LEAP THROUGH THE CURTAIN

The true story of two Hungarian ballet stars who escaped to freedom

By NORA KOVACH and ISTVAN RABOVSKY
as told to GEORGE MIKES

Preface by SOL HUROK

SECOND PRINTING

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ILLUSTRATED WITH
PHOTOGRAPHS

Young, talented, and pampered by the Communist regimes of both Russia and Hungary, Nora Kovach and Istvan Rabovsky were driven only by their innate love of liberty when, in May of 1953, they seized the opportunity of a performance in East Berlin to escape to the West and freedom. They were escaping not from persecution but from privilege. Though both had been born in modest circumstances, they were stars of the ballet, making more money than government mini[illegible] with a splendid apart-

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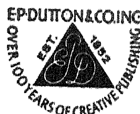

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Nora and Istvan in Esmeralda

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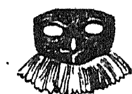

THE STORY OF

NORA KOVACH & ISTVAN RABOVSKY

TOLD BY

George Mikes

Illustrated with Photographs

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY, INC.

New York

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Preface

One day in June, 1953, I was in Nuremberg as American judge of the "Meistersinger" competition—by now a traditional event—organized by the U.S. Army for the three Western Zones of Germany. I was intent on listening to the competitors and making notes when a G.I. came up to the platform and told me I was wanted on the phone. He added that it was personal and urgent.

The telephone call came from the State Department. I was informed that the two Hungarian dancers—Mlle. Nora Kovach and her husband, Istvan Rabovsky—had now arrived in Munich: was I interested in seeing them? I replied that like everybody else I had read in the newspapers of their escape in Berlin and I would very much like to meet them. I was asked by the gentleman at the other end of the line to take a car and drive over to Munich straight away.

I arrived in Munich at 2 A.M. in a State Department car and accompanied by three colonels of the U.S. Army. Mlle. Kovach and M. Rabovsky were immediately brought over to my hotel and I talked to them till four o'clock in the morning. I was very favorably impressed by their personality, charm and intelligence but never having seen them dance, I would do no more at the moment than make some preliminary arrangements with them. As soon as I saw them dance—a few days later—I was glad to offer them a long-term contract and hand over their first dollar check—in fact, the first money they had earned in the Free World.

I think both dancers have extraordinary talent. They were stars in their own country, celebrated in Russia, and they have the talent to become great stars also in the West provided they go on working with that relentless, almost religious zeal and devotion which must be the lot of every great dancer. They have the technique, they have the personality and they will be given the chance.

I certainly do not claim to be infallible. But I was the impresario of Pavlova, Chaliapin and Marian Anderson—just to mention a few; I took the Sadler's Wells Ballet to America and I am taking the Old Vic now. I think I can claim at least that my confidence is a good omen and I have great confidence in Nora Kovach and Istvan Rabovsky.

Good luck to both of you!

And work hard!

Sol Hurok

Author's Introduction

When I was approached and asked to write this book, my instinctive reaction was to decline with thanks. I am not keen on the "as told by" type of literature, nor did I feel that it was up to me to write anybody else's autobiography. Yet, in this case, it was obvious that the alternative was not whether this book should be written by a third person or by the main actors of the narrative themselves, but whether it should be written by a third person or not at all. Having heard the story, I thought it was worth telling. I do not wish to give my detailed reasons for this belief because it would sound like sales talk or even a critical appreciation of my own work. And although rapturous praise of one's own work is a much more common practice than writing other people's autobiographies, I only want to add that I hope the reader will come to share my view or, at least, see my point.

I spent a great deal of time with the Rabovskys in my home, in friends' houses, in parks, country inns and London restaurants. They did the talking and I took notes. They both talked well and comparatively few supplementary questions were needed. Pista (pronounce: Pishtah) is a quietly spoken, very sincere and straightforward man. I think it never occurred to him to be ashamed of certain facts or episodes in his life or to try to conceal certain details. He is nervous—at least he often told me he could not eat—but I was unable

to discover any outward sign of nervousness. He is invariably polite, self-disciplined, calm and quiet. His art is his whole life—and yet he seems to care little for the external signs and trophies of success. He expects great things of himself and the complete absence of false modesty, a lack of the conventional pseudomodest phraseology, give an impression of true humility. "Dancing is a great art"—he seems to profess—"and hard work, constant endeavor and good luck may enable me to become a good dancer. Time will tell. I'll do my best."

While Pista simply gave me information—he told me what he thought I might want to know—Nora told me her story remembering that she was supplying raw material for a book. She related the events more dramatically and relived many of them. Often, when talking of her mother or Vaganova, she became upset and sometimes she cried; on other occasions a funny or happy episode cheered her up and put her in a gay mood for days. She is not only a beautiful girl but also very temperamental and extremely amusing. She has a huge repertoire of saucy stories which she tells well and with great gusto. Wherever she may be, she is the center of attention. She can not only catch but also hold people's attention without any effort. Her gaiety is not play acting: she really enjoys herself. And her radiant spirits are just as infectious as her flashes of stormy, Danubian anger.

On the following pages they both tell of their own childhood experiences. When we reached their later years, I thought Pista told the story of the war and the siege better, while Nora—with her keen sense of the dramatic—was more effective in describing their escape from East Berlin. So I used Pista's story for the war years and the immediate postwar era and Nora's narrative for the subsequent events. I let them speak in the first person singular; that is how I

heard the story myself and, I think, that is the natural way of retelling it. Finally, as Pista holds strong views on the respective merits of Russian and Western ballet, I let him express his views on this subject in the last chapter.

I wish I could claim that I used their own words throughout and I wish I could believe I have succeeded in reflecting their turns of phrase, mannerisms, etc. Such a claim would be false—and indeed nonsense, too, as we always talked Hungarian. The translator of any work is always present in the work itself. But if I have not succeeded in vanishing completely—as would have been desirable—at least I have tried to remain in the background. I can claim at least that this is not my book—it is theirs. My work was entirely journalistic and not literary, in other words, it was chronicling and not creating.

The escape of Nora Kovach and Istvan Rab (as he was then known) created a minor sensation all over the world in the summer of 1953. I feel however that they are much more than two people who happened to be "in the news." Their careers are remarkable; they are amazingly young—and yet they have seen and experienced so much; they saw Russia from the most favorable angle possible—the Soviet Union for them was the Land of Wonderful Ballet and nothing else; they were not persecuted in any way before their escape; indeed, they were the pampered and spoiled children of the Communist regime, and—after all, this is not immaterial either—they are great dancers. They have been described by critics and experts as the "new Pavlova" and the "new Nijinsky." These claims are not exaggerated. Well, I don't think they are exaggerated, but the reader must not accept me as an authority on ballet. A few days ago a friend and colleague of mine asked me in my Club whether it was true that I was writing a book on the two Hungarian ballet dancers. I

admitted the charge. Then he asked me with a sardonic smile:

"And what, if I may ask, do you know about dancing?"

I had to tell him that I knew nothing about dancing. All I could plead in my defense was this:

"But you see, I am not dancing the book; I am only writing it."

GEORGE MIKES

PART I

ISTVAN

PART I: ISTVAN

1. Big Money

I WAS born on March 31, 1930, in Szeged. The town, the second largest in Hungary, is in the southeastern part of the great plain, near to both the Yugoslav and the Rumanian frontiers.

My mother's name is Erzsébet Duda. At the time of my birth she was unmarried. I was given the name Istvan—the Hungarian equivalent of Stephen—so that my name, for the first seven years of my life, was Istvan Duda. I do not know who my father was.

My mother was a domestic servant in Szeged, employed at the time by a colonel of the *gendarmerie*. Having fed and looked after me for a year, my mother then decided to get rid of me, and my subsequent relationship with her was far from happy; I do not blame her for trying to abandon me at that time. She was only seventeen, little more than a child herself: she was a servant and very, very poor.

She succeeded in finding a place for me in a state-owned Institute for Abandoned and Unwanted Children where I was taken just before my first birthday. Some children were kept in the institute; others were sent out to foster parents who were paid very modest fees for their trouble. But poverty was so dire that every single penny counted. I was

among those who were sent to foster parents. My foster parents were gypsies.

Their houses, built of clay and mud, were terribly filthy. At the end of the village there was a well of the wheel type, well known all over Hungary. The bucket was attached to a long rope so that it could be lowered into the water by turning a large wheel; when the bucket was filled the wheel was turned in the opposite direction until the bucket could be reached by hand and the water poured into a can or a trough. I was about three when my grandmother visited me in the gypsy village. She found me at the well. Six or seven older children were playing with me. I was sitting in the bucket and they were turning the wheel round and round. I disappeared from my grandmother's sight. They let the wheel go and I hurtled down the deep shaft towards the water; then they got hold of the wheel: the bucket jerked and shook as they turned the wheel in the opposite direction until I reappeared in the bucket, shrieking with delight. My grandmother, however, did not shriek with delight; she took me from the gypsies, home to her own house.

I was three years old when I left the gypsy village, about which, naturally, I remember nothing. My first memories date from my grandmother's home. My grandmother was the village midwife at Csudabala. To describe Csudabala as a village is something of an overstatement. It was a loose municipal organization of farmsteads, scattered over a vast area. Its population numbered 150. About 15,000 acres of the land belonged to a rich landlord whose name I have forgotten.

My earliest memories are of beatings—though not too harsh and by no means cruel beatings. I often landed myself in trouble because I kept losing my trousers—quite literally losing them and coming home without them. I had

hardly any clothes when I arrived at Csudabala. I think it was my grandfather who improvised a pair of trousers for me which I hated. Even the ragged and filthy peasant boys of the neighborhood looked smart compared with me. I loathed my trousers so much that very often I just walked out of them and ran about stark naked. This explanation may be a kind of forced rationalization. Possibly, all the farm children were in the habit of rushing about naked but the others had the sense to find their trousers again in a bush or on a stone; I kept losing mine.

Another early memory is a delightful one. I remember myself driving or leading huge peaceful peasant oxen, yoked to carts or ploughing the fields.

It was my grandfather who looked after me. He was a Jack-of-all-trades, a veritable village wizard. His main business was drilling wells, building houses (of mud and clay) and repairing watches. But he could—and did—do many other things. My grandmother often had to go away for three or four days at a time or even a whole week. Distances were huge at Csudabala; one had to walk for many hours between the farms; the midwife had to be always ready and babies were often unpunctual. So I saw little of her and, in any case, I shared a house with my grandfather while my grandmother lived in another building not far away. Our small house, consisting of one single room, was also my grandfather's handiwork and he preferred it to the other and bigger building which, indeed, was so distinguished that it was suitable for offering hospitality to the village teacher himself. Whenever officials came to Csudabala—a tax official, a supervisor of the farm schools, a sergeant of the *gendarmerie*, or other notabilities—they were also put up in the other house where my grandmother resided. I remember our own small place quite clearly: its tiny, single room con-

tained the kitchen, too, with a large oven—a kind of pig-iron furnace customary in those parts. There was no flooring whatever in the room, the earth was simply flattened down with heavy poles. The legs of our single bed were sunk into the earth.

I stayed two years with my grandparents and then at the age of five I found myself on the move again. My grandmother became busier and busier and my grandfather, too, had to undertake an increasing number of building jobs which kept him away from the house from dawn to dusk. Our nearest neighbor, who was persuaded to look after me on such days, lived five kilometers—about three miles—away and Hungarian peasants are not born baby sitters.

My grandmother reminded my mother of her duties towards me and insisted that she ought to keep me herself—to such effect that my mother took me away with her to pacify her mother. A few days later she sent me once again to the institute for Abandoned and Unwanted Children and the institute, in turn, gave me out to foster parents. My new foster parents were again gypsies.

I do not remember what my mother was doing at that stage. I think she was no longer in domestic service but I am not sure. But I know that by that time she had had two more children by two different fathers—both unknown to me and to the children themselves.

I was sorry when I had to leave my grandparents. I do not say that I was happy with them. I was neither happy nor unhappy. I was a reserved and silent boy, I took life as it came. I was not even unhappy over being rejected by my mother. She was busy; she had other things to do and other children to look after (not that she looked after them, either); and she was poor. My grandparents, on the other hand were quite well off; indeed, rich by my own standards,

and I was sorry to leave, having got used to the peaceful life with the peaceful peasants and their cows. But I had to leave—no one asked me whether I wanted to stay or go.

The gypsies to whom I now went have remained in my memory as "clean gypsies." Their life must have been a little better organized and on a slightly more civilized level than in my first gypsy village. I became friendly with a bigger boy of about eleven or twelve, who had one great accomplishment: he could roll his eyes up in such a way that the pupils disappeared and only the white of the eyes could be seen. We found this performance very entertaining. He looked like a blind man.

Then he was struck by the possibility of giving up his amateur status. We went into the neighboring township, or large village, of Szikszó; he rolled up his eyes to imitate a blind man and I led him through the streets by one hand holding my cap in the other. Two little beggars, we always succeeded in collecting a few pennies. With these we bought food—just a piece of bread, large or small. I was hungry. From then until I reached the age of eleven, i.e. for about six years—I was always hungry. This is perhaps the dominating impression of my childhood.

I did not stay with the gypsies for long. I was shoved and pushed from one place to the other, from gypsies to peasants, from peasants to other peasants. I stayed a few months at one place. a few weeks at another. For the summer—that was in 1936—I stayed with some peasants in the town of Szikszó, where I had once begged in the streets with my pseudo-blind friend. I was six years old, thin, bony and sickly and forced to do heavy work. At harvesttime I had to get up at three in the morning and carry heavy buckets of water for hours and even days on end. This went on till I fell ill, but nobody paid any attention to me. The peasant

with whom I lived was angry at being deprived of a tolerably good little worker and the others, whether they cared or not, were much too busy at harvesttime to waste much time on me. My condition became worse and worse. Once I woke up from a coma to find my mother standing over me. Obviously someone had got in touch with her. She thought I was going to die and accused the peasant of killing me. He replied that I had never complained. He was telling the truth. I had never uttered a single word of complaint to him or anybody else.

My mother took me up to Budapest where she now lived. She was working in the Stühmer chocolate factory. The doctors told her that the heavy burdens I had carried had caused a hernia and I should have to have an operation. After the operation I slowly recovered in the public ward of a hospital. At last I was well again and to me that meant that I was hungry again. My mother wanted to keep me with her but she was living with a man then, and her husband—I do not really know which of these men was her real husband—was violently opposed to keeping me in Budapest. Practically as soon as I was fit to walk again I was dispatched to new foster parents, this time to the small market town of Gyula.

My new foster parents owned a small grocer's shop on the outskirts of this small peasant town. I was set to work again—carrying logs for the fire, carrying baskets and parcels for shoppers and delivering goods to customers' homes. I slept in the shop itself with a very old woman, who was the grandmother of my mistress. I liked these people and once, after becoming a dancer at the Opera, I visited them. This habit of revisiting people and places became almost an obsession with me. Was I returning to the scene of the crime? Or to the scene of the crimes of some other people? I do

not know. I did not feel guilty; nor did I blame the others. Only, in later years, haunted by my memories, I could not always believe that certain scenes were quite as horrible and squalid as I remembered. Revisiting them hopefully, I invariably found them worse than I suspected. In other cases I revisited these places without any particular purpose. I remembered some of them too well to expect anything but what they were. But I wanted to see them again: to see them; to remember; and be humbled.

In Gyula I started going to school. There I wore a uniform. Not a school uniform, of course—but the repulsively ugly gray uniform of the boys from the institute. My school was very far from the grocer's and I had about a mile and a half to walk. On the way I had to pass a lunatic asylum—and although I never said so to anyone—this was a place of dark horror and terrifying mystery for me. One day an old man with a long, dirty, grayish beard stopped me in the street, a few yards from the asylum.

"Little boy . . ." he said.

I stopped and I can still remember the unspeakable horror of the moment.

"Little boy," the old man asked again quietly, "are you from the institute?"

"Yes, I am," I whispered.

He took out a huge pile of one and two fillèr-pieces—the Hungarian pennies—from his pocket and thrust them into my hand. The money—about two pengös—was a fortune, something like twenty cents.

That was the first time in my life that I had had a really large amount of money of my own. I think the mad beggar was the first man who was truly good to me.

After school, back at the grocer's shop, my younger brother and sister were waiting for me. My mother had managed to

"unite the family" as she was fond of saying which meant keeping her three children under the roof of the same foster parents and at a safe distance from herself. Margit and Jóska —both smaller than I—were, and have always remained, strangers to me. But they were my brother and sister after all so I gave them two thirds of my fortune.

2. A Walk on the Bridge

We spent about six months in the grocer's shop and then we had to leave, largely because of my half-brother Jóska. The little boy had been knocked about in the first years of his life just as much as I, and somewhere in the process he had caught a bad cold which, in turn, infected his kidneys. Jóska was often beaten, sometimes with a stick or a leather strap. But as all his pedagogical efforts proved ineffectual the grocer finally appealed to my mother to take us away.

My mother took us up to Budapest. She had a new husband, a morose and—as we later found out—cruel man, but in those first days he did not object to having us in the house. This was quite decent of him as mother was out of work and he had to earn bread for the whole family. My stepfather had come from Transylvania, the district detached from Hungary after World War I and given to Rumania. Transylvania contained a very large Hungarian minority and a number of these Magyars strongly objected to compulsory military service in the Rumanian army, some on patriotic grounds, while others would not have fancied military service in any army. To whichever group my stepfather may have belonged, he escaped from Rumania to

avoid military service. The Hungarian authorities did not encourage these escapes—they much preferred Hungarians in the Rumanian army than an invasion of poor beggars into Hungary. So people like my stepfather were hunted and persecuted on both sides of the frontier: in Hungary for illegal entry, for not possessing identity papers and for working without a permit, and in Rumania for leaving the country to avoid military service. Although my natural sympathies are always with the persecuted I would not be able to say that the authorities were altogether unreasonable in showing a lack of enthusiasm towards these people. It was not, however, the moral aspect in the attitude of authorities that interested my stepfather. He had crossed the frontier once before, had been caught by the *gendarmes* and deported, or rather simply and unceremoniously put across the Rumanian frontier. This was his second venture and, naturally enough, he was very keen on avoiding any repetition of the incident. Falling into the hands of the Hungarian authorities would have been unpleasant enough; falling into the hands of the Rumanian military would have meant a long prison sentence. Finding himself in this delicate situation he had to be very careful what work to accept—and "accept" is rather an odd word when applied to working conditions in Hungary in the thirties, when it was difficult to find any kind of employment anywhere—with proper identity papers or without. Fortunately, however, my stepfather—I do not remember his name—did find employment. He was engaged in pushing little barrows for old-clothes and scrap-iron dealers all day long and he was paid two pengös per day for his labor. This meant about two dollars a week, and as he managed to make a little extra helping customers to carry heavy loads, his total earnings may have amounted to something like five dollars a week. This meant exceptional abundance for my

mother. Having found such a prosperous man she did not worry at being out of work herself. Indeed, she was able to afford to have her three children back at home. By this time she had a fourth child, too, from her present husband.

The place we lived in was Sárkány-ucca—which means Dragon Street—in one of the slums, although not the worst slums, of Budapest. The worst slums were still ahead of me. Our family of six occupied part of a room in the flat of a shoemaker. That part was, in fact, the smaller part of the room because we shared our accommodation with the shoemaker and his wife and another five or six people. We slept on ragged and filthy mattresses thrown on the floor and even some of these mattresses were occasionally let to other people for use during daytime. We were the "permanent" tenants, the others spent only a few nights or occasionally a week or two in the room. Most of them were Rumanian army deserters, and quite a fair number of the other tenants had equally or even more compelling reasons to avoid any encounter with the authorities. In Hungary everybody, on arrival in new lodgings, had to register with the police, but this was a luxury most of our fellow tenants could not afford.

I went to school again and spent as little time at home as possible. In fact, I could not stay in the room during the daytime even if I wanted to, because—as I have already said—it was sometimes let out for the day to another set of people. I did not like to play in the streets, so when I did not go to school, I accompanied my stepfather on his errands with the scrap-iron merchants. He was a taciturn man who hardly spoke a word to me all day. He drew the cart and I walked next to him. We returned to our room late in the evening. By that time he was usually in a terrible mood. He would quarrel with my mother, and often beat her up in the presence of her children, the landlords and all the tenants. My

mother did not object to the beatings, regarding these I think as a husband's natural right; but she objected to their public character and decided to move heaven and earth to find another place to live where she could at least be beaten in private.

Before she could carry out her plans we found ourselves in a desperate situation. My stepfather had lost his job and we were starving. Nor could we pay our rent and the shoemaker was unlikely to let us stay on credit. So my mother —who was an untutored but extremely gifted woman with a quick mind, vivid imagination and great presence of mind— hit upon an idea which—unrealistic as it was—worked beautifully and led to immediate improvement in the first place and eventually to undreamed of prosperity.

