!

Lake Balaton's location was similarly strategic. While no attempt was made to build a railroad on top of it, as the Russians had done across Lake Ladoga, the winter battles were horrible, as the soldiers fought on the ice of the frozen lake. The Russians attacked by crossing over the ice, including troops, horses, vehicles, weapons, everything. The opposing forces would shell each other while on the ice, causing the death of hundreds of men by drowning in the bloody ice. My family and I moved many times from village to village, running away from the fighting as much as possible. We spent several weeks in the town of Balaton-Lelle, and then Balaton Boglar, and then Karad. For a while we lived in a church sacristy. We all slept on the floor of course, crowded like sardines. There were no amenities, no diapers, and food was scarce.

The area changed hands between Germans and Russians several times, but eventually the Russians prevailed. My grandfather Imre had become fluent in Russian while in captivity in

Siberia during World War One, so he became the translator. My family thought that we had been liberated, not realizing at the time that this would only lead to a new form of servitude. At that time, most Hungarians, not just the Jews, welcomed the Russian liberators with open arms.

My family immediately had to contend with the Russian soldiers stationed in the same house as the one into which we had moved, which they had requisitioned. The Russians fit the stereotype and the description provided by authors like Sandor Marai. They were more primitive than my middle-class Hungarian family. Many of them came from the Asian parts of the Soviet Union. They drank enormously and most were practically illiterate. They were mesmerized by western gadgets like watches and fountain pens - which they took at will. You could see some of them walking around with half a dozen watches around their wrists.

One winter morning my mother had to go barter some of our possessions for a few potatoes. She went on her tireless bike, riding on the wheels= metal rims. The bike=s rubber tires, like anything else valuable, had been confiscated by the red army.

As Edith rode down the snow-covered road, a young Cossack soldier stopped her. He couldn=t have been more than sixteen years old. Very politely and timidly, he demanded that she give him her boots. Using some Russian, some Hungarian and a little signing and pointing, he insisted that he needed the boots more than she did, because the following day he was going to have to go fight the Nazis on the icy lake. He pointed to his own feet, with only sandals on, and looked at Edith=s boots, which he wanted. So, she had no choice but to take them off and hand them over. He thanked her profusely -- at gun point.

My mother returned home carrying a big bag of potatoes on her tireless bike, wearing nothing but socks in the snow.

The Russian soldiers also loved, hugged and were often very kind to children. Here again, stereotype and reality merge. Sometimes one of them would take me on his lap, at a table, as he took his gun apart for cleaning and oiling. He would explain the mechanisms to me, and offer to teach me how to use it. While I accepted the offer eagerly, my parents intervened politely.

When the Russians got drunk - which was practically every day - serious problems could ensue. They would get back from the field already drunk, or starting to get drunk on whatever local *Barack* (Hungarian brandy) or other liquor they got their hands on, and then all hell would break loose. The wild and drunken soldiers would start shooting off their guns randomly in all directions - mostly skywards, but sometimes in more dangerous directions, sometimes wounding or killing one of their own, or a hapless Hungarian civilian. Rapes and attempted rapes were also a chronic threat and occurrence.

My mother and her sister Itsa were very vulnerable. One night, the family was having dinner together at a long table. At the head of the table sat a short stocky Cossack officer. He was in charge and he was drinking heavily. He shouted incessantly and ordered everyone around. After a while he stood up, slapped his boots loudly to demand everyone's attention, and said, "Everybody out, except you and you,≡ - pointing at my mother and my aunt Itsa - two very beautiful women, one in her twenties and the other one only sixteen. Then he turned to my grandfather, sitting right next to him, and barked, "Translate!"

So my grandfather translated the order and everyone obeyed and filed out of the room, except my mother, Itsa and my grandfather.

The Cossack=s face turned beet red and he shouted at my grandfather, "Didn=t you hear

me? I said OUT!≡

Grandfather Imre, with his head down, answered in a low, calm voice, "AI heard you." But he didn't move.

The Russian shouted, "ADon=t you know that I can shoot you and kill you the instant you disobey me?≡

Imre: "AYes, I know.≡

Then the short stocky officer gave the dinner table a loud kick with his boot. Dishes and glasses fell to the floor, and he stomped out of the room and out of the house, red-faced and furious. Such was the courage of my grandfather! He saved my mother and my 16-year old aunt from being raped.