My stepfather, my mother and myself walked up to Lánchid—the famous Chain Bridge—and there we parted company. My father walked up the bridge holding me in his arms. (I was chosen for the role because although I was the eldest, I was also the lightest and looked the thinnest and most miserable.) My father walked up and down the bridge, throwing dark glances at the river and fond glances at me. After a while my mother, playing the role of a casual passer-by called the attention of the police to the ill-clad and obviously desperate man who was apparently intent on committing suicide by throwing himself and—who could tell?—also the child into the Danube. My stepfather and I were taken to the police station and questioned with much sympathy and understanding. My stepfather's position being desperate enough, the detectives did not go into the question of identity papers. They felt pity for me and gave my stepfather ten pengős—about one dollar. They also asked him what his trade was. When he told them he was a carpenter, they started phoning people and within an hour they had obtained

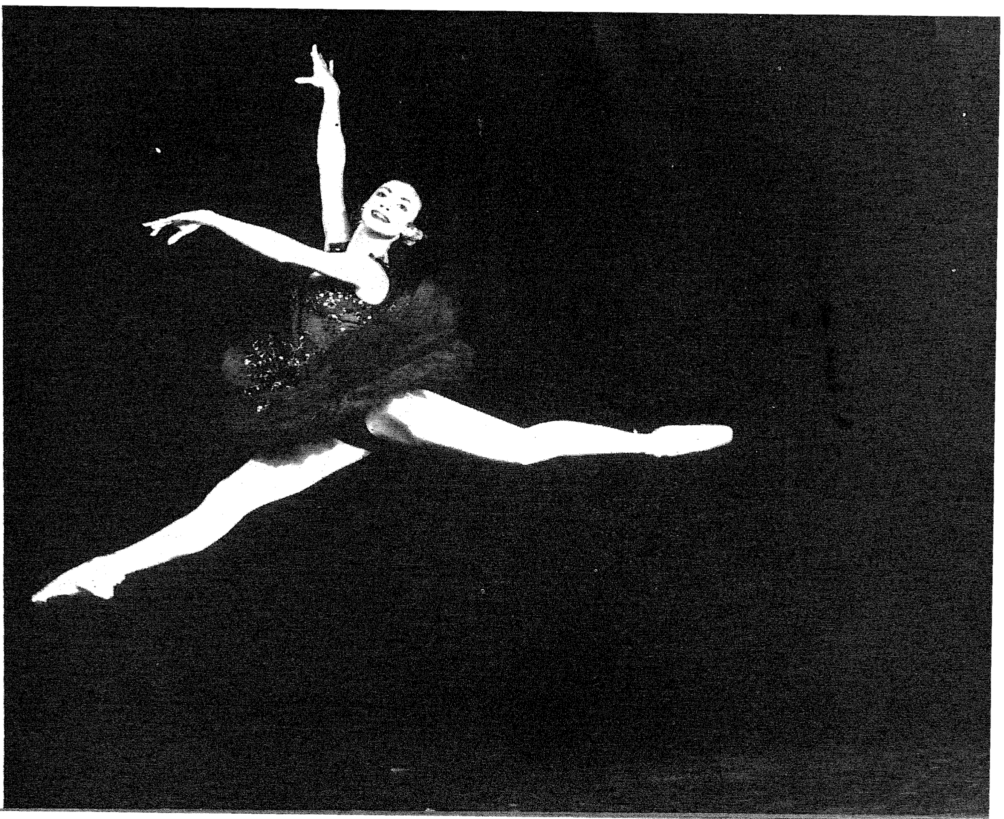
a job for my stepfather not indeed as a carpenter, but as a worker in a paint and dye factory.

That was only the beginning of our good luck. Soon after my stepfather's success in getting this job, my mother found new accommodation for the family. This was not a flat; nor indeed a room; it was a kitchen. A kitchen all to ourselves. No strange people were lying about on the mattresses laid out around the old-fashioned iron stove.

3. In the Land of the Angels

Soon afterwards we had another stroke of luck which led to further improvement in the family fortune although it meant a change for the worse for me. My mother got a whole flat on the third floor of the same house. "Flat" is a somewhat grandiloquent word for the place, which consisted of one room, a kitchen and nothing else. My mother—while we were subtenants at the shoemaker's—had been struck by the financial possibilities of letting sleeping accommodation to people, and her dream had been for some time to make some money as a landlady. Now that she had her own flat she threw herself into the new task with laudable, in fact rather exaggerated, zeal. She took in eighteen people to sleep in our single room and the kitchen.

Now there was no room even for mattresses. Straw, scattered over the floor of both rooms, was pushed into a corner for the daytime. My mother, although she could, of course, only charge people a few pence a night, could make a livelihood this way, and when my stepfather's wages were added to my mother's income, they felt more prosperous



Nora rehearsing

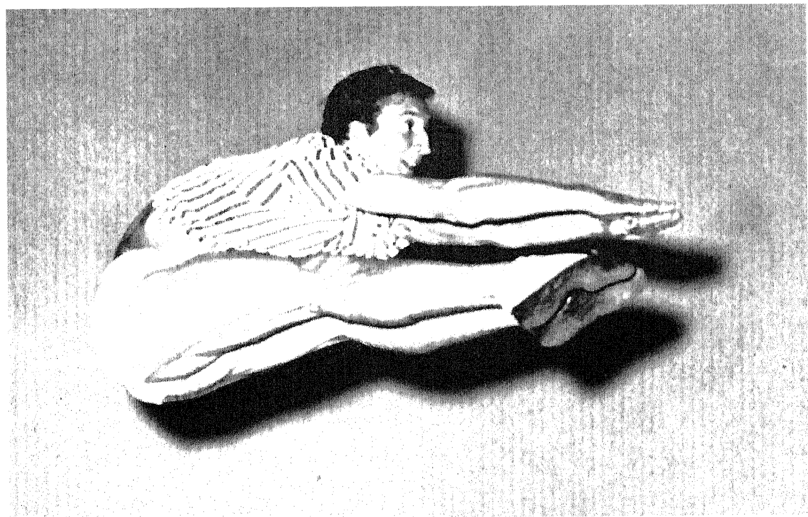


Photo: Serge Lido

Istvan rehearsing

than ever before. But having fifteen to eighteen people in the house kept my mother very busy and she had—if possible—less time for us than in the past. When not at school, I had now to do odd jobs about the house. I had to peel potatoes, take shirts to a woman who took in washings, carry parcels and run all sorts of errands for my mother or her tenants. There was always enough to do with so many people in the house. The tenants themselves were unemployed people who had come from the provinces in the hope of finding work in the capital. A few of them succeeded, whereupon they moved on to slightly more acceptable lodgings; most of them were disappointed in their expectations—these had to leave as soon as they ran out of money.

My mother was much too busy nowadays to feed me and the other two children. We had to get our meals at the so-called Free Kitchen. In Hungary there was no dole. The unemployed were left to their fate which was misery and often suicide. The authorities maintained that the dole encouraged laziness which may be true, but in the late thirties it was not only lazy people who were out of jobs in Hungary—or in many other countries of Europe and America for that matter. To ease the situation to some extent at least, huge cauldrons or boilers were pushed about in various slum districts. These contained soup and boiled sweets—*Mehlspeise* in German, a kind of food which is practically unknown west of the Rhine, cheap and filling—and this was given free to anyone who cared to ask for it. The staff of these Free Kitchens had to keep their eyes open: anybody was to be served but everybody only once. In any case, the food—disgusting and little as it was—could save one from starvation. It certainly saved me. Until I reached the age of thirteen I was a more or less constant customer of the Free Kitchen.

Our district was one of the worst slums of Budapest. It

is called—somewhat inappropriately—Angyalföld, which means "The Land of the Angels" or "Angel-Land." I revisited this old house, too, as I revisited my abode in Sárkány-ucca, where the shoemaker lived. When I went back to this place, the Communists were already in power and I had hoped that these slums had been wiped out, cleared and turned into paradise, or at least habitable houses. But they were not. The regime in power made no difference; the Communist boasts were untrue. Nothing had changed in the Land of the Angels—it was not worse and not better, not dirtier and not cleaner than under Horthy or the Habsburgs. Indeed, it looked as though even the people themselves had not changed: I seemed to rediscover exactly the same faces—some of them in new editions, so to speak—I had seen in my childhood. Our own house—when I saw it again—was in a state of near collapse; the staircase was filthy and the walls —inside and outside—were thick with dirt and grease. The sight of the house was exhilarating to me. "This is the place I've come from," I said to myself. "I have risen high. My dreams have been fulfilled." I breathed deeply and freely. And then the stench chased me away.

When I was speaking about dreams come true, I was not merely employing a cliché. On the other hand I was not speaking the literal truth either. Daydreams had become an essential and integral part of my life. I decided to become great, a leader of men, a benefactor of humanity. But I had only a very vague and, in any case, always changing, notion of what I wanted to become. A pilot; a surgeon; an inventor; but, first of all, I wanted to become a renowned spy, the best and most efficient spy who ever trod this globe. To become a dancer, needless to say, was not among my projects.

I think it was this intense life of fantasy which saved me from collapse, or running away from home or becoming a criminal.

I hated my new home more than any previous one. I should have much preferred to be returned to the Institute for Abandoned and Unwanted Children. The institute had always placed me with foster parents and some of these had been decent, kind people. I might have been lucky. But at home I was immensely and consciously unhappy. I was overworked, always hungry, emaciated and thin as a shadow. I disliked my mother and I disliked my brutal and foul-mouthed stepfather even more. I was terrified of him and in spite of the fact that I was a timid, quiet, withdrawing child, never in anybody's way, I was often beaten and, I knew, always unjustly. It was not because of anything I had done but because my father's temper was frayed; because life was hard and held no pleasures for us; because we were poor.

I had a further reason for hating my home. My mother's children were now five in number. The latest addition was a little girl called Irén and she was the pet. She weighed ten pounds at birth and developed into a fat, heavy child. Whenever I had a moment free, I had to carry Irén to a neighboring empty space and play with her. We had no pram. I had to carry her in my arms and I nearly collapsed under her weight.

This empty space was also on the way to my school, which lay just across it. I rather liked school, simply because while at school I was away from home. I was a fairly good but certainly not an eminent student. I lacked the capacity to excel but I was also gravely handicapped. I never had any pens, pencils, ink, exercise books, school books, rulers or any of the other things needed. My mother did not care whether I went to school or played truant; she never thought of letting me have some time to finish my lessons. When at home, I had to take out Irén, wash the kitchen floor or perform

some similar task not really connected with my intellectual and moral upbringing.

The teacher liked me and I was given half a pint of milk every morning. He helped me whenever he could and spoke to me with a friendliness which I had rarely experienced. The other boys, however, disliked me immensely. They were cheeky, quarrelsome little urchins, most of them juvenile delinquents, the cosh-boys of the next generation. They regarded me as a weakling and a spoil sport. They beat me up frequently but even beating up such a thin weak little boy was only limited fun. They often went over to the neighboring market place at Lehel-tér to steal food. Women's shopping baskets were their main target. If a woman put her basket down for a moment, the boys picked it up and ran like hares. They asked me to take part in these adventures, but I refused.

"You don't mean to tell us you've never stolen anything?" one of the boys asked me ironically.

I had to admit that I had stolen something. In the country when I was still very small, every now and then when hunger got the better of me, I used to steal watermelons from the fields. But I felt no inclination to take part in organized crime so they left me out of their ventures and treated me with increased contempt. I had not one single friend at school or anywhere else.

They also used to make fun of my name. At that time I was called Istvan Duda. Duda means a pipe or horn in Hungarian and it is also the name for a car horn. So the boys hardly ever called me by my name but imitated the horn whenever they addressed me. So I was very pleased when my name was changed.

I was eight years old when my mother left our stepfather or was left by him and married—this time legally—a man

called Rabovsky. I do not really remember Rabovsky and I do not know what happened to him later. He was prepared to adopt all my mother's children and give his name to us. So far, the five children had three different names and my mother, although by no means an oversensitive or prudish woman, did not like this situation. So in the second form of the elementary school I became Istvan Rabovsky. I was very pleased with my new name in spite of its foreign—Polish—sound and I am still fond of it.

In the summer of 1939 I was taken on a summer holiday. It was free for poor children and although my mother did not like the idea of dispensing with my services she agreed to my going. I gained some weight and then carried on my hateful existence for another year.

In 1940 Hungary was still a neutral state. I do not recall that I knew that there was a war on in Europe. I may have heard about it, shrugged my shoulders and gone on my way. It was in 1940 that I first heard the word "shoulder pad." It is an odd word to many; it is also an odd sight to see shoulder pads in large quantity piled up in boxes or baskets. Yet, it was "shoulder pads" which invaded and changed our lives, and eventually made my mother a well-to-do woman.

4. Shoulder Pads

SOMEONE in the house—one of the other tenants, I think, not one of our own lodgers—began to make shoulder pads. The shoulder pads required by tailors and some of the smaller clothes factories were supplied by merchants who specialized in these articles. These merchants, or small manufacturers in their turn, were on the lookout for cheap labor and sub-

contracted the work to women who were happy and eager to earn a few extra pence, and find some work which could be done in their own chosen time. The work itself was ill paid, as was everything else as far as manual labor was concerned, but it was easy and a woman with some skill and practice was able to turn out such an immense amount that it proved quite profitable even at the low rate.

My mother knew the woman tenant who did this work and watched her activities with growing interest. When the woman made inquiries on my mother's behalf the shoulder-pad tycoon agreed to take my mother on. So my mother began to visit his establishment regularly. One day when she arrived near closing time, two little errand boys dashed in carrying large empty boxes. This immediately gave my mother the idea that I might find some employment there too. As she soon proved her value and became one of the best workers attached to the little manufacturing shop, a few weeks later she asked the proprietor whether he could use another errand boy. He did not need "another one" but, as it happened, he had to get rid of one of the boys just at that time and the vacancy was filled by me. So in the mornings I went to school; from there I rushed to the Free Kitchen to get something to eat; and after lunch—if this be the right definition for my meal—I went to the shoulder pad establishment.

The work was extremely heavy and tiring. The shoulder pads were delivered in large boxes—about four feet long and eight inches wide; each box contained a hundred pads. The weight of such a box was quite considerable and I had to carry three or four of them at a time. Often I had too far to go—even out to the suburbs or neighboring small towns—and although I was paid my tramfare and did use the trams, my work naturally involved a great deal of heavy weight-

lifting. But I was quite happy. I liked the long journeys in the trams. I could watch people and indulge in my day-dreaming.

I had to hand over my wages in full to my mother. But I also received tips—everywhere. The tips were tiny sums—just a few pence, hardly ever reaching the princely sum of sixpence—but I had to deliver at so many places every day that they mounted up. Whenever I had a few pence I dashed into a baker's to buy a large piece of dry bread. If I had a little more, I went to the butcher and bought a small piece of sausage. Every now and then—these were red-letter days—I could afford even salami. Whatever I bought I always devoured it right in front of the shop.

In the course of my work I obtained some inside information known only to the trade. I was able to get thread and certain materials cheaper than in the shops. My mother always questioned me closely on every detail of my work and soon found out that in addition to delivering the product I performed another task as well: tailors placed orders with me. These were rather informal business transactions. A man would just tell me:

"I say, my boy, would you tell your boss to send me another two hundred pads."

My mother decided that she would fulfill some of these orders. I know now that my behavior was not up to the highest ethical standards of business life. I was employed by a firm and I passed on the orders which I ought to have given to my firm to a new competitor. But at that time I was not even aware that I was doing something I should not. The tailor's order was fulfilled and he was quite content; my mother made her money with honest and hard work; while my employer went on prospering. My mother's modest beginnings bore unexpected fruit. Her business grew so

rapidly that within a few months she kept twenty-seven women employed. She also had two full-time agents who explored the various tailors and tailoring firms in Budapest, showing samples of her work and offering her wares at a cheaper price than that of her competitors. Soon I, too, left my original employer and joined my mother's firm. I received no wages but as I had to hand over my earnings to her in any case, that made no difference whatever. I could still keep the tips, and as my mother's business was doing better than that of my former boss and I had more parcels to deliver, I also received more tips and I was satisfied. Yet my mother's unexpected and suddenly achieved prosperity—and I am no longer using the word in inverted commas or with an ironical undertone, she really was quite comfortably off by now—meant, in one way, some worsening of my situation. She was so busy that she stopped cooking at home. She had all her meals in a neighboring guesthouse or café. Not that I myself had had my meals at home even before this; but at least as long as some kind of household was in existence, I could get hold of an occasional piece of bread and lard or a mouthful of plum jam.

This was the pattern of my life in the spring of 1941. Hungary at the time was involved in a skirmish with Yugoslavia. The Hungarians signed an "eternal friendship pact" with the Yugoslavs and broke it—at German orders—a few weeks later. Count Teleki, the Prime Minister, committed suicide in protest against this flagrant breach of faith and I, too, may have heard something about these events. But I was not even remotely interested. War was still far ahead and I cannot even say that I pondered much on the possibilities of war and peace. The shoulder-pad business was flourishing, and I was more prosperous than ever before. In the morning I went to school. While I was away my mother

packed the parcels for delivery and at about 2 P.M. I set out on my errands. I was so well off that for the first time in my life I could afford to go to the pictures. Or rather to see the same picture several times. It was the first film I ever saw and it changed the course of my life in a rather indirect way.

The picture was one of Fred Astaire's. The art of Fred Astaire amused me rather than impressed me. The idea of becoming a dancer never entered my mind even then—but I liked watching him and was amused, amazed and fascinated. (I should like to add here that even today, after quite a few years, I have still the highest possible opinion of Mr. Fred Astaire whom I regard as one of the memorable dancers of the world.)

At school I was always reserved and timid, avoiding all contacts with the other boys, but my new experience warmed my heart to such an extent that I became more talkative and friendly. They were much more interested in Westerns and gangster films but they were rather amused one day when I performed a step dance for their entertainment. I had never tried it before and I didn't mean to do more than try to imitate Fred Astaire for the benefit of my schoolmates. I cannot say that they were wildly amused. While I was dancing the teacher passed through the corridor where this performance was being held. He stopped behind me; I went on dancing. When I became aware of him I stopped and stared at him motionless. He eyed me and asked me to follow him; but at the end of the corridor he stopped and spoke only these few words:

"Ask your mother to come in and see me."

I was terrified. After all, dancing in the corridor was no major crime—particularly in a school where a fair number of the pupils were juvenile delinquents. Yet, he must have

taken a very strict view of my action if he wanted to see my mother. I had little doubt that my mother would like the whole affair even less. She was too busy, she took no interest in my schooling and did not really care whether I was good or bad at school, whether I passed or failed. But wasting her time was quite a different proposition. Yet, I clung to my faith in my teacher and hoped he would not be too harsh on me as I was one of his favorites. Geography was his hobby and it was a subject that interested me. One day he had told us that a certain geographical matter was of extreme importance and we all had to learn two or three pages in our geography books by heart. I do not remember how I could find the time; still less do I remember how I got hold of a geography book. But I do remember that the lesson in question was a descriptive list of the mountains on the northwestern borders of Hungary. ("Hungary" at school meant pre-World War I Hungary. Our schools regarded the "foreign occupation" of these parts as a temporary matter.) I could recite the names of the mountains on the northwest frontier without a single hitch and I can recite them even today. Wake me up suddenly from a deep slumber and I shall recite for you the mountains on the northwestern frontier of pre-1918 Hungary. This is a notable feat and my teacher was duly impressed and always treated me with understanding and care. So now I spent long and anxious hours in calculating the chances of escaping lightly and pondering over the probable consequences of my misdeed. But I could not have foreseen what really was in store.

The teacher informed my mother that I seemed to show some extraordinary talent for dancing. My mother was impressed, because she held teachers in high respect, but did not quite know what to say; she did not even know whether to be pleased or whether she should be annoyed and tell the

teacher that she was sorry and she would see to it that I should mend my ways. But more was to come before she could make any reply. The teacher suggested that I should be sent to the Opera and apply to be admitted as a ballet student, adding that his younger sister was a member of the *corps de ballet* in the Opera and he himself had a modest knowledge of the art of dancing. He could not tell my mother more than that I might have a chance, and that it would be a good thing for me if I got in. He explained that I could earn more money as a member of the *corps de ballet* than in any other occupation I could hope to enter. My mother was quite pleased and flattered. The teacher asked her whether she had any objection to his writing to the Opera, to which my mother replied that she had no objection whatever and returned home to her shoulder pads. One of her two representatives—who canvassed the town for her—was an ex-dancer. Not a ballet dancer, but the type who is engaged in big international hotels to dance with rich ladies who are prepared to sacrifice a modest sum in order to have a slim, good-looking young man as partner instead of a short, stout husband. The ex-dancer very emphatically reassured my mother that his was a magnificent profession; should I succeed, even moderately, my future would be secured. He had always boasted of his own resounding international successes and my mother saw no contradiction between the glittering prizes of the profession and the fact that a successful member of it had landed up as an agent for shoulder pads. She was electrified and more interested in my fate than she had ever been.

My teacher sent in an application and received a reply by return of post. At that time there were about 200-250 girl applicants every year and about four or five boys. So the ballet school was eager to see every boy who betrayed even

the faintest interest in dancing. The letter written on the impressive note paper of the Ballet School of the Royal Hungarian Opera instructed me to report one morning in June, 1941, for the entrance examination.

I was very excited by this letter but not because it was to decide my future as a dancer. About my artistic prospects I cared nothing, although I was glad to have a glimmer of hope of getting out of the treadmill of my present life. Yet I was uneasy, even worried, for the simple reason that I had no clothes to wear. I was clad in filthy rags; I had never had a decent suit, let alone a new one, in my whole life. In summer I went barefoot, as all boys of my class did. One did not wear shoes in the summer, it was just not done. I simply could not present myself at the Opera as I was. Luckily, my mother was also aware of this and she was still very keen on the idea.

I told her that I had seen a white Bocskay suit and the dream of my life was to possess such a suit. This Bocskay suit consisted of white shorts and a white jacket with rather quixotic Hungarian trimming around the buttons in the middle. That was about the first request I had made to my mother for a long time and to my surprise and delight she immediately agreed. She agreed that I must have a decent suit to go to the Opera even if they rejected me. To my great satisfaction she added that I deserved the suit quite apart from the Opera, too, because but for me she would not have her prosperous manufacturing undertaking. I had provided all the connections for cheap material and I had brought the first customers.

"Tomorrow we'll go out and buy the Bocskay suit for you," she said.

But the next day my mother was still taking about "tomorrow." My mother had a lot of money then but the suit

was more expensive than she thought. She was also spending a great deal on entertainment. "Entertainment" is a weak and colorless translation of the Hungarian verb *"mulatni."* The activity defined by that word is something extraordinary and typically Hungarian. You go to a pub, restaurant or inn, order wine from the waiter and your favorite tunes from the gypsies; you sing folk songs, sad or gay, and the gypsy violinist plays softly into your ear while his orchestra accompanies him from a corner of the room; people join in at your invitation and help themselves to your wine—and the more you have to drink, the more generous you become. In the end you pay a huge bill, give handsome tips to waiters and gypsies—often you have to stick your notes on the forehead of the cymbal player—you also pay for the glasses broken by mistake and smashed in merriment, just to increase the gaiety of the night. By the time you go or are taken to bed—in the small or not so small hours in the morning—your head is heavier and your pocket very much lighter than on the previous evening. *"Mulatni"*—squandering money on wine and gypsies—was one of the great passions of my mother and the more money she made the more she spent. I must add in her favor that by the time she managed to ruin herself completely once again, she had no regrets, there was no self-pity. She never looked into the future; but she never looked back either.

Still, she kept her word in a fashion. She had a black two-piece suit, made of good material, and that was recut for me by a tailor client of hers and quite a respectable suit made from it. She took me to buy socks, handkerchiefs and a pair of shoes. By the time the date of the entrance examination was near, I felt that I would cut quite an acceptable figure. That had been my only worry; otherwise I wasn't excited at all. I did not realize what this whole fuss was about. I had never been in a theater, I did not know what the word "opera" or

"Opera house" meant and indeed I had no idea where the building was.

A few days before the examination, I felt that it was high time to make some inquiries. I was delivering shoulder pads along with the other messenger boy employed by my mother.

"Look here," I said, "have you any idea where the Opera is?"

"The Opera?" he said. "Yes, I know."

We were close to it and he led me a few minutes' walk up the Andrássy-ut till we came to a vast and impressive building. I looked at the terrifying façade, at the vast columns and pillars and the great steps which so obviously led into a different world.

I looked at the building for a long time. I could not say a word. All I felt was that I had nothing to do with whatever might be behind those heavy oak and iron doors.

"Don't tell me you're going to see an opera," said my friend.

"Oh no," I replied. "I've just received a letter from the Director . . ."

"What? You? A letter!"

"Yes, I may become a dancer in this place."

My friend burst out laughing. Whatever he wanted to say in reply remained unsaid because he could not utter a word. I can still hear his mocking laughter. Neither as a reaction to my statement nor as a reflection on my abilities did it make any impression on me. But simply as laughter it was and has remained unforgettable. I had never heard anyone laugh quite so sardonically.

* * *

The day before the entrance examination was due, my mother's representative—the former dancer—was cooking goulash on our kitchen stove. He was talking to me about his past glories and the beauties of dancing. He started showing me a few steps and was waltzing very prettily round the kitchen when he accidentally knocked over the boiling goulash. My left foot was splashed and burned. I fainted. When I came to myself I looked at my foot: it was a mass of burned, red flesh. I had not uttered a sound, I did not complain and did not cry.

"Can you walk?" my mother asked me.

I shook my head.

"Can you stand up?"

I shook my head again.

"Good heavens," she exclaimed, "then you won't be able to go to the Opera tomorrow."

"Oh, yes, I will," I replied.

PART II: NORA

1. My First Flight

SATORALJAUJHELY—Ujhely for short—is a medium-sized town in the northeastern corner of Hungary, not far from the famous wine-producing district of Tokay. When I say "medium-sized" I speak by Hungarian standards; by British or American standards it probably would not often achieve the distinction of being put on any map showing the whole country. But whatever Ujhely's place may be in the world, in my own eyes it was a metropolis; more than a dream city: it was, for me, *the* city. I was born there but when about two weeks old I was taken to the village of Károlyfalva.

Our part of the world is one of those racial kaleidoscopes, not infrequent in Central Europe. Ujhely was in Hungary and it was a predominantly Hungarian town; the surrounding district, however, was mixed. It lay in the immediate neighborhood of the Czechoslovak frontier and there were many Slovak villages around us; one did not have to go far to find Ruthenian villages; and, of course, Hungarian villages were even more frequent. Károlyfalva itself was a German village, a Swabian village, to be exact, as the German minority in Hungary—mostly to be found in Transdanubia including

Buda and its neighborhood—consisted mainly of Swabians.

My mother was a teacher in the tiny school at Károlyfalva and my father had a small post in the local Treasury Office in Ujhely. He got up early every morning and rode into town on his bicycle equipped with a little auxiliary motor.

My mother was busy all day long and I was looked after by Mari, a young, charming and good-hearted Slovak girl. I loved Mari and Mari loved me. She wore—according to Slovak habit—about a hundred skirts, all of different colors and my earliest—seemingly unachievable and, in fact, unachieved—ambition was to wear skirts like Mari.

She called me in the morning, often with the words:

"What do I have for little Nory?"

She had a little doll for little Nory. After her unending daily work she had the patience to sit down and make a doll for me which she carved out of wood herself and dressed up in multicolored and manifold skirts—cut from various pieces of rag.

I was about two when my attention was attracted to the school. I was glad that my mother was a teacher. Hers was a position of importance. All the children loved her and looked up to her. I knew that to be the teacher's daughter was a position of social eminence in Károlyfalva and yet I was much more impressed by the little peasant children than by my mother. My mother was my mother after all, kind and loving, but familiar; the children came from remote homes, were big and sometimes sad and all brought dry black bread and a bottle of water with them for their lunch. My family was comparatively well off but for years I would not touch any other food in the morning but a piece of black bread and water—drunk from my own little bottle which I carried about in my pocket.

From my earliest days I instinctively imitated the world

around me. I know that is exactly what all other children do; but I think I was more conscious of what I was doing than most and was from the start fascinated by the most minute details.

On Sunday we went to church. The first row was reserved for the male teacher who was unmarried and for my mother, father and myself. Behind us was the village. All the girls and women wore black or colored kerchiefs round their heads. Walking in their Sunday best, they held the black prayer book in front of them in both hands; on the book lay a neatly folded white handkerchief and on this a rosary. They moved along with a slow, swaying motion, their mouths opening and closing—as though they were murmuring a prayer. I always walked to church in the same way, with the same motions, opening and closing my mouth in humble and imitation prayer and carrying my book, handkerchief and rosary in the accepted fashion.

It was about that time (at the age of two) that I started going to school. My mother permitted me to sit in her class and listen in silence. Having started attending school so early and listening intently to what was going on, I could not help learning the whole curriculum before entering school as a pupil myself. That was all to the good as I was rather lazy.

My primary interest, however, was not the school but the stage. There was a popular theatrical weekly in Hungary, called *Szinhazi Elet*—Theater Life—and I am sure the title of this magazine was among the first ten words I learned to utter. I used to sit in peace and silence for hours engrossed in the pictures of actors and actresses. I was stage-struck long before I saw a stage.

Then something happened in our tranquil and uneventful world which changed our life and resulted in my first flight.

I was six years old then, in 1937. It was on a hot June day,

June 29, to be exact, the day known as "Peter and Paul," the customary thanksgiving day for a good harvest. This thanksgiving is more often riotous than pious; the young peasant lads get roaring drunk. This is part and parcel of the festive mood but on the day in question the festivities got out of hand. Not only did the lads get more drunk than usual but the whole uproar took on a political color and became menacing and ugly. As I have said, my village was a Swabian village and owing to the Nazi successes the Teutonic blood of our Swabians began to stir. They felt oppressed and began to eye their Magyar masters, whom they regarded as their inferiors, with deep contempt. It was quite natural in that mood that my family—as one of the leading intellectual ones of the village and symbolic of haughty Magyar oppression over the peaceful and deserving Swabians—became a target of their wrath.

I was in bed and already asleep when I was wakened by an approaching roar. The noise drew nearer and nearer and grew louder and louder and I was terrified. I called out for my mother who came rushing into the room. The next moment a huge stone crashed through the nursery window followed immediately by a second, larger one. The first fell on my bed —about three inches away from my right foot—and the second barely missed my mother's head. Her shrieks of horror brought my father dashing into the room. Seeing what had happened, he turned on his heel and rushed out. My mother, not daring to leave me, shrieked and sobbed until my father came back. He was carrying his gun which terrified my mother even more. She knew that he was just about to run after the ruffians, shoot at them, kill a few and, perhaps, be killed himself.

I still remember the unspeakable horror of that night. Fear—deep, shattering fear making you tremble and sweat

and overpowering you to such an extent that you do not even cry out—makes a lifelong impression on a child. I felt the same fear once or twice again, in later years: during the most savage and destructive bombing attacks on Budapest. I rarely have nightmares; but when I have, I do not dream of these attacks but of the huge stones smashing our windows, just missing my foot and my mother's head, and also of my father carrying the gun and trying to run into the dangers of the night, his face flushed and a strange, terrible expression in his glowing eyes.

Next day we packed our things and moved to Ujhely.

2. The Artists' Entrance

My mother's teaching career came to an end at Ujhely and I was sent to a convent school. I hated the school. I felt I was in jail.

This period is significant for three outstanding events. Mari left; Muki arrived, and my acting and dancing career began in earnest.

Mari, the charming Slovak maid, left us in the last few months we spent in the village and the exciting circumstances of her departure should perhaps have been related in the last chapter.

There was a narrow-gauge railway connecting Károlyfalva and Ujhely and whenever we wanted to go to town we had to use the "little train" as it was usually called. Like everybody else Mari also used the little train and the little train had a guard, like all the other trains in the world. These facts are the basic elements of the story. Mari was pretty, shy, and had

large, blue eyes. The dashing young guard had a saucy mustache and helped her on and off the train with exemplary courtesy and growing tenderness. The admiration developed into friendship and the friendship into a closer relationship. Mari permitted the guard to visit her in our house although she knew that so doing she was running grave danger. My mother—as I, too, was to learn in latter years at my own expense—was extremely strict in questions of behavior and my father felt responsible for the young Slovak girl living in our house and entrusted to our care. So the guard was warned by Mari to take every possible precaution while climbing into her room through the window, to make no noise whatever, even to stop breathing. Whether he stopped breathing or not, he did something else. To get into Mari's room he had to climb through a very narrow window and when he was halfway through with his legs still sticking out—he inadvertently and most unfortunately pushed the bell button with his boot. The bell went off at 9:30 p.m.—in other words in the middle of the night as far as Károlyfalva was concerned. My father leaped out of bed and ran out armed with his inevitable gun. In Mari's room he found the trembling maid and the greatly embarrassed guard. Mari's employment was abruptly terminated then and there, to my greatest sorrow; but her virtue was saved and that was much more important. Mari and the guard got married a few months later and as a respectable married couple they visited us at Ujhely many times and were received with fond affection. (They lived together happily ever after).

The arrival of Muki is a childish episode but it is of some importance in my life and Muki, years later, played a small political part too, in that he was taken and examined by the Communist Security Police. I, for one, feel certain that he was questioned too, and acquitted himself with flying colors.

He was eventually released. I shall have to describe my parting with Muki and his adventure with the police later; at the moment I am speaking of our first encounter.

Muki is a large teddy bear of great charm and beauty. When I first saw him he was sitting in the window of a toyshop at Ujhely. He had large, round, pink soles, and a blue ribbon and a bell in his neck. I fell in love with that bear and probably only a psychoanalyst—and a very skillful one at that—could explain the immediate and irresistible effect the bear had on me. I christened him Muki because that was the name of another bear, popular hero of a series of Hungarian children's stories. I spent long hours in front of the shop not only looking at Muki but also talking to him.

Muki cost about 30 pengös—about three dollars—quite a little fortune and certainly an immense amount for a toy, in our circumstances. My father saw my longing and warned me—as gently as he could—that I could not count on getting Muki as a Christmas present. He explained that now that my mother had stopped working, we were less well off than before and Muki's price was prohibitive. I knew it was. He added that I would get another and smaller bear for Christmas. But I did not want another and a smaller bear. I wanted Muki, although I quite understood that I could not have Muki. My parents were almost taken aback by my unusually wise understanding and struck by my obviously mad desire for Muki, so they bought it for Christmas. Our family custom was that I had to search for my Christmas presents after they had been hidden all over the room lit only by the candles on the Christmas tree. I found Muki hidden under an armchair—his two rosy soles sticking out. Maybe I am simply childish; maybe the psychoanalyst—referred to above—would have some further work to do exploring the depths of my psyche. In any case, the fact

remains that Muki became my only intimate friend until the day of our escape. More intimate than my mother and, in later years, more intimate than my husband. Muki always slept in my bed, and even after my marriage to Pista, Muki and I shared a bedroom while Pista and I did not for some time. And I told Muki all my secrets—literally told him at great length and in clear language—although I never expected him to reply or give advice. All this may be—indeed, I know it is—childish and silly; yet, to dismiss it as such and not to mention it would be keeping silent about something important. Silly and childish the attitude may have been; but this attitude was for long part of me and I wish I knew clearly whom and what Muki really represented.

There was nothing unusual about the beginning of my acting—or as it later turned out to be—my dancing career. I took part in little shows, just as other children did and do. Once, I remember, there was a matinée for orphaned children and I was taught a song which I was to sing to them. I presume the idea was to cheer the children up, yet the song—probably specially written for the occasion by a local celebrity—dealt with the terrible lot of orphans and I told them—the irony of it!—how sad and tragic it was not to have parents. The rehearsals went off all right but the performance itself is still one of my haunting memories. I still see the little round heads in the first rows. They were all munching chocolate. When I got about halfway through my song the children started sniffing and coughing and blowing their noses and one or two even started to weep aloud. Hearing them weep, I broke down completely, ran off stage and sobbed for a long time before my mother could console me, or at least calm me down. The stupidity in the choice of song did not strike me, of course, I was much too young for that. Yet the event made a lasting impression on

me. In the first place I did not understand why it was that I wanted to give pleasure and joy but in the end upset my audience and myself instead. Was this the essence of art? Or a danger inherent in it?—I did not word these questions so clearly and in so many words, but there they were at the bottom of my mind growing into a big question mark. Secondly, I think it was then and there, that I developed an incurable mother complex. From that day the greatest threat, the darkest tragedy looming on the horizon, was the possibility that I, too, might one day become an orphan.

On another occasion I was singing Hungarian folk songs and dancing *csárdás* in a garden restaurant. Lili Neményi, a well-known opera singer, was there and I could not resist rushing up to her and asking her whether she liked my performance. I had to have the admiration of the expert. She stroked my face and I refused to wash that bit for days. On another occasion some friends—a lawyer and his wife—who saw me dance told my mother that I seemed to have some talent. Why not take me up to the Opera and try my luck? My mother replied that we were soon traveling to Budapest where she might call at the office of the Opera and make inquiries. I happened to hear this conversation and I knew that my fate was sealed.

My mother never took the scheme seriously, although she mentioned it every now and then. Not only did she have no hope that I might be accepted in the ballet school—she did not want me to be accepted. She wanted me to become a teacher or a pianist but not a dancer. Yet she needed no reminding: when we visited Budapest a few weeks later she went with my father and myself into the office of the Opera and made inquiries. A lady secretary looked at me, remarked that I was terribly thin, took my name and address and said that we should hear from them.

My parents thought no more of that visit. I thought of nothing else but never expected to hear from them again. Yet the letter came, and it came on June 13, my birthday. I was instructed to appear in the Opera next day—about 2 p.m. My father brought the letter home—it had come to his office —and handed it over in jocular fashion, but it never entered his mind that I really meant to travel up to Budapest. When my desire became clear, he told me briefly and grimly, with all his authority, that the journey was absolutely out of the question. First of all, it would be in vain, because they would not take me. There were hundreds of little girls trying to pass each year and very few were chosen. Secondly, what if most unexpectedly and, frankly speaking, quite unfortunately, I were chosen? Did I expect him to give up his job at Ujhely? To ask the Treasury to send him to Budapest? And did I expect the Treasury to do so just because his little daughter was desirous of learning to jump about in ballet shoes? His own answer was "no" and a very final "no" at that.

When I heard this, I started crying. I think it was about noon that I started crying. I went on—bitterly and uninterruptedly—till the early hours of the morning. In bed I lay sobbing on Muki's bosom. It was about three o'clock in the morning when my father came into my room and told me that as, in any case, there was no chance whatever that I should pass the entrance examination, he agreed to our traveling to Budapest, but only because he did not want utterly to spoil my birthday. My mother and I took the first train in the morning and appeared in the Opera at the appointed time.

We were interviewed and then we had to march about in a big room and perform rhythmical movements. There were musical tests, too. While the examination was going on my mother sat in an anteroom. She knew the dangers inherent

in my possible success. Even if I were taken my father would still have to stay in Ujhely and consequently the choice before her was: to come with me to Budapest and thus disrupt our family life, or to stay at home and break my heart by refusing to allow me to study. (To be sent to Budapest without my mother was a possibility which never crossed her mind.) So there she sat and prayed humbly to God that I should be rejected.

While waiting for the result my mother walked up to Mlle. Karola Szalay, the famous *prima ballerina*, who was a member of the jury.

"Excuse me, my dear," my mother said in nice provincial fashion, "I know this is a silly question . . . there were too many little girls here. . . .But can you confirm that my little daughter—this one, here—has been rejected?"

"Oh, that little dark minx?"—Mlle. Szalay laughed. "Of course she has been taken."

There were about 250 candidates and fourteen were chosen. I was not overwhelmed or even surprised. Not because I was certain of being taken. But from the arrival of that letter until the present moment everything had gone at such breath-taking speed that I had no time left for contemplation and emotions. It was the first time that I had heard myself described as "that little dark minx." I heard this description thousands of times later.

About a month later my father was officially transferred by the Treasury to Budapest and we took a large room in Lázár-ucca—Lazarus Street—behind the opera house, about a hundred steps from the artists' entrance.

3. The Saracen's Head

In the mornings we practiced with our ballet mistress whom we called Madame Titi. In the afternoon we had ordinary school lessons in the private school of the Opera and in the evenings we often acted as extras.

It was this stage activity which overwhelmed me. I could not get over the fact that I was treading on the sacred stage of the opera house in the presence of a huge, real audience. For the first few months I was in a highly emotional state and my nervous tension landed me in trouble. Soon enough my record became so bad that after my latest—and worst—misdemeanor, Mr. Oláh, the all powerful director, stage designer and kindly dictator, insisted on my dismissal.

One evening the ballet school pupils had to appear in *Coppelia* as the crowd of urchins who run after Coppelius mocking him and sneering at him. Whereupon Coppelius turns round, threatens us angrily with his umbrella and we all rush out laughing and shrieking. The part of Coppelius was played by M. Harangozó, the chief choreographer of the Opera. I was among the crowd on the stage and I found the whole scene so enthralling that I forgot all about my own part. I just stood there with my mouth open, watching the dance. When all the children rushed out screaming through the wings there I was still gaping at M. Harangozó motionless and with my eyes wide open. He did not know what to do. The performance was held up for a second or two—an eternity for the embarrassed M. Harangozó, who hit me with his umbrella—not too hard but hard enough to bring me to my senses. I rushed out after the others, shrieking perhaps a shade louder than instructed. I was followed by a wave of

loud and delighted laughter: the audience had noticed by now that I had simply refused to leave the stage.

I was gently and kindly warned that I must pay greater attention to my instructions. It is a little embarrassing for me to describe this in detail even after such a long time.

A new Passion Play, or rather Passion Opera, was being performed—if I remember correctly—for the first time. In one of the scenes, Jesus walks across the stage accompanied by a pious crowd and a number of real camels in solemn procession. We were supposed to be a group of small children, standing about and as soon as Jesus reached us we were to kneel down. I was always excited on the stage but today even more than usual; I was getting a deeply religious education at home and I think I could not have been more excited had I been a real member of the original crowd in the presence of Christ. The stage procession passed in front of our eyes and at last Jesus appeared. At that moment I committed an unexpected but flagrant breach of etiquette more characteristic of babies under three than future ballerinas on the stage of the Opera. The audience did not see the result of my deep, genuine and pious emotions but all the singers did and one or two of them could not help giggling. It was at this moment that we had to kneel down and one of my colleagues—another little girl of eight—refused to kneel where I had committed my unfortunate misdemeanor. So she remained standing.

"Kneel down," I hissed.

"I certainly shan't," she whispered back. "You pig."

We changed places quickly and I had no choice but to kneel down where no one else wanted to kneel. These happenings were only reported to M. Gusztáv Oláh who laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "It will be a good lesson for the girl," he said and the subject was closed for the time being. For the time being only, because M. Oláh

unfortunately remembered the scene too well as I was to find out about six weeks later.

One of Mozart's operas was being performed and once again I was one of the crowd. This time I was a little Saracen child. About two dozen of us were painted pitch black with a huge red mouth. M. Oláh's *décor* was even more beautiful than usual—he was a man of outstanding talent in more ways than one—and the dominating color was white. I was standing in the wings watching the performance and listening to the singing. I moved nearer and nearer to the singers and M. Oláh, who was watching the performance from one of the boxes, suddenly noticed to his great horror that a small black head was showing from behind the wings, a head only followed by the rest of the small Saracen. There she stood, under the shining white *décor*, obviously in raptures, her mouth half-open. Someone pulled me back.