This was not an isolated incident. My grandmother often had to fend off drunken soldiers as well. Once (I was four years old), I saw her physically shoving one of the soldiers out the front door. After she slammed the door shut, I walked up to her and asked, "AGrandma, weren=t you afraid that he was going to shoot you?≡

It is also during that winter by Lake Balaton that my family suffered one of its worst tragedies. Some members of the family have blamed my father for the tragedy which I am about to recount, and they never forgave him.

My father was an inveterate womanizer. Then too, the war probably relaxed everybody's mores. Many men and women lived lives of incredible danger, deprivation and also courage and heroism. Frequent quick and random love affairs were the only solace. To Jules, no woman was off limits, not even my mother's sixteen-year old sister.

Edith's sister Itsa was a pretty, freckled, frizzy brunette with blue eyes -- one could describe her as having that attractive, sexy Eastern European Ashkenazi look. She used to give me baths and dry me and dress me afterwards. I loved the luxury of a warm bath, something rare and requiring the boiling of water in several pots for a long time.

So here was this large group of people that had gone underground during the war, all living in very close quarters. The group included much of my extended family, plus various acquaintances. My father's adulterous affair with my 16-year old aunt was especially disastrous in view of the fact that they we lived together under one roof - my father himself, my mother, her 16-year old sister, and even Itsa's fiancé Ferry. Everyone was aware of the scandal, not just the four people personally affected by it, but my grandparents and others, too.

My father's seduction of his wife's young sister contributed a great deal to the tension in the house. My mother's reaction had been sadness rather than anger. Itsa herself felt guilt and bewilderment. The brief affair had been a one-time seduction in which she was more victim than participant. Her fiancé Ferry was angry, but he was afraid of my father, who was effectively one of the group's patriarchal leaders. My grandparents were both outraged. However, grandfather Imre was a silent, dignified man who did not get into the gutter with people. His response to Jules' misdeed was to shun him.

The only person who had the meanness to get into a scrap when necessary was my grandmother Margit. All her life she had been forceful and outspoken, and she had never backed down from a fight when one was called for. After Jules' seduction of her 16-year old daughter, she had expressed her anger without restraint, calling him all sorts of names, telling him that if it were up to her, he would never again be allowed inside the house, that he deserved to be thrown out into the snow and be killed by the Russians or the Germans, she didn't care.

One bleak winter morning, words were flying again. Grandma Margit was telling Jules again that he was a bastard. He didn't reply much, but young Itsa said, "Oh mom, that doesn't help, you know. What's done is done. Now we all have to try to survive the war."

"You stay out of it, girl," said Margit, "I am not talking to you, I am talking to that son of a bitch who had his way with you."

Itsa began to cry again, as she had done daily for weeks. "I am sorry for what did, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry," she kept repeating, while sobbing.

Jules tried to console her, but her fiancé Ferry told him not to touch her, ever! It looked like blows were going to follow. However, Itsa said to Ferry, "Let's get out of here! I am going to the library in Szekesfehervar. I heard that they are about to burn all their books. Let's go get books and bring them back while there is still time."

"You are crazy," said Ferry, "it's too dangerous. Szekesfehervar is more than twenty kilometers from here. And they are fighting, and what about the land mines?"

"I don't care, I'd rather be dead," Itsa shouted back, "I can't stand it here any longer!" And with that she stomped out the front door, followed by Ferry running after her, and another young couple who also ran out either to try to hold Itsa back, or maybe because they also felt cooped up and hysterical.

The people inside the house saw the four run across the snow-covered field toward the road, Itsa in front, Ferry close behind and the other couple catching up fast.

Suddenly there was an explosion which sounded more like a train collision, followed by horrible screaming and then deadly silence. My father went outside and walked carefully across the field, following exactly in the foursome's footsteps. All the adults understood instantly what had happened. The group had stepped on a land mine buried in the snow. I did not truly understand, but I knew instinctively that something terrible had happened, and I began to cry.

Only years later did my parents describe to me the carnage my dad saw in the snow that day. Itsa had been blown to pieces, probably never realizing what hit her. The other couple died a slower and more painful death. Ferry was the only lucky one. He lost a leg, but survived.

There is one thing about this event which I do remember clearly to this very day: A couple of years later, back home in Budapest, I once barged in on grandmother Margit in her room. She was crying silently. He saw that she was going through family photos and that she had stopped at a picture of Itsa=.

To purchase the book, visit <http://www.europeanamericanpub.com>