Two minutes later M. Oláh was backstage. Of course, he could not recognize me. All the Saracens looked alike.

"Who was the idiot who walked out on the stage?" he thundered.

There was deadly silence and I knew my friends would not give me away. But suddenly I seemed to hear my mother's voice. She had brought me up on very strict principals and I knew what my duty was. I hesitated a few seconds and then stepped forward with trembling knees.

"Oh, you. You again," said M. Oláh. He turned and walked quickly away. His remarks were ominously brief, his comment much too restrained for my liking.

M. Oláh went straight to Madame Titi and ordered my immediate dismissal. Strictly speaking this was not within his sphere of authority, but M. Oláh was virtually omnipotent and no one ever dared to contradict him. Deeply outraged, he recalled the incident in the Passion Play and

declared in a stentorian voice that he was not going to have all his productions ruined by one stupid little ballet pupil. Madame Titi and also M. Nádassy, who took the more advanced class and who had already noticed me, disputed M. Oláh's decision. Madame Titi declared that I was her ablest pupil. Mr. Oláh replied that he did not care; even if I was a genius I had to go because he had had too much trouble with me. But Madame Titi and M. Nádassy stood firm and finally I was let off with a very serious and absolutely final warning. My father, too, was sent for and the warning repeated to him. I really could not blame him for not being delighted by the prospect. He had left Ujhely and moved heaven and earth to be posted to Budapest to make my studies possible. And now, after a short and inglorious term, I was in danger of being kicked out of the Opera thanks to my own inattention, negligence and lack of concentration. At home I was smacked hard—perhaps harder than ever before or after. But nothing helped. Many further incidents occurred and I received innumerable further last warnings.

My first examination came at the end of the year and I knew that the Director of the Opera as well as M. Oláh would be present with a number of other dignitaries. I practiced my steps and movements practically day and night and my only aim was to impress M. Oláh. I kept watching him during the examination but, to my greatest dismay, he did not seem to notice me at all.

The examination was over, we had heard the closing speeches and the exhortation to further hard work, and were about to leave the room when M. Oláh walked up to me.

"You are a cheeky little girl," he said. "But you have talent."

And he gave me ten pengös—about one dollar.

The examination itself did not mean much for me. A few

weeks before it M. Nádassy, master of the advanced school, had come over to watch our form and moved me over to his own class. That meant that I jumped a whole year.

In 1941 I was already in the third form. One morning Madame Titi opened the door of our classroom and—as was the custom—brought in the new pupils to introduce them to the older ones. Among the boys there was one, called Rabovsky, who looked very odd. He was dressed in a peculiar white Bocskay suit which he obviously considered very smart, and he was timid and shy and thin like a caricature. The whole class started giggling.

"Have you ever seen anything like that?" I said to the girl sitting next to me. "Isn't he a scream? He has legs like a chicken."

I *was* amused.

PART III: WAR AND DANCE (ISTVAN)

1. Ham Sandwiches

I WAS ashamed of being poor.

This was a new sensation for me. Hitherto my poverty had been my life. I was a poor boy and saw poverty all around me. Rich people driving about in cars or sitting behind the high plate glass of restaurants eating good food, drinking good wine and laughing happily were not real people to me. They were features of my surroundings like the Danube or the Chain Bridge. I never thought of the possibility of becoming one of them, any more than I thought of becoming the Chain Bridge. I was I, and they were they; we lived in different hemispheres of life and our ways never crossed each other.

But now I had suddenly come into contact with that strange and distant world. All my classmates belonged to well-to-do middle-class families. They were the children of professional people or bankers or high civil servants; governesses or uniformed chauffeurs in big black cars came to fetch them. The snacks they brought with them for luncheon were elaborate meals, even packed in such a way that I could not help

thinking they had much more money for wrapping than I had for food.

But I was not envious; I was not angry, desperate or rebellious. I was only ashamed.

I believed, for some time, that my poverty was my own secret. They had no means of suspecting—I thought—that I was not one of them. I was fairly decently dressed: I had my black suit, made of my mothers' old two-piece suit, and I had also had my dream fulfilled: I had been given the white Bocskay suit. That was the only major—or for that matter, the only minor—gift I had ever received from my mother with the exception of some shirts, a pair of shoes and some socks bought at the same time. She spent quite a little fortune on me then, about 400 pengös—about forty dollars. Yes, I said to myself, I might pass as one of them and there was no reason on earth why they should find out that I had no governess at home.

But of course all this was naïve self-deception. At first they paid no special attention to me but afterwards—as I found out later—they often discussed me. They noticed that I never had any proper lunch with me. I usually brought two pieces of bread and lard and that was my whole nourishment for the day. It was not enough for a child and particularly not enough for one who was engaged in exhausting physical work. Soon the other little boys and girls started offering me part of their meals. They had much more than enough and most of them offered me his or her cold chicken or ham so casually and with so much friendliness that I could accept it with grace and without shame or self-reproach. But I think I should have accepted in any case. A person who has never felt hungry in his life—I don't mean the healthy and exhilarating hunger one feels after a long drive or walk but the hunger caused by the inability to obtain food—does not

know what it means to refuse cold chicken or ham, particularly when everybody else is eating around him. Soon I got friendly with a boy called Tony and it was mostly he who shared his meals with me. Looking back, I now know that from a certain date he simply brought food for two.

Then they noticed that I was wearing the same white suit. (I do not remember what happened to the other suit but very shortly I had only the white one.) It was not always too clean and soon it started showing wear and tear. In a few months my new pair of shoes also began to give me reasons for acute anxiety. No union, it is said, can last for ever and certainly the soles of my shoes soon showed a tendency to part from the uppers. No attempt at a reconcilation succeeded and they drifted apart. I could not have them mended. Quite apart from financial considerations, I simply had no other shoes to wear while these were being repaired. So I mended them myself by winding two pieces of wire round them. These shoes—now I was aware of it myself—had given my secret away. It was clear I had no governess at home; I was very, very poor and for these little ballet pupils was the Land of Angels incarnate, and the breath of a strange and menacing world, the breath of the proletarian suburbs.

What would they think about me? Would they tolerate me in their ranks? I did not know. I discussed many problems with my friend Tony, but the subject of my penury was never even alluded to.

Christmas was approaching. It was the first war Christmas in Hungary. In 1939 Hungary was still neutral. She was, of course, under strong German influence and the government did their best to please Germany, with an eye to claiming their share in the spoil—such as the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and Rumania. In April, 1941, Britain broke off diplomatic relations with Hungary but the country still

remained neutral. In 1941 Prime Minister Bárdossy—subsequently executed as a war criminal—ordered a fake aerial attack on the Hungarian town of Kassa, blamed the Russians for it and used it as a pretext for declaring war on the Soviet Union. In December, 1941, Britain declared war on Hungary, The declaration preceded the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor by one single day. By Christmas, 1941, Hungary—a neutral state six months earlier—was at war with the three greatest powers in the world—with quite a few smaller powers thrown in. But, of course, I was much more interested in my first end-of-term examination than in the war. The war was a distant and not very interesting affair, it did not as yet affect our lives in any way and perhaps a boy of eleven can be forgiven in any case if he shows but a limited interest in world affairs.

My friend Tony and I were at the top of the class. I received ten pengös—about one dollar—reward and both of us were lavishly praised for our work. I was immensely proud of my progress. Not that I cared at that time about becoming a good dancer. I was gratified because I was doing better than all the rich boys and girls, with the single exception of my best friend.

One day before Christmas our teacher, Madame Titi, dragged a large heavy parcel into our classroom. There it stood while we were doing our exercises. Before she dismissed us for the short Christmas holiday—during which we still had to come in and do our work as extras—she made a short speech. She wished us well for Christmas and said the usual things about some good work done and the necessity of working even harder during the next term. Then she continued:

"And now I should like to say something to you, Pista Rabovsky. I am sure you will forgive us for noticing that you

are not quite so well off as some other boys and girls are. We thought you should be given the chance of getting on with your work without trouble and worry, because you have talent. And because we like you. That is why we want to give you a collective Christmas present, which is the gift of the whole class and each pupil in the class. It's also the gift of your teacher. A very happy Christmas, Pista!"

She pointed to the huge parcel. It was all mine. It was full of suits, shirts, socks, shoes and—a veritable treasure—it even contained a winter coat. (I had never possessed a winter coat before.) I also found cakes, crystallized fruit, figs and oranges and nuts in the parcel. There I stood in the middle of the class sobbing bitterly and unable to utter one single syllable. So much goodness overcomes one. And this was real goodness and true kindness; I had never felt envy or hatred because of my poverty but at this moment the feeling of shame also disappeared. They had accepted me—I felt. Perhaps they even loved me—I thought. Not because I was lovable—I did not talk much to most of them—but because I danced better than the rest.

And today I think that is why I, too, was able to accept them.

2. Newspaper boy

In the ballet school I was in the beginners' class for about a year but in the ordinary school—which we attended in the afternoons—I was with the bigger children. I was the quietest and least troublesome child in my form; a little girl, called Nora Kovach, was the naughtiest and the cheekiest. So the teacher hit upon the idea of putting Nora to sit next to me. She was sure that my influence would prove beneficial to her.

The teacher's scheme was logical and intelligent but it did not work out. On the contrary, it was Nora who spoiled me. A few weeks later I was constantly chattering myself, up to all the tricks and very fond of playing a game called "bed bugs." This is not a highly intellectual pastime, in fact its educative value is infinitesimal, but we liked it and spent many long hours playing it unnoticed by our teacher.

At the end of the first year I passed my examination with honors. I and my friend Tony were again the best in the class. I was pleased with myself and my teachers seemed to be pleased with me. I was told that next year I would be moved up to the more advanced class under M. Nádassy. I found the new class much too difficult and at first I thought that my upgrading had been premature. There in the new form I was very much the junior pupil—although not in age—and I could not quite follow my instructions. I could do my steps and movements fairly well but no combination of steps. And to think what I was doing with my hands and head at the same time, seemed to me beyond the limit of human abilities. I was frightened and upset but did not despair; my natural reaction was to take the difficulties for a challenge and to work harder. I practiced in the ballet room whenever I could sneak back, although this was strictly prohibited. I wanted to do my movements well. M. Nádassy paid very little attention to me. I was a new boy and he had little faith in boys. As a rule they were clumsy and utterly unsuited for dancing and I, although I had jumped a year, seemed to be no exception. By the end of the year, however, he seemed to have changed his opinion about me and after the examination at the end of the term he gave me twenty pengös—about two dollars —reward.

I gave this money to my mother because by that time she was very hard up once again. She had spent too many merry

nights singing folk songs to the accompaniment of gypsy music. Some of her workers stole what they could lay hands on; and as orders were no longer executed punctually or efficiently, customers went elsewhere for their shoulder pads. My mother was ruined but, I must add to her credit, she did not take it too much to heart. It was herself who had brought this new misfortune upon herself and she blamed no one else for it. She was ready to face the hard future without self-pity or, indeed, much concern for her children.

This was in the year 1942. The war had made only a small impact on the life of the country and none on mine. Our new quandary had nothing to do with the war. During the summer my mother could not feed me and as the Opera was closed for its annual holiday, I had to think out some means of making money. I succeeded in getting a job as a newsboy. I was posted on the corner of Rákóczi-Road and Muzeum Boulevard, in front of the Márkus Emilia Open-Air Theater. There I had to sell newspapers all day until late in the night. In the theater, a light musical comedy—known in Budapest as a "summer operetta"—was being performed. I did not see it but I had anxiously scrutinized the caste. Sometimes opera singers performed in these light operettas during the summer, partly to pass the time and partly to make money. But there was no one from the Opera in this caste—as I noticed with great relief. I did not want to be seen selling newspapers. Not because I looked down upon that particular activity but because I looked once again a real vagabond from the Land of Angels. I had to save my better clothes for the school so I went about in rags—and not too clean rags at that—I had to take even greater care of my shoes so I walked about barefoot like all the other urchins.

I did fairly well financially but lived in a state of permanent nervous tension. I dreaded the idea of being seen by one of

my colleagues. When the dreaded encounter came—in a different form—it was not so embarrassing as I had feared and lead eventually to a complete change in my circumstances.

One evening a beautiful woman, very smartly dressed, stopped in front of me. I handed a paper to her but she did not take it.

"You?" she said, hardly believing her own eyes. "You? What on earth are *you* doing here?"

It was Bella Bordy, the *prima ballerina* of the Opera. On her way to the performance she had caught sight of me in the street. She did not even know my name but recognized me immediately.

I told her that we were poor and I had to work in the summer.

"Come with me," she said.

The star of the operetta was Ida Turay. Bella Bordy took me to her dressing room. All the actors and other people passing through the corridor, turned to stare after us, not knowing what to make of this unusual spectacle: the beautiful Bella Bordy followed by a dirty little barefooted newspaper boy to whom she was chatting in a friendly manner. To Ida Turay and some of her friends Bella Bordy explained that I was a member of the ballet school and was forced to sell newspapers in front of the theater to earn my living. Whereupon they all gave me a few pengös. Ida Turay gave me a number of her photographs, all signed, and told me to sell the photos. They fetched one pengö per picture and made a great difference to my earnings. Bella Bordy, before dismissing me, gave me her card and told me to visit her at home next day.

My mother came with me next day. Bella Bordy was a great and famous star—and even my mother who knew little about theatrical matters and personalities was eager to see her.

We rang the bell. The door was opened by a maid who led us into the hall. I stared about me and was overawed. The apartment—thinking back on it, probably was quite nice but nothing extraordinary—looked quite unreal to me: a place of oriental luxury and undreamed of riches. Bella Bordy appeared presently robed in a sumptuous dressing gown. She shook hands with my mother and stroked my hair. I was no longer the little untouchable—I had scrubbed myself and put on some presentable clothes and even shoes. Bella Bordy asked my mother many questions and was answered in great detail. There was an obvious and painful discrepancy between my mother's story and the truth. It was a good, romantic sob story and although I did not want to deceive Bella Bordy I could say nothing to contradict my mother. In any case, it was true enough that we lived in penury. Miss Bordy listened to us and then she talked to my mother:

"Things cannot go on like this, Mrs. Rabovsky. Your son is working very hard and if he is not properly fed he'll break down. He is quite an able little fellow but no talent can help him if he gets tuberculosis or heart trouble, as he is bound to if he goes on like that. You must help him somehow."

My mother promised to do her very best. Bella Bordy gave me fifty pengös—about five dollars—which my mother took away from me as soon as we were out of the apartment. But Bella Bordy's great kindness did not end there. She told her colleagues about me and of our encounter in front of the theater, and was otherwise active on my behalf, and once again I found people kinder and more helpful than general experience seems to indicate. Indeed kinder and more helpful than I found people later when I ceased to be the underdog.

Many of the singers and dancers got into the habit of giving me a few pengös after a successful performance. I accepted

the money with thanks. Soon I started dancing small parts—children's parts—and receiving small fees for these artistic achievements. So my lot improved considerably and a year later, in 1943—when I was thirteen—I had an incredible stroke of good luck.

Irén Hamala, a member of the *corps de ballet* and one of the most beautiful girls in Budapest asked me whether I should like to live with her family. They would be pleased to have me, she added, to look after me, and treat me as a member of the family. She lived with her brother who was married and had a three-year-old child. I was to look after the little boy whenever I had the time and inclination.

I moved out to Obuda—Old Buda—into a magnificent house and a much more luxurious apartment than Bella Bordy's apartment. This was a dream come true: my life had completely changed. For the first time in my life I felt that I had a family, that I belonged to some people. I loved them and I think they loved me. They had no reason whatever to be so generous to me and I shall never have a chance to repay their kindness. My years with the Hamala family were one of the happiest periods of my life.

And a few weeks later I fell in love.

3. The Red Belt

NORY had been playing an important but unreal part in my life for some time. I was only thirteen—and she a year younger—yet the seriousness of this love affair should not be underestimated. A boy of thirteen can be seriously in love and I certainly was. Nevertheless, my love for Nory was

quite unreal. She sat next to me in the classroom and we were in the habit of spending all our long days together—the mornings in the ballet school where we were now both pupils of M. Nádassy, the afternoons in the ordinary school and the evenings on the stage. We could guess each other's thoughts and no person was nearer to me than Nory; yet at the same time no person was more distant. The gap between us was not physical but social—and I felt that she lived in a different world. She was the daughter of a civil servant and I was a little prowler from the worst slums. Had she lived, say, in Japan and I in Budapest, I might have hoped to approach her by some means; but to cover the much vaster distance betwcen the Land of Angels and Lazarus Street was almost unthinkable.

Nevertheless, the unbridgeable gulf was suddenly and unexpectedly bridged—or almost bridged. My moving to the Hamala family suddenly changed my social status. It was not only that I was now better dressed and better fed; not only that I had no reason to accept gifts of sandwiches and second-hand clothing from others; but I had my own background and my own home. I belonged to some people and consequently, I felt, became somebody. It was Archimedes who said: "Give me somewhere to stand and I will move the world." I had somewhere to stand now and I felt ready to move the world.

One evening we were acting as extras in *Lohengrin.* It is a long opera and Nory had to hurry home as soon as it was over because her mother would be anxiously waiting for her. She was wearing a red dress with black stripes and she had a red belt to match it.

As soon as the performance was over, Nory ran back to the girls' dressing room and a few minutes later she was gone. When I was on my way home myself I saw something lying on

the staircase. I picked it up and examined it. It was Nory's belt which she had lost in her hurry. I put the belt in my pocket.

I took the belt out of my pocket in the tram, looked at it for a long time and put it carefully back again. It was a fetish; it represented Nory. I fell in love with that belt, or rather, it was the belt which made me realize with a sharp shock that I was very much in love. I put the belt under my pillow for the night although I was thoroughly ashamed of this silly and sentimental act.

I found the belt on a Saturday and I did not see Nory on Sunday. On the Monday we met again but I said nothing about the belt. Not until Tuesday did I ask her casually:

"I say. . .you haven't lost your red belt by any chance?"

"Why, yes," she replied in great excitement. "How do you know?"

"I found it on the staircase."

"When?"

"On Saturday, I think."

"You beast. Why didn't you tell me? Just you give it to me at once."

"At once?" I said with a superior smile. "No, I shan't give it to you at once. But I might give it to you later."

"Might?" Nory exclaimed. "What do you mean? Are you crazy? Give me my belt or I shall report you."

"No, you won't report me," I said like a man of the world who knows women inside out, but at the same time I felt my heart in my throat and nearly fainted with excitement. "You can have your belt back if you give me a kiss."

"A kiss?" said Nory, surprised and shocked. "A kiss? You?"

"Me," I said firmly and calmly. "I want a kiss and I want it on the fourth floor."

To ask for a kiss on the fourth floor was an outrageously daring and immoral suggestion. All the props were kept up there. The place was a veritable jungle, an excellent hiding place for couples—and it had a shockingly bad reputation. During daytime the fourth floor was derelict. Nory—quite rightly—felt insulted by my suggestion.

"Oh no. Thank you. You may keep the belt," she replied coldly and haughtily.

"Very well, I will"—I nodded with determination. I felt like the gangster who had been denied his ransom.

But Nory was in greater trouble than she cared to admit. If the loss of the belt was not a major disaster, it was at least serious. The dress was new and until the day of our conversation she had managed to hide the loss of the belt from her mother. But she knew she would not succeed in keeping her secret for long and she also knew that her mother would be very angry and would probably punish her severely or even smack her. So after reflection she came to the conclusion that a kiss given is better than blows received. Before the evening performance she came to speak to me again.

"Look here," she said. "You are really disgusting. Will you please give that belt back? I am quite prepared to give you. . ."

"Don't waste your breath," I replied. "I am not interested in offers. Either you give me a kiss and you can have your belt back or you keep your kiss and I'll keep the belt."

"Very well," said Nory. "You can have the kiss."

"On the fourth floor?"

"On the fourth floor."

I was much more terrified than pleased.

"Bring the belt tomorrow," she added.

"As a matter of fact I have it with me." I took it from my

pocket. "The whole business could be settled straight away."

"Very well," said Nory in martial mood. "Let's settle it then."

Our dressing rooms were on the third floor so we had to walk up one floor. I walked slowly. My heart was beating ferociously and my wild, almost uncontrollable excitement, grew with every step. This walk up the stairs was perhaps the most exciting and dramatic part of the episode. The steps, the dumb, cool, white steps were photographed in my memory and I saw them again in different circumstances, ten years later. This picture, Nory and I walking up the stairs of the Opera, came back vividly to my mind when I recollected the scene of our escape from East Berlin to West Berlin. Then we had to go downstairs to the underground. There once again, every step taken was a little drama in itself, and lasted an eternity. Now we were walking up, then we were walking down. Then we were walking to freedom; now I was walking to slavery. Then the stakes were our lives and now we were embarking on a ridiculous, childish prank. Yet, I do not know whether I was more excited now or ten years later.

We reached the fourth floor. I took her hand and led her on. We hid behind some props, I embraced her and I kissed her passionately on her mouth. She looked at me with surprise and disappointment.

"Is that all?" she asked. "What's so good about that?"

Words stuck in my throat.

I gave her her belt. I was hilariously happy. I was drunk with happiness. I think my dominating feeling was not love but pride. I was proud of my great secret known only to Nory and myself.

The secret remained a deep and closely guarded mystery

for about two minutes. Nory turned, ran down the stairs laughing loudly and told all her girl friends about the happenings on the fourth floor.

4. War with Nory

Our love affair soon developed into a scandal. On reflection Nory, too, decided that kissing was not so foolish after all and we repeated the performance many times. We hid ourselves on the fourth floor and spent odd ten minutes and half hours just sitting there, holding hands or kissing each other wildly. Considering that I was just over thirteen and Nory a year younger, this behavior was not altogether what might have been expected of us. But that is how we spent a considerable part of our time, upsetting and exciting ourselves, corrupting others and, eventually, interfering with the performances of the Royal Hungarian Opera.

One evening *Boris Godounov* was on the program. We were to appear in the third act. Our job was to run after the village idiot, mocking him cruelly and laughing at him. Nory was dressed as a little gypsy girl, she painted a wide vampish mouth and she looked simply beautiful. During the performance we disappeared from the sight of the others and withdrew to the fourth floor. Neither of us had a watch and in any case we forgot all about time, about *Boris Godounov* and the village idiot. We missed the scene and although there was no lack of other boys and girls on the stage, so that our absence caused no trouble whatsoever, our teachers as well as the producer took a very serious view of this breach of discipline. We were summoned to a tribunal. Our prospects looked very grim indeed; we had been left in no doubt that

we had committed one of the most serious theatrical offenses. We trembled and prepared for the direst consequences, possibly dismissal. Yet the storm blew over lightly. The chairman of the tribunal listened to the evidence and asked us whether we admitted the charges. We both pleaded guilty and offered no excuses. Then the chairman made a little speech which was as brief as it was to the point.

"It is perfectly all right, children," he said, "if you love each other. But love is one thing and missing your scenes is quite another. You have committed a serious offense but you will not be punished for it this time. But take my word as a warning and a most serious and grave warning at that: such a thing must not occur again."

But it did occur again. It occurred many times again. It occurred so often that they did not bother any more summoning us to tribunals. They gave orders to some of the older pupils to look after us and not to let us out of sight until our stage appearance was over. This measure was fairly effective and a certain amount of discipline was thus restored.

I was very much in love with Nory and I knew that she was in love with me. I never told her about my feelings nor did she say much to me. We quarreled a great deal and occasionally discussed marriage. This discussion usually amounted to my assuring her that I would never marry such a little bitch and her retorting that she would not marry me even if I were the one single male left on earth.

Her mother took an immediate dislike to me and although she knew nothing of our meeting on the fourth floor she warned Nory quite frequently to beware of me. I was poor; I had neither rank nor riches to boast of; I was a dancer. In fact, I united all the disadvantages a loving mother can think of. So when she realized that Nory was not entirely averse to me she became alarmed and did the only thing she ought in

her own interests not to have done: she strictly forbade Nory to speak to me. She accompanied Nory wherever she went. Until Nory was married she was not allowed to take a single step without a chaperon (with the exception of one journey); the Opera, however, was out of bounds for her. No parents were allowed to enter the ballet school unless explicitly invited. So her strict prohibition had little practical effect except that it made me much more desirable in Nory's eyes than I would otherwise have been. Her main objection against me was that I was not a Prince Charming; her mother's prohibition rectified this failing of mine: it turned me into a Prince Charming in Nory's eyes.

We spent more and more time on the fourth floor. I had a carving knife and was rather skillful in the art of carving. And even more industrious than skillful. I carved Nory's name, her initials, our joint initials, hearts and arrows and all the usual variations, signs and combinations, into every single piece of furniture on the fourth floor. I carved them into wooden pillars; I carved them into the ceiling and the floor and the corridors and into everything carvable. Even today, innumerable pieces of stage furniture and other material in the Budapest State Opera must bear testimony of the budding love of Nora Kovach and Istvan Rabovsky.

One night, early in 1944, *Aida* was being performed. We were both to appear in the big ballet scene, as Egyptian slaves. Somehow we succeeded in eluding our supervisors and sneaked up to the fourth floor. Nory was worried about her costume, first because it was much too delicate and secondly because it was not her own but had been borrowed from one of her colleagues. She told me that she could not possibly take the risk of ruining the costume so I must not kiss her. I did not like this at all and hit upon an excellent idea.

"Why not take the beastly thing off?" I suggested.

Nory knows a good idea when she hears one. She took the Egyptian costume off, folded it neatly and placed it on the barrel of a cannon. I must add that there was nothing indecent in all this: Nory had her underclothes on, and was dressed at least as decently as in the ballet class. Our project was simply to save the Egyptian costume from destruction or damage.

A few minutes later we heard heavy steps. Every now and then the head porter and one of his assistants came up to the fourth floor to look for thieves. By the time we heard the steps, they were already very near us. I dragged Nory away and we fled. The only possible route of escape was to go out on to the balcony and hide there. The porter heard our footsteps and called to his companion.

"There's someone hiding there. . . You go that way. . . . I'll go round here."

Then he shouted:

"Who goes there? . . . Stop or I'll shoot."

We knew that there was no fear of his shooting but that did not make our plight any easier. We ducked under some props on the balcony. All the dazzling lights of Budapest were under our feet, cars rushing along and hooting, people walking and talking, policemen on the street, and a large gay crowd sitting on the balcony of the coffeehouse opposite. We were terrified of the porter but no less terrified that someone—let us say a policeman—might notice us from below.

But no one found us. The porter was not unduly worried. He had found Nory's Egyptian costume in the meantime. Realizing that the culprits must have motives other than stealing, he called off the chase but, naturally, took the costume with him. He thought he knew whose costume it was as the owner's name was embroidered on it.

After a few minutes, leaving Nory behind on the balcony, I ran down to visit Uncle Kolo who was in charge of the men's dressing room. He was an old friend of mine and remained one until my last days in Budapest. Uncle Kolo disapproved of our behavior strongly but he succeeded in recovering the costume for Nory and on that occasion we were not even late on the stage.

This exciting adventure was a serious warning to us and we realized that it must not happen again. To avoid a repetition we took a very silly step. We decided not to go up to the fourth floor again. Instead we discovered a magnificent hiding place on stage level, near the trap door. We kissed there passionately in rapturous forgetfulness, believing that, as we could not see anyone, no one could see us. The fact was that anybody who cared could watch us from above and, indeed, many cared. For a few weeks it was the main entertainment of the whole caste – whenever offstage—to watch our passionate love scenes. We might as well have saved ourselves the trouble of hiding at all.

Our love affair having become public, it was logical and unavoidable that someone should tell Nory's mother about it. Mrs. Kovach was shocked and outraged. She gave Nory the worst hiding of her life. She told her that she had not sent her to the ballet school to become a prostitute. She decided to take Nory away from the ballet school and send her to another, normal school where closer supervision was in force. That, of course, would mean the end of Nory's dancing career. The storm was so terrible, and the charges so grave and so well founded, that Nory did not dare to protest or make a scene. She knew that she was guilty and she had no excuses to offer.

Next morning Mrs. Kovach gave Nory a last chance. If she would give her word of honor and binding promise not

to speak to me again, then she might reconsider her decision to move Nory to another school. Nory gave her word of honor and she kept it faithfully. Next morning she entered the class and did not even say "hallo" to me. For a very long time—and how many things happened during that time!—she did not speak to me and, indeed, she seemed to be unaware of my very existence.

This terrible turn of events had an even worse aspect for me. Nory lived in Lazarus Street. When they first came up to Budapest the family hired a room there and later they managed to get an apartment in the same street. One side of the Opera gave on to Lazarus Street and, as it happened, from the dressing room of the male extras one could look right into Nory's room. Up to now this extraordinary coincidence had had very little significance for me because I saw enough of Nory and spent all my time with her. From now on, however, that window was to give me the worst tortures of my life.

A prosperous and elderly gentleman started paying his attentions to Nory. He was a cigarette-lighter manufacturer and in his spare time he also turned out guns and cannons. He was about fifty and Nory was a child. He did not court Nory in the ordinary sense of the word and the idea of marriage was one which at that time could not even be contemplated. Later I heard that this gentleman had behaved with the utmost propriety, saying that he only wished to help Nory on her way. Whether his motives were as unselfish as he alleged, I am not able to say; but I certainly did not think so in my mad jealousy. He took Nory and her mother out quite frequently and, from my window, I watched them go and sometimes return. I saw Nory dressed up in smart new clothes, smile coquettishly at her elderly admirer, leave with him and return home with him while she would not say even "Good morning" to me. Life was hell and I suffered more

perhaps during those months than at any other time of my life—not forgetting my days in the Land of Angels and the long years of tormenting hunger and humiliating poverty.

I thought that I had reached the limit of human endurance. My work was my only consolation and I worked with a passionate zeal, indeed with the fervor of a maniac. Day after day I sneaked back to the ballet room when lessons were over. I had left the door open for myself or hid the key. Once back in the room I went on practicing hour after hour. I wanted to achieve perfection in my work and I refused to stop even when on the verge of collapse. As long as I could lift a limb I went on practicing. Work was not my satisfaction only; it was a narcotic drug.

Things, however, soon took a turn for the worse. Such a turn seemed quite impossible but its possibility was brought home to me with devastating clarity. The most terrible war of history was being fought on our doorsteps and there is a time when not only youths but even ballet dancers must take notice of history knocking on the door.

That time had now arrived.

5. War

If I was inclined to forget—or rather take no notice of—the war, I was reminded of it with a sharp shock one day in the autumn of 1943. At that time I was already staying with the Hamala family but for some reason—I cannot quite remember what it was—I went to sleep one night in my mother's flat. That night was picked for the first carpet raid against the Hungarian capital. There were a number of military targets and quite a few factories around us—although the nearest

public building was a military hospital, known as the No. 10 Garrison Hospital.

When the sirens sounded we all went down to the ramshackle shelters of our shaky old house. At the beginning I was not afraid at all because there had been many air-raid warnings before, some bombs had been dropped but nothing really serious had happened—at least as far as my own personal knowledge and experience was concerned. A few minutes later, however, the raid began in earnest. Carpet-bombing meant—as probably most people will recall—that the chosen target was not a building or a group of buildings but a given area and the aim of the raid was to flatten that area as completely and efficiently as possible. We were right in the middle of the area selected and there seemed to be nothing wrong with the efficiency of the British Air Force. As the noise increased, and bombs whistled and exploded incessantly, it seemed to me that the inferno meant the end of the world; or, at any rate, the end of my own world. I was terrified for my life. The fright which shook me inwardly was a natural, atavistic and probably healthy animal fright, a primitive fear of destruction and death. But it only shook me inwardly. I showed no sign of fear. I sat next to my mother, my eyes wide open, listening keenly to every noise, near and distant. Assuming that a hero is a man who is not afraid—which is a general but stupid assumption—I was not a hero; but I looked like one.

We all knew perfectly well that it did not require a direct hit to bring our house down. About one o'clock in the night a bomb fell even nearer than the previous ones. The blast of the explosion threw a number of people against the wall with violent force. They shrieked and yelled and swore; others lost their heads and near-panic broke out. Some women started crying and shouting hysterically, a man and two

women fainted and others started cursing the war, the Germans and, of course, first of all the Jews. A few minutes later another bomb shook the house even more violently and bricks started falling from the ceiling. By a miracle, nobody was hurt but the tension became unbearable. Women were shrieking and men cursing and I suddenly felt that I could not bear it any longer. I was afraid of the raid but I was afraid of the people around me much more. I jumped up and without saying a word to anyone was about to rush out of the cellar. I had just reached the exit when the house collapsed over our heads.

We had received no direct hit. The house simply could not stand the shaking any more. There was no panic or threat of panic this time. We were all swallowing and choking in the rising dust and everybody started coughing. Then two men left the shelter and went on a brief reconnaissance tour. They came back two or three minutes later and ordered everybody to stay put. We did not quite know the reasons for this order, nor were we able to test or query its wisdom; but to do nothing is always the simplest course to take, so we obeyed.

In a raid everybody always feels that he is in the center of personal attention from the aircraft above. We, too, believed that the exclusive aim of the Royal Air Force was to destroy our dwelling in the Land of Angels. This supposition seemed to be completely justified because as soon as our house was wrecked the planes turned, flew away and the All Clear was sounded.

We dashed out of the shelter to see what had happened. The roof of the house had been blown off and it lay with placid arrogance in the middle of the courtyard. My mother's flat was on the third—i.e. the top—floor and as there was no roof left over us the place had become uninhabitable. (Not

that it had been inhabitable before.) The staircase was gone, too, and the open corridor—an indispensable feature of Budapest architecture—was torn off. One of the main back walls had also collapsed. In short, the house was in ruins. I have that picture of destruction quite clear in my mind, yet I cannot help feeling that the house was then seen to its best advantage. Destruction is a great leveler and our house looked like a reputable war casualty; it looked like the wreck of a house, not like the wreck of a wreck.

All this was no real tragedy. The people who had been living in my house were quite used to being rendered homeless from one moment to the other. Perhaps they were all flattered a little that world history itself honored us by destroying the foundation of our everyday life. Such a thing had happened before—for more prosaic reasons. This time the destruction was more dramatic and noisier than on previous occasions but no more and no less complete. Indeed, in a way we had an advantage over the bourgeoisie of the better-off districts. We had been hardened in the past. And we had not lost our belongings for the very simple and obvious reason that we had had no belongings to lose.

I returned to the Hamala family and my mother took my sister and some of her other children to the country. She did not have to do anything for me and she could do nothing for my younger brother Jóska because he had disappeared some years ago—he had run away from his foster parents—and no one knew where he was or even whether he was alive or dead. My mother did her best for the rest of the children, by leaving them in the comparative safety of her mother's home where they all survived the coming horrors.

At the time of the raids Budapest was full of placards warning the population against the tricks of the "gangsters of the air"—a German technical term for the British and

American air forces. These placards explained to the people that the Anglo-Saxon crews were out to destroy defenseless women and children and were dropping explosive dolls and fountain pens. I remember these placards which, I think, succeeded in increasing the panic and made the city more apt to lose its nerve.

Hungary was occupied by the Germans in March, 1944. My mother reappeared in Budapest and I went to see her fairly frequently. She was very well off and better dressed than perhaps ever before. She did not have a worry in the world and, I noticed with great amazement, she was wearing very expensive jewelry. I asked her what she was doing for her living but my questions were brushed aside with vague and noncommittal answers. But soon I found out for myself. The looting of Jewish property was going on at full speed and a large number of German officers and soldiers had started in keen and efficient competition with the official looting organization. In other words, on top of the official looting and robbery they organized their own little expeditions for plunder and pillage. They appeared in Jewish homes and robbed the people of their possessions at pistol point. My mother was friendly with many German officers at that time and she reaped the benefit of this looting, blackmail and robbery. I do not intend to whitewash her either publicly or in my own judgment; on the other hand I wish to be fair to her. She certainly never took part in any looting expedition, never encouraged it and was not responsible for anybody's personal misfortune. But she was not averse to reaping the benefit. There were no searching questions asked and consequently no disquieting answers given. My mother told me that by refusing the jewelry, money and other generous gifts of the Germans, she would not save one single Jewish citizen from being robbed; she would only be giving

some other woman the chance of receiving these things instead of herself. This was perfectly true; yet I hated to see my mother as a beneficiary of these crimes. I did not go to see her for a long time.

But I felt guilty myself. These were terrible times and I felt, as everybody else did, that a worse future was still in store. Nevertheless, it was these months which were, in a way, the easiest and most comfortable in my life. It was now that I was wearing good suits—made to measure!—that I was living in undreamed of luxury, fed on expensive food and—this seemed the acme of riches to me then—receiving money for my tram journeys.

But even then the alarming signs of the approaching collapse—not only military but the collapse of a certain way of life in Central Europe—were casting their shadows on my life. I have spoken of air raids and looting but the center of my interest was still the Opera; my life was still dancing and nothing else.

One autumn day in 1944, I was listening to the radio, along with the rest of the family, when Admiral Horthy broadcast his decision to sign an armistice with the Allies. According to his own code of honor he was doing a dastardly thing by letting down Hungary's German allies and, again according to his own code of honor, he thought that he remained an honorable gentleman and officer if he did that dishonorable thing badly and stupidly instead of doing it effectively. He thought it was his duty, however, to give the Germans a chance of withdrawing. The Germans did not withdraw but kicked Horthy out. Treachery and muddle also played their parts and Horthy's armistice attempt proved abortive.

It was only a few hours we lived in a fool's paradise. After Admiral Horthy's declaration on the radio the Hamala family were crying with joy. Mr. Hamala dashed to a cup-

board, opened a secret drawer, took out what seemed to me many thousands of pengös in 100-pengö notes and scattered them all over the room.

"Help yourselves! Help yourselves!"—he shouted excitedly and the ten or twelve people present—members of the family and some of their friends—did their best to help themselves. I did not think that the offer was meant for me, too. Anyway, I had received enough generosity from the family and I was not even interested in money—so I did not move.

A few hours later the Hungarian Nazis—the Arrow Cross—took over the government with the help of their German masters. Excitable and hysterical youngsters rushed about in the Opera, wearing green shirts, and shouting that it was our duty to save the fatherland. Every boy over twelve seemed to be carrying an automatic pistol and using it freely. They dashed off, usually in huge trucks, to save the fatherland. Saving the fatherland consisted of looting factories. As Jewish factories could not supply all the raw material required for looting purposes, they looted non-Jewish factories, too. And they shot anybody and everybody it took their fancy to shoot A lady of easy virtue — a prostitute, to be more precise—was carrying a saucepan in Népszinház Street. The saucepan happened to be red whereupon a youngster of about fifteen walked up to her shouting:

"Red saucepan? You Communist bitch!"—and shot her dead.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of people were killed by these youngsters running amok—not to speak of the victims of other murderers. I clearly remember a colleague of mine condemning the massacre in these words:

"It is really awful. . . . A large number of innocent people have been killed, too."

By "innocent people" he did not mean people innocent of any crime; he meant people who were not Jews.

Soon after Szálasi—who was subsequently executed as a war criminal—took over, a number of his uniformed henchmen appeared in the Opera, all wearing leather overcoats and jack boots and carrying the indispensable German automatic pistols. They pointed the guns at the artists and the rest of the Opera staff and ordered us to line up on the stage. Ballet dancers, ballet pupils and opera singers are, as a rule, unarmed and belong, generally speaking, to the less martial section of humanity. So these thugs, carrying automatic pistols or submachine guns and behaving like heroes in an extremely dangerous situation, looked more foolish than frightening. We lined up on the stage as told, and their leader—who tried to be grim and impressive—delivered a patriotic pep talk to us. He assured us that Szálasi was the savior of Hungary. With the help of the Führer he would chase the Russians back behind the Polish frontier, behind the Volga and behind the Urals and would do all sorts of wonderful things, including the "settlement" of the Jewish question. The times were great and historic and we should be grateful to fate that a man of historic greatness had been called upon to serve the country as its leader. Szálasi, with the help of the German Führer, would do this, that and the other thing and we were all expected to do our sacred duty to save the sacred fatherland. Having finished this peroration he took a piece of paper from his pocket, read out a form of oath which we had to repeat after him. We were ordered to hold up two fingers of our left hand and place the palm of our right hand on our heart and say after him that we would be faithful to Szálasi, the National Leader, and do whatever he might order us to do. No scenes of wild enthusiasm followed but we had no choice but to take the oath. The leader of the group and his

men then departed and we proceeded with our rehearsals. A few minutes later the sirens were sounded and we went down to the safe and capacious cellars of the Opera.

The situation was one of nightmarish horror. The Russians had crossed the frontiers and were advancing on Budapest; rumors of terrible—and incredible atrocities were passed from mouth to mouth. A small part of Hungary was under Russian occupation already, the rest under the Germans and this gang of crazy criminals, the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party. Robbery and looting were officially permitted provided "good patriots" did the robbing; thousands of others were rounded up by the Gestapo and the military police and the political police of the Arrow Cross Party. People found to be active in the numerically small but desperately brave resistance movement were rounded up and tortured; and again others were just shot in the streets without much ado either for being Jews or for carrying red saucepans or for some other good reason. The terror was at its height but in the Opera we went on rehearsing and had a fairly good time in the deep, spacious and pleasant cellars. Our duty was to carry on and we tried to do our duty. "Duty" is an extremely pompous word, but obviously the duty of a singer is to sing and of a dancer to dance. Sometimes we had to break off the performance because of air-raid warnings. In most cases we could carry on after an interval; in a few other cases the performance had to be abandoned.

One day in November I was going to the Opera when I saw a long row of people being herded by Arrow Cross youths of about sixteen or seventeen years of age. I knew they were Jews being escorted to some unknown destination. Many of these people were sent to Auschwitz, as we were to find out later. But many others—as we were to learn much earlier—were taken to internment camps. In the beginning

some kind of order was still maintained in these camps; the rules, harsh and unjust as they were, were adhered to and even visits were allowed. The family I stayed with had a large number of Jewish friends in the internment camps whom we visited frequently. We took food parcels to them and I remember the scraps of excited, worried, and sometimes optimistic conversations I overheard. We visited Jewish houses too—later they were all marked with a yellow Star of David—and were given money, jewelry and furs for safe keeping. Our house became a veritable storehouse where goods of immense value were piled up. I remember carrying huge heavy suitcases to the cellars at nighttime.

One day I had to visit the offices of the City Council. On the corner of the nearby Károly Boulevard and Dohány Street I saw a dead man lying in the street. He was an elderly Polish Jew with a long white beard. He was lying in his blood and nobody paid any attention to him. I asked a passer-by what had happened. He told me that the man had been one of a large group being escorted somewhere. He fell down and could not get up again so he was shot. This was the first Jew I saw lying dead in the street. In subsequent weeks there were countless others. I saw them in the streets and in doorways; I saw them on benches and in the parks and once I even saw three corpses neatly piled up on top of one another. With the exception of the first victim I saw, all the others were covered up with sheets of newspapers. After the first few days people paid very little attention to these corpses. This horror, too, became part of the landscape.

Early in December one of my colleagues—perhaps two years older than I was, i.e. sixteen years of age—brought a number of hand grenades to the ballet school. Saying it would be everybody's duty to fight the Russians, he started giving us instructions what to do with the grenades when

facing Russian tanks and artillery. When the theoretical part of the lesson was over he ordered us up on the roof of the Opera. There we received practical training on handling automatic pistols. He explained the intricate mechanism and then fired several rounds in the air. We all had to try our hands and I also took my turn. The reports of the pistol attracted no attention. There was nothing extraordinary in it, people in the street did not even take the trouble to look up. By now our young instructor was in a decidedly gay and exhilarated mood. We went down to our dressing room where he loosed off again with his automatic pistol, using it to write the letter O in the wall. No one was eager to find fault with these high-spirited young gunmen but the supervisor felt there was a limit, so for shooting into the walls of the dressing room my friend was mildly reprimanded.

Rehearsals and performances became more and more irregular. It was a few days before Christmas that I saw the announcement on the blackboard:

TONIGHT: NO PERFORMANCE

I spent Christmas Eve at home in Old Buda. I am ashamed to say that in spite of all the horrors around us and in spite of the fact that we knew that Budapest would almost immediately become a battlefield, I remember this Christmas as a happy one. I received many gifts, bought some modest ones for the people I loved and spent the day eating, drinking and playing games.

On Christmas Day I was to appear on the stage as an extra. I left home early because it was a long way from Old Buda to the Opera and I knew that the trams were getting exasperatingly slow. It took me about an hour and a half to reach the bridge. And I could not get any farther. Pest was

cut off. The city was completely surrounded and the siege was on.

6. Siege

THAT Christmas the distant gunfire became less distant and soon shells began to fall all over the place. We spent our time in the cellar and all we knew was that the city had been surrounded. We had no idea what was going on in the world; indeed, we had no idea what was going on in our immediate vicinity. We did not even hear of the fall of Pest. Buda—my half of the capital—was liberated only weeks later.

I spent six weeks in the cellar. We were hungry and filthy. We were also half-frozen—it was one of the coldest and most cruel winters for many years or even decades. Every now and then German soldiers appeared among us and reassured us that they would chase the Russians back. They were tired, hungry but in great spirit—I think they believed what they were saying. But we did not believe them and hated these visits because we knew that the Russians might appear at any moment—in fact they appeared much later than we expected—and we also knew that the presence of German soldiers in *our* shelter would make an unfavorable impression on the Russians. Just how unfavorable was subsequently often demonstrated in many places by the fact that they shot people in shelters where they found German soldiers hidden or hiding. This, of course, was not unreasonable. Bitter house-to-house fighting was going on for weeks and, naturally, the gravest crime of the moment was hiding and protecting the enemy. Yet we had no means of getting rid of these visiting German soldiers. For a long time they were the absolute masters, rulers and tyrants. Then in one moment they were

turned into abject slaves and frightened fugitives—but that moment had not yet arrived.

Fighting came nearer and nearer and one day phosphorous incendiary shells set fire to our house. Our building being the highest in the district was used as a fortress by the Germans since the whole neighborhood could be kept under observation from the roof. Naturally the house in turn became the chief target of the Russian artillery which eventually hit it so effectively that the building went on burning for about three days and nights. But life in the cellar could go on uninterruptedly and although the roof and certain parts of the huge block were completely destroyed, our own flat—as it turned out later—remained undamaged.

Fighting reached the neighboring streets and a few days later ours, too. Clearing the Germans out of Buda was no neat and methodical affair. It did not mean that a certain street or building was cleared and then safely held by the Russians. The whole district was in chaos, the noise was deafening but one got used to it with amazing speed and adaptability. Sometimes the machine guns were barking in front of our door for hours on end and then at other times frightening and deadly silence surrounded us. At such intervals we ventured up the street to look around. The street was littered with the dead bodies of German soldiers, and as the siege proceeded more and more civilian corpses were mingled with them. One day I saw two or three tanks crashing through the street. They were under fire from nearby but invisible Russian artillery and the Germans had neither the time nor the inclination to sweep the streets and push the dead bodies to one side. So the tanks roared over the corpses, flattening them into an ugly red mess. The sight made me sick. I remember someone remarking:

"Burying the fallen heroes with full military honors."

Our house became a no man's land. One end of the street had been liberated by the Russians but the other was still in German hands and the ground between us was a battlefield. By that time hunger and starving to death, however, seemed a more real or, at least, more acute danger than being shot dead. So whenever there was a lull in the shooting we ran out to the street to get food. Getting food was a very simple procedure. We often managed to find dead horses within a few hundred yards of the house. Armed with huge carving knives we surrounded these dead horses and cut out huge chunks of meat. Within an hour or so only the red carcass of the animal was lying there amid the human casualties. The cruel cold served us well in this respect: the meat was always well preserved and fresh. It also tasted delightful or so I thought then. I especially remember one huge feast. My gang arrived too late on one occasion to find any meat on the carcass but I carved out the large heart of the horse and I still remember the delicious and luxurious repast which it provided. These sorties for food were not without their danger. Some people returned with their rich booty, others were left behind lying dead in the street, near or on the horses. Once, while we were dissecting a dead horse, nearby artillery opened up and shells began to fall all around us. We ran for safety and all reached the house with the exception of a woman who lived not in our building but somewhere in the neighborhood. An incendiary shell hit her and her hair and clothes caught fire in an instant. In half a minute she was transformed into a screaming human torch that fell and died. All her clothes had been burned off and her naked corpse lay in front of our door for two days. On the third day her three sons came to fetch their mother's body—probably to bury it in one of the nearby squares—with their own hands. Her eldest son was sixteen, the youngest eleven.

At last, some time in January, the Russians arrived. All the houses in the streets had basements and cellars and the Russians drove an underground passage through these cellars. We heard some terrific exchanges of fire for a prolonged period of time and the explosion of an unusually large number of hand grenades and then three Russians came through the underground tunnel. They wore white overalls over their uniforms—to camouflage themselves in the snow. When they appeared, a woman holding a small baby started shrieking madly. One of the three Russian soldiers went to the baby, made faces at it, and stroked its face kindly. The baby began to laugh and the mother, too, calmed down. Only then did the Russian ask us:

"Any Germans here? Any German soldiers hiding?"

There was a man in our cellar who spoke Slovak and could understand the Russians. He told them that there were no Germans in our cellar.

"Why are so many men here?" one of the Russians inquired. There was, indeed, a large number of men among us and that looked suspicious. Hungary had been fully mobilized and the men were supposed to be on the front. The Russians thought that some of the men were German soldiers in civilian clothes. Such last-minute changes of clothes had often happened though not in this case. The men in our cellar were Hungarians who had evaded call-up in one way or another or deserted—as they did not feel like risking their lives in an unpopular war fought for German interests. The Russians were not satisfied with our explanation and all the men were rounded up and taken away. I was not quite fifteen then so I was left behind.

For another week or so the firing was kept up from windows and hide-outs, but the fighting moved on and once again the noise of firing echoed from a distance. A few days

after our liberation the Germans succeeded in retaking a few streets very near us and the Russians decided to build barricades in our street. We all had to help—"all" meaning women, youngsters and elderly people because there were no able-bodied men left with us. The Goldberger Textile Factory was very near us. We had to go there and carry bricks and drag large pieces of timber to our street, under the supervision, and with the help of, Russian soldiers. Bullets were flickering across the street over our heads and I remember watching their red glow and sparkle and noticing how uneven and irregular machine gun fire was.

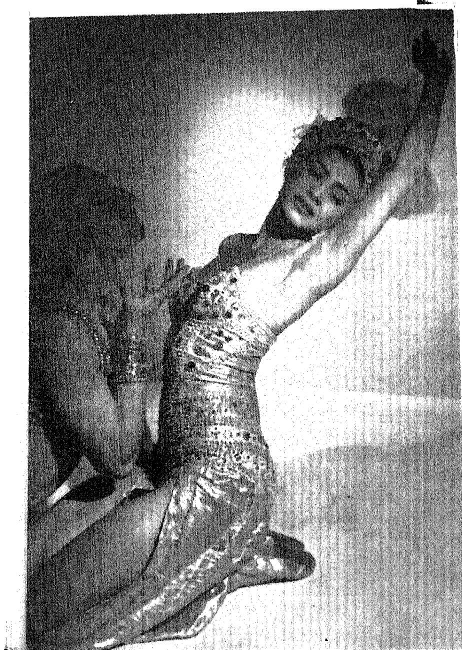
The cold was still Siberian and the women—who, of course, had no hats—made improvised scarves from odds and ends of material lying about and tied them round their heads. Someone made a scarf for me, too, and tied it around my head and they all laughed at me, remarking that I looked like a pretty young girl.

Then one of the women decided that I was too young and too weak for this heavy and strenuous work. They, too, were in a half-starved condition, but they were kind enough to consider me. It was very late, about 11 p.m. and pitch dark. So they asked a Russian soldier to take me home, telling him that they, the rest of the party, would finish the job. The Slovak-speaking gentleman had been taken away with the rest of the men and there was no one left among us who could make him understand. The women were talking Hungarian and the Russian soldier, naturally, had no idea what they were talking about. But he gathered from their wild and excited gestures that he was to take me away so, in the end, he did so.

The Russian soldier took me to one of the derelict houses, or rather shells of destroyed houses, led me down to the cellar where, before I could say knife, he embraced me and

Nora and Istvan in
Don Quixote.

Istvan in Scheherazade.



Nora and partner in Scheherazade.

Photos: Gyenes

gave me a passionate kiss. I was not only embarrassed but also terrified. I felt guilty for not being a girl and rousing his wrath. It took me some time before I convinced him in no uncertain manner that I was a boy. Fortunately he was a good-hearted fellow like most of them and luckily he was not drunk—because, when drunk most of these nice fellows turned into savages. He laughed heartily and happily like an innocent child as though he had not been bent on raping me a minute before. As soon as his plan proved impracticable, he accepted the position in good humor and even escorted me home indicating with gestures that it was too late for a young child like myself to be out all alone in the hours of darkness.

His concern for me was as genuine and as misplaced as his lust had been.

7. Our Private Reconstruction

It was only at the end of March, 1945, that I could go over to Pest. All the bridges had been destroyed—blown up by the retreating Germans or their Hungarian satellites—and for some time barges were the only ways of communication. Eventually, however, *Peggy* was built.

Budapest is a town of jokes. Whatever happens—an amusing social scandal, the fall of an idol or a historical and world-shaking disaster—Budapest makes a joke about it. The jokes spread like wildfire, are passed from mouth to mouth and the exploding happy laughter puts people and things into perspective. Budapest *is* a cynical city to some extent but these jokes are no manifestations of its cynicism.

These jokes are the folk songs of the city, the primitive, instinctive and collective art of an urbanized civilization. Birds and peasants sing; the people of Budapest make jokes about their cares.

Peggy was one such jocular reference. The Margaret Bridge had been destroyed during the war along with all the other bridges. The bridges had been the pride of that famous and beautiful city on the Danube: flood-lit during the summer months between the similarly flood-lit hills of Buda and the glittering and elegant hotels of Pest, they were one of the most captivating and lovely sights of Europe. Nothing hurt, humiliated and exasperated the Hungarians more than the destruction of these famous bridges. A "bridge" is always something symbolic and indeed their destruction meant that Hungary ceased to be a bridge between East and West and became now part of the East. Hungary ceased to be Central Europe and was moved over to Eastern Europe. No real bridges were allowed to exist any more. When they were rebuilt they no longer connected the Eastern half of Europe with the Western; they connected only Buda with Pest. Yet, reconstruction began immediately and the Russian army built a small pontoon bridge a few yards from the ruins of the Margaret Bridge. This miniature Margaret Bridge was christened with pathetic irony—Peggy. And it was over Peggy—the one existing bridge—that I walked across to Pest about two months after the liberation of the capital.

I walked among the ruins, improvised cemeteries and still moldering debris for about five or six hours. I had to make a frightfully long detour on foot, as public transport—even in its most primitive forms—was a dream at the moment. I reached the Opera. The building was damaged but not too badly and there it stood in its impressive baroque ugliness —the most beautiful sight in the world for me. From that

moment our own private reconstruction began: the reconstruction of the Opera. Our duty was to perform operas and ballets as soon as possible and to bring back a touch of normal, civilized life to the destroyed city. A town where Opera performances can be seen is more than a ruin. The reconstruction of the Opera may not have seemed essential to many; but, all the same, it was important. An Opera is not a necessity of life but it is a necessity of civilized life. In the case of Budapest it meant also a gleam of hope that the mass of ruins, debris, corpses and heaps of dust might be turned into a city once again—a proposition which seemed to many doubtful for quite a long time.

That night I went to see my mother and stayed with her. It was quite out of the question to go to the Opera from Old Buda and return home every day. About ten hours' walk—on top of a full working day—was beyond human endurance. My mother took me in and she was able to give me one or two pieces of bread and lard and sometimes soup. I was poor and in rags again—but this time I shared my poverty with the whole city. Only black-market trade was able to yield a comfortable livelihood and all sorts of people—former ministers, German deserters and Jews who had come out of the ghetto, as well as many others in all stations of life—were engaged in these activities. So was my mother. She worked on a modest scale but—with the help of her lodgers—she was able to give me shelter and just enough food to keep body and soul together.

A few days after my reappearance in the Opera, Nory, too, returned. We had not spoken for about a year before and we did not greet each other now. She had made a promise to her mother not to speak to me. I was deeply hurt; the war, the destruction of our town and the sinking of a whole world around us had made no difference to her.

Soon afterwards we became friends again or at least started talking to each other. One day I was playing a silly rough game with some of the smaller boys—a rough Central European equivalent of blind man's buff—and by accident I hurt one of them. It was a very minor matter and the little boy behaved like a good comrade: he never complained to anyone. His mother, however, noticed that his behind was terribly red and being pressed for an explanation he told her the truth without mentioning my name. Investigation was set on foot and I had to tell what had happened. I was ordered to appear before a disciplinary committee where all the small boys were heard, all of whom gave evidence in my favor. At the close of their testimony I was sent out of the room while the committee deliberated. I was waiting in the cold anteroom, shivering with fear when Nory came in.

"What's happening? Any decision yet?" she asked.

"No, not yet," I replied.

I looked at her. And then, forgetting that next door an all-important committee was in process of deciding my fate and also forgetting that the door might be opened any moment, I walked up to Nory, embraced her and gave her a long passionate kiss which—I was glad to notice—was reciprocated. Nory laughed at me, I laughed at her and our feud was at an end.

The disciplinary matter itself was of no consequence. I got away with a mild and friendly warning, thanks to the comradely behavior of my young colleagues. I felt I could never thank the disciplinary committee enough: was it not responsible for the fact that Nory and I were on speaking terms once again? A certain part of that little boy's body had, after all, suffered in a good and noble cause.

I am sorry to say that Nory herself was soon to suffer for

the same good and noble cause. Next day I looked out of the window of my dressing room and saw Nory in her room. I waved to her, she smiled and waved back and her mother marked this affectionate scene. Nory got a sound box on the ears and her mother exclaimed:

"The war's hardly over and you start again with that brigand."

"Brigand," remained Mrs. Kovach's name for me until Nory and I got married; after that it was replaced by a less complimentary one.

Nory told me about her war experiences. Her father had become an invalid during the year we had not spoken. This sad occurrence was due not to the war but to illness. Now he could get about only in a wheel chair. During the raids, some Jewish friends of theirs had always come in to help Mr. Kovach down to the shelter but as soon as the Jews were rounded up and their flats taken by others, no one ever bothered to help and her father had had a terrible time getting down to the shelter in his wheel chair. In fact, these journeys to the shelter became worse nightmares than the bombing raids themselves. She also told me how, later, some Russian soldiers were about to rape her and her mother. Mrs. Kovach hit one Russian on the head and shrieked, pointing to her obviously ill and crippled husband:

"Syphilis! Syphilis!"

The Russians fled in panic. Another unforgettable experience of Nory's was the return of some of her friends. The block where she lived was largely Jewish. As soon as the district was liberated a filthy and emaciated beggar was found in a state of near-collapse in front of the main door of the house. He spoke to Nory who was so frightened that she ran away. Later it turned out that this horrifying ghost of a man was a Jewish friend of the family, the brother of a

conductor, formerly something of a dandy, gay, loud, happy and corpulent. It was difficult to believe he was the same man —yet he was one of the lucky ones: he had survived, at least. A few hours later Nory saw the Jews being released from the ghetto. The doors had been flung open and the sad and motley crowd surged across Andrássy Road—a few yards from the Opera and Nory's home. They all looked alike; they tried to run but most of them could only stagger, totter and stumble. A large number of them collapsed and quite a few died there in the middle of the road. Their sufferings had been inhuman and the joy of their liberation was more than they could bear.

Nory's personal situation had also changed. Her father as a civil servant, of course, received no salary or pension. They were left virtually without a farthing. They had their meals on the street where food was distributed to all who cared to come and queue up for it. Practically the whole population of Budapest cared to come in those days. Nory's mother sold cigarettes in the street and that was the only way the family could eke out a miserable pittance at all.

Yet these horrors and tribulations slowly faded into the background. It was long before the economic situation improved, but the city was being rebuilt, the atmosphere of creation was in the air. We all felt that we were taking part in something worth while and our own personal miseries were of secondary importance only. We were busy again with our rehearsals and performances—the Opera opened its doors to the public without any delay—and there was only one tragicomic event which reminded us of the extraordinary times we were living in. There was a well-known music critic who as a musician and composer himself was in constant contact with operatic circles. He was an elderly gentleman and lived in Bajza Street—practically next door to the Russian

Legation. He returned home very late every night although it was a well-known fact that it was dangerous to walk in the streets after dark. People were attacked and all their clothes taken away. They were hardly ever maltreated, but drunk Russian soldiers, German and Hungarian deserters and some criminal or desperate civilians had embarked on the new and fashionable crime. Clothes were currency in those days—while money itself had little value. Our journalist friend had infinite confidence in the Russian Legation next door and probably also in himself. He was a man who wore a straw hat day and night in all four seasons and who was never seen without a pipe in his mouth. One night he was attacked on his way home and all his clothes and underwear were taken from him. The thieves—or rather robbers—insisted on taking every piece of clothing with the exception of the straw hat. Having been robbed of almost all his worldly possessions, the journalist walked back to the Opera—stark naked, but wearing a straw hat with a pipe in his mouth—rang the bell and asked the porter to lend him some old stage dress to cover his body. He was happy to leave in an ancient Oriental garment—originally made for the opera *Turandot.*

The war was behind us but a lot of work before us. When I asked Nory whether she would like to become my partner, she agreed. Partners have to practice together for infinitely long hours—every motion and part of every motion has to be rehearsed thousands of times. We threw ourselves into our work with almost religious zeal. I sneaked back to the ballet room—as I had started doing even before the war—and went on practicing often with Nory and sometimes by myself for long hours on end. I was undernourished as I often had nothing to eat but one or two pieces of bread and lard for months, and I still do not quite understand how I escaped going down with tuberculosis or a bad heart.

For a week I thought my financial problems had been solved: I was awarded a scholarship in the Opera. I was proud of it and I did appreciate the moral value of this distinction: the material value of it, however, proved to be very disappointing. I may have received five million pengös or fifty million—I do not remember—but the inflation was at its height and money had no value whatever. I had great difficulty in keeping body and soul together. My mother did her very best to supply me with the bare necessities of life—and even that meant a great sacrifice for her. But her flat was full of all kinds of people and I was not keen to stay in her house; I had been spoiled by the Hamala family. So I stayed in the Opera and in those months of chaos and disorganization—or I should have said reorganization—I was allowed to sleep in the ballet room. I laid some cushions on the floor and slept as soundly as anyone in a luxury hotel.

My financial position improved in the end. There were still a number of Western officers in Budapest in 1946. Some of the Americans were anxious to meet young members of the corps de ballet and invite them to their clubs to dance. As they had to preserve a semblance of being interested in the art of dancing, which a few, but only very few of them, really were, they felt compelled to invite one or two male dancers, too. That is how I came to appear in American officers' clubs where we were treated in a charming and friendly fashion, were given magnificent, Lucullian hospitality and were paid in dollars. The first invitation caused me acute embarrassment because I had no decent clothes to wear. It was a friend of mine who lent me a pair of gray trousers and a dark blue jacket. Both garments had been made for someone twice my size but I still looked more respectable than in my own rags. Except for shoes; I could borrow no shoes and I had to dance practically barefoot. The fees earned in these

clubs were a great help. Every now and then I visited the Hamala family, too. My journeys to Old Buda were altruistic visits to people I loved because by that time they, too, lived in miserable conditions.

Soon the currency was stabilized, the pengö was replaced by the new unit of currency called the forint and the financial position of the whole country improved enormously from one day to the other. I could live now without any worries. I made enough money in the American clubs to hire a large and comfortable room in the house of a colleague's mother and the kind lady looked after me as if I had been her own son.

At the examinations in 1946 I surprised my teachers by performing sixteen *tours en air* (double jumps). This is quite a feat. The number of people who can do it is not large—indeed, it is very, very small. I practiced this all by myself for months and it created quite a stir when I first performed it at the examination. The new director of the Opera, Pál Komáromi, offered me a contract which, needless to say, I accepted with gratitude. Nory, too, received a contract at the same time.

The two leading dancers of the Budapest Opera, M. Tatár and Mlle. Patócs, went to America on a study tour and did not return. So the Hungarian State Opera was left without its leading dancers—a painful situation which was to repeat itself six years later. I was given some of M. Tatár's parts—but only some. I was quite unsuited for most of the parts because I was still only seventeen years of age, a thin and skinny youth, looking like a child. I appeared first in *The Legend of Joseph*—a ballet by Richard Strauss. Joseph, whom I impersonated, was a boy. This was my first leading part and I was so excited before the first performance that I did not close my eyes for many a night.

A few days before the first night we had a dress rehearsal

in the ballet room. The director of the Opera was present as well as his main functionaires, all the soloists and members of the corps de ballet and even the orchestra crowded the small room. I started dancing but had to stop because I still did not have proper ballet shoes to wear. I kicked off the pieces of rag I had on my feet and started all over again, this time barefoot. I was dancing well–I knew it. A spontaneous and enthusiastic applause greeted me. The public performance too, was a furore.

A few weeks after the performance of *The Legend of Joseph* I was given the title role in the *Spectre de la Rose*. Revivals had been attempted many times but my performance was the first successful revival. Now I received one leading part after the other. Nory, too, received increasingly important parts and we looked forward to the day when we would be partners on the stage.

In those days I had to change my name, too. My name started appearing on the bills, and I was advised, indeed, instructed, not to use the name of Rabovsky. The trouble with my name was twofold; first it was too long and secondly it was not Hungarian, so I was supposed to Magyarize it as almost all Hungarian artists always Magyarized their names. What name was I to choose? I did not know. There was a dancer called Rab in the *corps de ballet* and he suggested that his name was a good one and as it formed part of mine, in any case, I might become Istvan Rab.

I did. "Rab" is a good Hungarian name. The word itself means "prisoner." I would have preferred to use my own name but it was not allowed. So I remained "Rab" for seven years.

8. Ulanova

THE next outstanding event in my life was the visit of Mme. Lepeshinskaya to Budapest, in 1947.

Life meanwhile was proceeding normally. I went on with my studies and danced some new and exciting roles—so did Nory who scored one memorable success after the other and rose higher and higher in a company full of able and distinguished rivals. As I slowly grew up, I realized that my education was shatteringly inadequate. I had finished the grammar school and passed the examinations which were compulsory by law but that was all. I realized that there were vast and terrifying gaps in my knowledge and education and I tried my best to fill them as well as I could. In my spare time I studied and read and Gusztáv Oláh gave me lessons in history, and history of art. Oláh's nominal job was—and still is—stage designer of the State Opera. But he is much more than that: in fact, he is the producer, casting director, program organizer and general factotum. He is more than an able and outstanding man: he is an institution.

Political life was also whirling around us but I knew little about it and cared even less. I knew that the Smallholders' Party was in power and I was pleased with that. I should have been equally pleased with any other party as long as I was left alone. In fact, it never occurred to me at that time that our lives and work had anything to do with the party in power. Politics used to be a distant game played by strange people and I had had nothing to do with it. The management of the Opera was the business of the directors; the management of the country was the business of the government and it never entered my mind that the government could have

anything to do with my private affairs and my own life. Politics had one bearing on the life of the Opera: some Fascist singers and administrative employees—who had compromised themselves during the Nazi regime—had been dismissed or in some cases imprisoned. But even that was not politics in my eyes; it was justice.

So, as I have said, the next event of importance was the appearance of Mme. Lepeshinskaya in Budapest. She is regarded as the second best dancer of the Soviet Union but this classification would hurt and outrage many Russian connoisseurs. Many place Lepeshinskaya before Ulanova—it rather depends which school and style one favors because the two ballerinas differ greatly in style. The ardent fans of the two ballerinas oppose each other in bitter argument although lately Lepeshinskaya has been physically indisposed and has not been able to maintain her position.

Lepeshinskaya gave four concerts in one of the Budapest theaters. Her performance had an electrifying effect on Nory and myself. We had never seen a dancer of that caliber. Her technique was perfection itself; in addition to being a wonderful dancer she was a first-class mimic, too. She inspired the audience, she carried people away into an ecstasy and at the end of her performance the theater became the scene of prolonged and wild ovation and demonstration. Her partner, M. Gusev was worthy of her. He is not one of the best dancers but one of the greatest *partners* in the world. He carried Lepeshinskaya, lifted her up with obvious love and care, treated her as a beloved and miraculous being. He danced his own part extremely well but did not forget for a moment that this was not his evening but hers. M. Gusev is also one of the best teachers of ballet in the Soviet Union—as I was to find out two years later in Leningrad.

We had heard a great deal about the legendary fame of the

Russian ballet; we thought that its quality surpassed its fame. Now we saw Lepeshinskaya four times—in other words, each evening she danced in Budapest and became convinced of the value of the Russian school. We went to see various Russian dance groups which visited us at varying intervals and were greatly impressed by them, too. Folk dancing is a real and living art in the Soviet Union and the various nationalities preserve their own dances. This is an endless source of inspiration to the ballet which, indeed, has its longest and highest traditions in Europe. Our own encounter with things Russian occurred on the best possible plane. We knew next to nothing about the dreary facts of life under Stalin; dancing was certainly better than anything else in the Soviet Union.

During the next two years I grew up. Even now I am not robust but it was between 1947 and 1949 that I ceased to be a boy and was able to dance any part for which I might be chosen. I put on weight—and consequently grew from a pathetically skinny youth into a normally thin dancer. I was grateful now for the days of hunger and privation. I thought that if I had not been so alarmingly and ridiculously thin at seventeen I might have grown fat by nineteen.

It happened in February, 1949, that the great Ulanova, too, visited Budapest. She also came for four evenings. She gave her concerts on the stage of the Opera and her partner was Gabovich, another of the great Russian partners. Ulanova, as I have already mentioned, differs greatly from Lepeshinskaya in style and in appearance. She has the face of a Russian peasant woman but as soon as she starts dancing her face changes completely and radiates ethereal and celestial beauty. She defies the force of gravity—it simply has no power over her. She leaps, she flies in the air and gives the impression of never touching the floor at all. There is a superhuman

element in Ulanova's art. Our only regret was that she appeared in concerts and not in ballets because, we thought, ballet was her more natural element. Still we had no doubt whatever that we had seen one of the greatest dancers of all ages.

Ulanova played a decisive part in my life. Our meeting was an extraordinary and unexpected one and it changed the course of our lives—mine as well as Nory's.

Ulanova is very reserved and aloof. We were interested to know whom she met in Hungary, with whom she spent her free time and what she thought of the Hungarian dancers. The answer to these questions was disappointing: she met hardly any Hungarians, she spent her free time alone, or with her partner, or some members of the Soviet Legation, and she thought nothing at all of the Hungarian ballet dancers because she saw none of them and was not interested in them. Ulanova had come to Hungary from Bulgaria and Rumania. There—it was rumored—she had gone to see the local ballet dancers but she had not been favorably impressed and that was why she did not care to see more satellite ballet in Budapest. Even in the Opera her contact with other people was reduced to a minimum. She was constantly accompanied by an interpreter and occasionally by some members of the Communist Party. (Rákosi had concluded his "salami-cutting" technique about a year before. All the other political parties had been liquidated by this time and the Communists were all-powerful.)

One morning we were practicing in the ballet room when the door opened and in came Mme. Ulanova and her interpreter. The pianist stopped playing, the dancers stopped dancing and we looked at her mesmerized; she was also surprised and obviously displeased. She said something to her interpreter who translated:

"Mme. Ulanova is sorry to have disturbed you," he said. "She thought the ballet room was free and she wanted to have some practice herself. She apologizes for the intrusion."

Nádassy, our ballet master said that there was no reason for apologizing. He added that it was a great honor to us to have Mme. Ulanova in our ballet room even if her visit was the result of an error. We were to have a performance tonight—Nádassy went on—so we could not evacuate the room at that very moment but we would do so as soon as possible and in the meantime it would be a further honor to us if Mme. Ulanova would stay here and watch our rehearsal.

All this was translated and although Ulanova bowed politely we could read her face: she was bored by the prospect. There was nothing she desired less than to watch these budding barbarians practice but she probably remembered her instructions from Moscow—namely, that she was supposed to show interest in the arts of the newly acquired satellites. So she bowed to the inevitable. Two chairs were brought in for Ulanova and her interpreter and they sat down. They watched variations performed by three or four people and, at Nádassy's polite inquiries Mme. Ulanova nodded and said that it had all been very nice indeed. Then she looked at her watch but remained seated.

Nádassy called me. He ordered me to do a variation which I did. As soon as I finished Ulanova stood up and walked up to Nádassy. I, in the meantime, returned to the crowd standing in the back of the room and another dancer did another variation. As soon as he finished Nádassy called out:

"Rab, come back. Mme. Ulanova wants you to do something else."

I did what I was told to do.

"Is this young man dancing tonight?" asked Mme. Ulanova through her interpreter.

I was not. So my surprise was great when I heard Nádassy's reply:

"Yes, he is."

"Very good," said Mme. Ulanova. "I shall come to see him."

Nádassy bowed to her and Ulanova turned round and left the room.

Nádassy told us to wait. He ran up to the office, told the director and Oláh that Ulanova had expressed her desire to see me dance on the stage and they made immediate arrangements to change the program. There were three short ballets or numbers to be performed so it was easy to increase their number to four. I was to dance the *Spectre de la Rose*. Vera Pásztor was to be my partner.

I remember only two other occasions when I was so excited as on that day. Yet I was not aware of the importance of the occasion. Everything that happened later came as a surprise to me as much as to everybody else. I only knew that the great Ulanova was coming to see me dance and that was enough for me. It was a great day in my life and I hoped my performance would not bring shame on me and my masters.

I was inspired that evening and I felt that all went well. Ulanova had never seen the *Spectre de la Rose* before—in Russia it had never been performed. The applause was tremendous, I was called out before the curtain many times but, which was more important, I knew and felt that I had done as well as I possibly could. And more cannot be expected from anyone.

I returned to my dressing room, sat down for a minute and

then walked out to the bathroom. I was sitting in the tub when I heard excited knocking on the door.

"Can't you wait?" I shouted back a little annoyed. "The bathroom is engaged."

"Hurry up, Rab," said an excited voice. "Ulanova is in your dressing room waiting for you."

I do not think that in the history of bathing anyone has ever jumped out of a bathtub quite so quickly as I did on that occasion. I did not dry myself. I put my bathrobe on and, I think, ten seconds after being told about Ulanova's visit I stood in front of her in my dressing room.

She was not alone. She was accompanied by her inevitable interpreter and by Gabovich, her partner, and also by a number of dignitaries of the Opera. Ulanova came forward to meet me. She extended her hands and smiled broadly. I kissed her hand. Her imperial reserve was gone for a moment but it returned later. She said a brief sentence and the interpreter translated:

"You danced well."

My heart beat fast. I looked at her and had no idea what to say. Then she spoke again:

"You should go on studying. It would be worth while."

Then she turned and left the dressing room.

I did not quite understand this last remark. Did Ulanova think that I wanted to give up ballet? Or did she mean that I was good but not good enough—which may have been quite true but, I felt, was not really what she wanted to convey. Then what?

"You should go on studying. It would be worth while"—these were her enigmatic words. I was soon to find out what she meant.

Two days later I was called from our normal rehearsal to

the telephone. It was an internal call from the Opera office, or to be more exact, from the Party. The Communist Party had by that time installed its commissar in the Opera. The commissar—Mr. Mihály by name—was a kind and decent man who was not much in evidence and I did not quite know what his job was. Nor was I interested.

I went to Mr. Mihály's office where he asked me to sit down.

"A very great honor has befallen you, Rab. Mme. Ulanova was impressed by your performance and she spoke to Comrade Rákosi about you. With Mme. Ulanova's help and with Comrade Rákosi's approval you have a chance of traveling to the Soviet Union and completing your studies there."

I nearly fainted with excitement. But I was terrified, too. I knew that Ulanova's offer was genuine and also that Rákosi's permission was a great honor. But I had no desire whatever to go to the Soviet Union. I was afraid of it. No Hungarian artist had been there before—or at least I had heard of no one—and I knew of no one who had ever returned from the Soviet Union. The word "Siberia" flashed across my mind and I saw myself as a slave worker in some Arctic mine. I was being tricked and trapped, I thought in panic. And even before I could utter a word another reason against going occurred to me. At the beginning of my career as I was, I had naturally, to face considerable competition. I was being given a fair number of leading parts but others too were in the queue. I was quite prepared to take part in fair and healthy rivalry. But to go to the Soviet Union as a student and leave the field to my rivals—oh no, thank you! I was delighted by Ulanova's kindness; I appreciated Rákosi's permission. But I had only one thought in my mind: how to get out of this.

"Oh yes. . . ." I said. "It is a very great honor indeed. I am extremely grateful. But I cannot go."

"Why not?"

"I cannot speak Russian," I declared.

Well, this excuse was not very good and I was fully aware of it. I received the obvious answer to my objection and by the time Mr. Mihály finished speaking I had managed to get over the first shock.

"I cannot go, I am sorry. There is someone here in Budapest whom I do not wish to leave behind."

He did not ask who it was because he knew perfectly well. To my greatest amazement he made no attempt to bully me. He did not lecture me on the great and unique honor that had befallen me and on the impossibility of offending Rákosi and Ulanova. He said very kindly and most reasonably that it was up to me to decide what I wanted to do. I was to let him know within two days.

He stood up to shake hands with me. He looked at me and asked:

"If Nora Kovach agrees to your going—would you go?" I was taken unawares.

"Oh yes, then I would," I said.

As soon as I had left the room I was furious with myself. I had been trapped after all. I had told Mihály that I did not want to leave Nory, not that I needed her permission to go. Now the whole question was transposed to a different and utterly irrelevant plane and even the decision did not rest with me but with Nory.

I told Nory what had happened and she said nothing. In the meantime my reply was reported to Ulanova.

"A little girl?" Ulanova asked. "What is her name?"

But before her question could be answered, she waved with her hand:

"Don't tell me her name."

Next morning Ulanova quite unexpectedly turned up in

the ballet room once again where all the female dancers were getting ready. She sat down and the girls started performing for her. One after the other did her best to impress her but Ulanova said nothing, expressing neither pleasure nor disapproval. There she sat almost motionless, like a distant goddess. Nory's turn came; she did her variations and then returned to the far end of the room.

Ulanova stood up. She turned to Nádassy and asked him through her interpreter:

"Will you please ask the little dark girl—who has just finished her exercise—to come back."

Nory stepped forward.

Ulanova smiled at her.

"Are you Rab's fiancée?" she asked.

"Yes, I am," replied Nory. "Not his fiancée but. . . ."

"Thank you," said Ulanova, then she stood up, smiled and left the room.

Next day Nory was told that Ulanova had phoned Moscow again and as Moscow was prepared to have both of us and as the Hungarian Government was also prepared to pay for both of us we could go together. That meant we would go if we wanted to.

Nory asked for one day to think matters over.

We were thrown into a real panic now. My former considerations were still valid. I was very much afraid of going to Russia and nearly as much afraid of leaving Budapest to my rivals. Here I was making good money whereas in Moscow or whatever town we were to be sent to, I should find myself a pupil again. The same applied to Nory—and indeed, much more. It is true that we were told by people whom we trusted and loved that we would learn more in the Soviet Union in six months than anywhere else in ten years and we, having seen Lepeshinskaya and Ulanova and other dancers,

knew that there was some truth in this statement. But we were not at all sure that we would really go to a ballet school and not to some copper mine. On top of it all, Nory's case was quite a special one. She was very much Mummy's little girl. She had never spent one night away from her mother. Mrs. Kovach accompanied her everywhere—absolutely everywhere—with the exception of the Opera which was out of bounds to parents. Nory had never traveled alone as far as Ujpest, an inner suburb of the capital, and now she was to go to the Soviet Union, of all places, for months and alone; not even alone. She was to go with the "Brigand." When Nory told her mother of the plan, Mrs. Kovach would not even listen to it. Indeed, it never entered her mind that Nory might seriously consider it.

But Nory did.

Next day we kept our appointment and told Mr. Mihály that we were grateful for the offer and would be delighted to go to the Soviet Union to complete our studies.

For some time nothing happened. For a while we thought that there was some bureaucratic muddle, that our files were stuck in somebody's office and that our planned journey would be forgotten. But now we felt no relief, only deep regret.

In September we were recalled to Mr. Mihály's office.

"You are going to leave for Moscow in a week," he said. "This afternoon you are to visit the Minister of Cultural Affairs and tomorrow afternoon at four o'clock you will be received by Comrade Matyas Rákosi at Party Headquarters."

He stood up and smiled at us:

"Good luck, children."

9. Rákosi

WE were called to the office again and given more detailed instructions. As pupils we would be the guests of the Soviet Government or of one of the State Ballet Schools—which was the same thing; but as far as our living expenses in the Soviet Union were concerned, we were to live on a scholarship granted by the Hungarian Government. We would receive —we were told—2,000 forints each in advance and the rest of the money would be paid to us in the Soviet Union on the first day of each month. The first advance of 2,000 forints each was paid out to us straight away.

In the afternoon we went to see Mr. Ortutay, Minister of People's Culture, who repeated the same instructions and wished us good luck. When we left his office, an official of his ministry cornered us, explained the monetary arrangement in the same terms as the other official had used in the morning and he, too, gave us another 4,000 forints, by mistake. We felt we knew what was happening. Bureaucracy is terribly slow all over the world but ten times slower in Communist countries. But as Comrade Rákosi had shown some personal interest in our affairs, everybody had suddenly become overzealous. Generally the golden rule is: don't do anything and you cannot make a mistake. In this particular case—as people knew that Rákosi might make personal inquiries—omission seemed to be much more dangerous than commission. The officials vied with each other in their eagerness to report back that the instructions issued in the morning had been already carried out by the afternoon—and accordingly they carried them out twice: 8,000 forints amounted to about seven hundred dollars—quite a decent

sum. We did not breathe a word about the double payments. We went to do a lot of shopping and bought everything we thought necessary for the harsh Russian winter. We bought fur coats for ourselves and by the time we finished our shopping, Nory was fully equipped not only for a journey to Russia but for an Arctic expedition.

Next day, too, we spent our time in the various shops but our visit to Rákosi hung over our heads. We were not looking forward to it. Rákosi, we thought, might ask us whether we were members of the Party and the answer to that was "No." What would he say then? Would he cancel all our arrangements? We were also prepared to be asked a lot of political questions, about dialectical materialism and the finer details of the Leninist-Stalinist doctrines and we knew very little about such things. We were supposed to go to seminaries—everybody was supposed to—but we never went. We pleaded that we were much too busy to study Communist theory after our strenuous daily task and although such an excuse could not be officially accepted, nobody ever bothered to do anything about us. Now—we thought—Rákosi himself would find out that we had not fulfiilled our most elementary duties to the Party and had remained utterly ignorant of all the absorbing and thrilling details in the history of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) Party. We were also prepared for a vociferous and never-ending pep talk in that confused Party jargon we not only hated but did not even understand.

A few minutes before four o'clock we appeared in Akadémia-ucca (Academy Street) at Party Headquarters. Our first surprise was to see that there were no armed police detachments or soldiers (we still do not know whether they were concealed somewhere or not, but certainly there was not even a solitary policeman in sight). We were received by a porter to whom we gave our names, saying that we wanted

to see Comrade Rákosi. He was clearly expecting us and sent someone with us to a waiting room. Here the person who had accompanied us asked us very politely to wait a few minutes. Comrade Rákosi was busy at the moment but would not be long.

Five minutes later a secretary came out, leaving the door open behind her.

"Comrade Rákosi is ready for you now. This way, please."

We were led into a large and beautiful room. Rákosi's desk was at the far end of the room and he was just getting up to greet us with a broad and friendly smile.

"Good day, children," he said. "How are you? Come here and take a seat."

We nearly fainted. These words sound simple and natural to any Western reader but it was a very pleasant, almost incredible surprise to us. First of all, the greeting "Good day" had been almost completely forgotten—at least it was hardly ever used—in Budapest. It had been replaced by the Communist slogan "Liberty" and this idiotic greeting was repeated millions of times every day by workers and ministers of state, by road sweepers and generals. And now here was the all-powerful Rákosi himself, the dictator of Hungary and Stalin's personal friend, greeting us with a treacherous but human and natural "Good day." Secondly, his smile. His first sentence made it absolutely clear that he was neither a monster nor a parrot repeating Party slogans but—in personal contact, at least—a kind, agreeable and polite little man. Yes, "little" man because one of our first impressions was his small stature. We had suspected that he was no giant but he had always been photographed in such a way that he looked taller than he really was. Now when he sat back at his table I had the feeling that his legs did not touch the ground.

After some preliminary remarks which made it clear to us that he knew everything about our lives and surroundings and which also put us at ease, he said a few words about our mission. It went something like this:

"Now, children, I am sure you realize that you are the recipients of a great honor. You are among the first Hungarian artists to be sent to the Soviet Union—although later I hope to send many more. Now I should like to ask you to be modest when you get there. Certain things will seem primitive to you and you may be inclined to acquire a feeling of superiority. You may say to yourselves, "We have come from the West." Do not make such a mistake and do not try to look down on the Russians. They are good-hearted people, charming people—but much more than that. I know them well—they are a great people and we have every reason for looking up to them. But I do not want to tell you now what to think about the Russians. You will form your own—and, I am sure, very favorable—views. All I want to tell you is: be modest. You are the very first people to represent the Hungarian Theater over there and consequently you represent, to some extent, the whole country."

All this sounded simple, reasonable, and kind. He was not talking to us like the great boss giving instructions and expecting to be obeyed. What he said sounded like good and paternal advice given in our own interests. Rákosi went on:

"Pista, I want to tell you something else. Do not get married in the Soviet Union. Do not marry a Russian woman. You are not going to the Soviet Union to marry but to learn and to bring home the fruit of what you learn."

He looked at me with a twinkle in his eyes:

"I could tell you one or two things about women, Pista. Believe me, the best thing is to leave them alone."

He stopped for a moment and then went on:

"The same applies to you, too, Nora. Do not get married over there. We do not want to export dancers to the Soviet Union. They do not need them. We need Russian-trained ballerinas here, so please come back."

Then he smiled broadly:

"Anyway you *will* come back. And six months after your return you will marry each other."

While he was talking we looked around the room. It was an attractive room, impressive but not flashy or overawing. Busts of Lenin and Stalin stood near the desk. Rákosi had a little crystal ball or globe in his hand, with which he kept playing, turning it over with his fingers while talking to us.

He summed up his warning once again:

"Come back and show us what you have learned in the Soviet Union. One day perhaps Hungarian ballet will achieve the same high standards. But that day's far away."

He asked us whether we had any questions to ask.

"Yes, Comrade Rákosi," said Nory. "My mother is very worried about my departure."

"I know," nodded Rákosi. "You have never been away from her for one single night all your life."

"That is so," said Nory. "And I wonder whether I would be permitted to phone her from Moscow every now and then?"

"Why every now and then? You may ring her up every night if you wish."

Rákosi was as good as his word. Nory actually did ring her mother up from the Soviet Union every single night for six months.

Then Rákosi asked us:

"Are you members of the Party?"

I felt myself turning pale. So it was coming, after all.

"No," I said.

"And of the DISZ?" (meaning the Hungarian version

of the Komsomol, the Communist youth organization).

"No," I confessed.

"Never mind," said Rákosi. "It does not matter at all. We have enough good Party members but we haven't enough good artists. You do not need to become members of the Party to dance really well. Later, if you are interested, if you have time for politics and are really convinced that we are following the right road—as we certainly are—then you join. But, until then, you concentrate on your art and forget about everything else you do not care for."

He stood up and held out his hand to us. "Good-by. Pista, good-by, Nora," he said. "Good luck. And as soon as you are back, come to see me again and tell me all about your experiences."

We left the room feeling dazed. We had never expected to have gentle and friendly feelings for Rákosi but now, we had to admit, we had come to like him. What he said about joining the Party was shrewd politics, of course, but it sounded well. We met him often afterwards. I know of his deeds and I know that he is responsible for a great many harmful and, indeed, terrible things. But I am not writing the history of the Hungarian Communist (Bolshevik) Party, nor Rákosi's biography. I am recording our own personal impressions. And personally we always found Rákosi a warm-hearted, kind and friendly man, free of pomposity and full of sincerity and goodwill towards us.

Five days later we spent two hours on a Danube steamer. We wanted to see Budapest once again and although Nora was gay and optimistic, I had a definite foreboding that I was saying farewell forever to the city. My feelings amounted to certainty rather than foreboding: yet—like so many mysterious forebodings—they were utterly wrong.

Next morning we and four other passengers boarded a

Russian military plane at Budaörs airfield. The sad and desperate face of Nory's mother was the last picture that stuck in our minds. We took off, stopped at Lvov, in Poland, for an hour and on September 15, 1949, we landed on Moscow airfield which, at six o'clock in the evening, was already wrapped in complete darkness.

PART IV: RUSSIA AND AFTER (NORA)

1. Arrival

At the airport we were received by a member of the Hungarian Legation, a lady called Julia, who was very helpful.

"There is no room booked for you in any hotel," she told us cheerfully. "We have no idea where you are going to study. Nor do we have any idea where you are going to live. Or what you are going to live on."

Pista nodded. His nod implied: "That is a great comfort. We are extremely grateful." But he said nothing.

"We have heard something about a scholarship but we know nothing about it officially," she went on. "No money has arrived for you. But don't worry, it will work out all right one way or another."

In spite of her words her manner was so reassuring that we did not worry. We were driven to the Hungarian Legation where for six days we enjoyed the hospitality of Mr. Ferenczi, the Hungarian Minister. He, too, was kind and helpful. He told us not to worry, things would sort themselves out and meanwhile we could make ourselves at home in his house until we got further instructions. We spent a lot of time with Mr. Ferenczi and talked a great deal about the theater, opera and

the arts, and entertained each other with anecdotes. Politics were never mentioned, except on one occasion, when we discussed the case of László Rajk. Rajk—it may be remembered—was one of the leading lights of the Hungarian Communist Party who, for some time, was regarded as Rákosi's rival and successor. He had been in charge of the Ministry of the Interior and consequently of all the police forces of the country—including the all-powerful political police. It came as a great surprise when one day Rajk changed his job and was promoted or demoted—no one was quite sure at that time—to be Minister of Foreign Affairs. It soon became clear that the change of portfolio was a simple—if unusual—preliminary to his downfall. Rajk—like all the Police Ministers of the Soviet Union including Beria—was charged with the vilest crimes under the sun and his trial began while we were staying at the Legation in Moscow. Rajk pleaded guilty to all the charges and true to precedent accused himself of wild and incredible villainy. As the trial proceeded in Budapest it was, naturally, widely discussed in Moscow and it was Mr. Ferenczi who explained to us that not only were all the charges against Rajk true and well-founded but his real crime was even worse: he wanted to be the Hungarian Tito—in other words he wished to become the leader of National Communism instead of following the guidance and policy of the Soviet Union. This was criminal madness, added Mr. Ferenczi, and no punishment was too severe for such crimes. Rajk was sentenced to death and executed. Soon after our visit Mr. Ferenczi was recalled to Budapest, accused of having been a "Rajkist"—an accomplice of Rajk—arrested, tried and hanged.

Six days after our arrival, Julia took us to M. Garijainov, who was in charge of all matters connected with the Russian theater. M. Garijainov told us that we were to study in

Leningrad because the best ballet school of the Soviet Union was in that city. The term in Leningrad would not start, however, for another month and until the opening of the school we were to stay in Moscow. We would have opportunity there, too, to practice—so that we should remain in training—but otherwise our sole duty would be to attend performances in the Grand Theater and watch ballet. A box or two seats would be set aside for us every evening. We would leave the legation, he continued, and live in the National Hotel which, we knew, was Moscow's best hotel. All our expenses would be paid by the Hungarian Government but we would be given 600 rubles (about one hundred fifty dollars) pocket money from the Soviet Government.

We thanked M. Garijainov for his kindness and later in the afternoon moved to two beautiful and luxurious rooms in the National Hotel. The hotel, which is on the Red Square, opposite the Kremlin, is one of the best luxury hotels in the world. It may be a showpiece—it is mostly reserved for foreign visitors—but it is excellent. Our rooms were the last word in comfort, the service was perfect and the food, although strange, was also very good. We could order whatever we wanted to and all we had to do was to sign a chit before we rose from the table. The first evening I ordered *Omelette Surpris*—and I certainly did have a surprise with it. The omelette was filled with ice cream.

Supper over, we went to the Bolshoi Theater and saw Lepeshinskaya in *Don Quixote.* No adjectives can describe my delight. It is sufficient to say that I cried during her performance—something I had never done before and have not done since.

We spent a quiet and uneventful month in Moscow. We enjoyed ourselves but saw little of the place and what we saw was not characteristic of it. One day before our departure

Pista, while running downstairs, tripped over something and fell, twisting his ankle. He could not put his weight on his leg for an hour and went on limping afterwards for quite a few days. He was still limping when we arrived in Leningrad.

At Leningrad Station we were received by a member of the Hungarian Consulate who took us straight to the Mariensky Theater. There we were received by M. Gusev, the Director of Ballet. We knew M. Gusev. When Lepeshinskaya was in Budapest, M. Gusev had been her partner.

He received us kindly and took us down to the stage. We were to give a demonstration—he told us on our way down—so that they should have some idea how much we knew. I walked down and Pista followed me, still limping. In the dressing room we were received by a young girl, Katioushka. She was of Hungarian origin. As she still spoke Hungarian fairly well, she acted as our interpreter for the first days. Katioushka gave me her own training dress and advised me to wear it. The Russians wear an old-fashioned, traditional and very pretty dress at rehearsals and Katioushka pointed out that it would make a good impression if I were dressed in Russian fashion. So I put the dress on and went down to the stage.

A terrible shock awaited me. There were about 250 people sitting in the auditorium—the entire *corps de ballet,* all the soloists and a number of people belonging to the administration.

An elderly lady—I did not know then who she was—received us. She looked stern and unfriendly. We had to go to the bar and do some basic exercises and then go on with our demonstration at the center. Pista—who was called Stepan—did not complain about his foot and, indeed, did whatever he had to do faultlessly and beautifully. He was

Nora dressed for a Russian peasant dance

Nora and Istvan rehearsing

asked whether he could do a *tours en air*. He did sixteen double tours in the air—which is an unsurpassed feat. The old lady nodded but said nothing.

Then she turned to me. I, too, had to do some variations and then she asked:

"Can you do a *fouetté*?"

She uttered the word in such a way as though she had not expected the little barbarian girl to know what she was talking about.

"Shall I do sixteen or thirty-two?" I asked.

"Thirty-two," she said coolly.

I performed the thirty-two *fouettés* (a kind of pirouette in which the foot in the air makes a whipping motion) and when I finished, loud applause broke out.

I felt more at ease but the stern expression on the old lady's face did not mellow. She turned round, walked to the far end of the stage and held a brief conference with M. Gusev and a few others. Then she came back and declared:

"We have made our decision. Stepan will be taken in hand by Peter Ivanovich Gusev. Stepan is to be here every morning at nine as Peter Ivanovich will work with him before starting his own daily work. Nora will have her lessons with me. She is to be here at ten-thirty every morning. She will have one hour in the top class where, however, no leading soloists or ballerinas appear. At eleven-thirty she will have an hour with the soloists and ballerinas. We start tomorrow. That's all."

She turned round and left the stage without saying good-by or taking any further notice of us.

I told Katioushka in the dressing room that Pista was lucky to have Gusev himself as his instructor. But who on earth was that angry and unpleasant little lady who was to be my teacher? I asked.

Katioushka looked at me with surprise and bewilderment.

"She is Agrippina Yakelna Vaganova," she replied.

It was a magic name. Now I understood why the old lady had been surrounded with the greatest respect. Vaganova had been one of the great ballerinas of the Czarist and Soviet Ballet and latterly had become one of the outstanding teachers of the world, if not the greatest of them all. I knew that the name of Vaganova was revered among teachers of ballet and I knew that she had been the teacher of some of the most famous ballerinas—Ulanova, Danilova, Yemionova and Duginskaya among them; but I did not know then that I had just met one of the kindest and most lovable persons I was ever to meet. I did not know that Vaganova was to be for me one of the very few truly great personalities I was to be privileged to meet and know really well during my life.

2. The Cross

It was only after our long and exciting visit to the theater that we were taken to our new hotel. This was the Hotel Astoria opposite the Isakievsky Church, near the Neva—just as beautiful, comfortable and luxurious as the Hotel National in Moscow. We liked Leningrad from the first moment we saw it. It is a much more beautiful city than Moscow, having kept a great deal of its magnificent and imperial beauty from the days of St. Petersburg. We liked our rooms too. Here, however, after the first few days our eating arrangements were changed, very much to our disadvantage. The Hungarian Government wanted to save money, which was natural and for which we did not blame them. We were given a certain allowance—in addition to our pocket money,

paid to us by the Russians—with which to feed ourselves in the canteen of the theater or elsewhere. The food outside the theater was appallingly poor in quality but sufficient in quantity. It happened sometimes—though not too often—that we felt very hungry because we were short of cash. But we did not really care. We were much too absorbed in our work to care for prosaic things like mere food.

Our first appearance had gone off well—we knew—and our introduction had been a success. Still we realized from the first day that we had plenty to learn. It was quite obvious that Russian Ballet was something far above anything we had seen before and we knew that if we could only take advantage of our opportunities we should develop into dancers of a class different from the one we were in.

Next morning Pista and I took the No. 3 trolley-bus and went to the theater. As Pista's lesson began earlier I had an hour and a half to while away. I saw him go to his lesson and saw him come back. At nine o'clock a young athlete left me and crossed a little bridge a flight higher up; he was boisterous and gay; his steps were elastic, his demeanor radiated self-confidence and sprightly youthfulness. Ninety minutes later I saw the return of a wreck. He was tottering and stumbling over his own legs. He seemed a cross between a drunk and a pathetically old and infirm beggar. He stared into space and as he was recrossing the bridge I wondered whether he would be able to make the last twenty yards or would his knees give in before he reached me. At long last he arrived. He looked at me for a long time but did not speak. Then he said:

"I can't bear it. Let's go home."

A few minutes later my own lessons started and I soon understood what he meant. The training was tiring and exhausting. But words like "tiring" and "exhausting" do not

really convey what I mean. There is a stage the human body reaches when you feel that you just simply have no strength left to move even your little finger. I reached such a stage and awaited blissful and total collapse when my responsibilities would cease and I would be taken out on a stretcher to recover. But I did not collapse. Instead, I heard Vaganova's loud dry voice:

"Do it again!"

And I did the exercise again. And again.

Vaganova was seventy-two years old then. She was curt, sometimes rude; she was a tyrant and an absolute authority. We dreaded her and loved her and knew that she was the best ballet teacher one could dream of. Every day I felt that I knew more than the day before; after each lesson I had more self-confidence, more knowledge and, at the same time, I felt more clearly how little I knew and how much there was to learn not only here, in Leningrad, but every day, throughout my future dancing life.

I began to notice that my love and admiration for Vaganova were not unreciprocated. I felt that she liked me and soon enough it was obvious to all that I had become Vaganova's favorite pupil.

"Yemionova was my favorite," she said more than once before the whole class, "and you, Noroutchka remind me of her."

Vaganova's favors did not help to make me popular in the eyes of my fellow students or the other ballerinas. In Russia, of course, you are supposed to be above small personal vanities and live only for your work. It is true that they take ballet more seriously than we did in Budapest or people do in the West—but to expect ballerinas to shed their personal vanities is to expect them to become inhuman. Once Duginskaya, the truly great ballerina, did not do something

to Vaganova's satisfaction and the old teacher turned to me:

"Noroutchka, show her how to do it."

I showed her. I very much doubt whether I did the exercise better than she, or indeed as well as she. But Vaganova praised me too generously and I knew that such things did not increase my popularity. However on the whole, I must say, my Russian fellow students were kind and generous to me and, apart from one or two occasions, I met with very little ill will or jealousy. And those few occasions only confirmed my feelings that the Russians, too, are human beings and not the automatons which their regime tries to create.

Once in the first few days Vaganova's wrath was turned against me. I was studying Russian very industriously and so was Pista. I was making some progress but, needless to say, my knowledge was still very limited. We all called Vaganova "Agrippina Yakelna." For one reason or another I could never remember the name "Yakelna." So, on one occasion, I called her "Agrippina."

"What did you say?" she asked me with a dark glow in her eyes which made me shiver. "What did you call me?"

"Agrippina," I repeated. I wished I could remember her other name but it was gone from my mind.

"Listen, Noroutchka," she said softly and in an ice-cool voice, "Listen, my girl, I like you it's true. But do not try to take advantage of that and do not dare to be impertinent. I won't have you or anyone else calling me 'Agrippina.' "

I said I was sorry and told her I had no idea in what my grave crime consisted. I went on:

" 'Agrippina' means teacher and the second word is your name, isn't it? I am sorry if I made a mistake, but I didn't think it was such a crime to call you simply 'teacher' or 'mistress.' "

She burst out laughing:

"'Agrippina' means 'mistress?' Good gracious, Noroutchka, you foreigners are such fools. . . ."

The matter was closed much more amicably than I could have dared to hope a minute earlier. I remembered to call her "Agrippina Yakelna" but it was only weeks or months afterwards that I fully realized the degree of my rudeness in calling her simply "Agrippina."

The days and weeks passed and we managed to have a glimpse of life outside the theater. Or rather we could not help noticing a few things. I am ashamed to confess that we made no effort to look round. There were a few things, however, which forced themselves on my attention. I soon found out that the luxury of the hotel was in sharp contrast with life everywhere else in Leningrad. I could not help noticing that women were badly and shabbily dressed. They had neither good material nor tolerable dressmakers and they had no taste into the bargain. The evening dresses we saw paraded in the corridors of the theater were of nightmarish quality. On the other hand we were deeply impressed by the courtesy and deference shown to all women. It is the Americans who are supposed to put their women on a pedestal; but they are left behind in this respect by the Russians. This is amazing because it is a specifically bourgeois attitude and unacceptable on Bolshevik principles. But nothing can kill the deep and admiring respect for their ladies which the Russians—or is it only the inhabitants of Leningrad?—cherish. I often saw men and women out shopping together and the men simply carrying the basket.

Before long I grew very fond of the Russians. They are great-hearted, very sentimental and easy going. And yet they are extremely temperamental, too; they are subject to sudden and violent fits of temper when they do things they regret afterwards. But normally they will do anything for

you if you get on their right side, and any Russian will take his one and only shirt off his back for you if you need it.

They are all convinced they have a wonderful life, and that —thanks to the achievements of their admirable system of government—they have a much higher standard of living than people in the West. They are all convinced nationalists—Russia is the most wonderful country in the world and the Russians the most wonderful people. Propaganda has had a thorough and lasting effect. They believe what they read in their papers—at least the overwhelming majority of them—and consequently they are pleased with their government and believe that the British, but especially the Americans, are their mortal enemies who hate them because they envy them.

Stalin—who was still alive then—was much more than a politician, much more even than a great politican or a statesman of historic stature. Stalin was a demigod. They hardly ever discussed Stalin—he was not a subject for profane discussion. A bust of Stalin stood in the theater vestibule and I often watched pupils as they passed it. They would turn towards the figure and murmur something. It was not a put-up job—not to please their superiors or to fool the observant and omnipresent eyes of the political police. It was a sincere, almost religious act; they were paying homage to a superior being.

The ballet students also had a religious attitude towards their art. Their discipline and strength was, we thought, unequalled and scarcely conceivable. Their art was indeed on a very high level. I have already mentioned that intrigues were as rife in Leningrad theater life as anywhere else. It cannot be all the same to a ballerina whether she or her keenest rival is to dance the leading role in a new ballet. Even a Russian ballerina will do her best to get the big parts. But somehow, I had the feeling, dancing meant more to them than just the

external success it may bring. It amounted almost to a religion with all of them—whether they belonged to the *corps de ballet* or were celebrated and beloved soloists and stars. Dancing was a satisfaction in itself. The reason may be the intoxicating appeal of self-expression in a society where self-expression was not only frowned upon but, in many cases, regarded as a crime.

One day—it was not long before Christmas—Pista and I were summoned to M. Gusev's office.

"You still have a great deal to learn," said Peter Ivanovich. "But if you go on as you have been doing, you will be given a chance of appearing on our stage."

We could hardly believe our own ears. To be allowed to dance on the stage of the Mariensky Theater was a distinction we had never dreamed of. Never before (or since) had foreigners been invited to dance in any Russian theater among Russian artists. Later, we heard that Gusev had had to write to Moscow on our behalf and his suggestions had been very carefully considered in high places.

M. Gusev went on:

"You, Noroutchka, will dance in *Les Sylphides* and the *Blue Bird* and you, Stepan, in the *Red Poppy*. You will also appear in *The Sleeping Beauty* and in *Don Quixote* together. You will hear more about this. The hardest possible work will begin tomorrow. The present soft kind of training is over. We don't want you to bring shame upon yourselves. And on us."

As soon as I got home to my room in the hotel, I ran to my bed for the little gold cross hidden underneath my pillow. I believed in that little cross and prayed to it whenever something important happened to me. In Leningrad I always hid it under my pillow because I knew that religion was just tolerated—or sometimes not even tolerated—in Russia and

as a foreigner and a guest I did not wish to offend their anti-religious susceptibilities.

The cross wasn't there. I searched the bed, tearing the sheets off, going through the blankets. But it was of no avail. The golden cross had gone and the whole world seemed to collapse over me. I felt that my appearance on the Leningrad stage would be a flop. I would be the first non-Russian to appear in the ballet and I would fail miserably. I cried throughout the night—except when I got up to make renewed and unsuccessful searches for the cross. Next morning I was a wreck and I had a good mind to turn down Gusev's invitation and the great chance of a lifetime.

Someone knocked on my door. It was one of the girls employed in the hotel. She looked frightened as she came in.

"I have to apologize to you," she said. "I have done a terrible thing."

"What did you do?" I asked but I was not really interested.

"I took away the little golden cross you keep under your pillow," she said with her eyes cast down. "You see, we have no such things in Russia. We cannot get them. And I wanted to pray. I had to pray. It is very important. I hope you are not angry with me."

No, I was not angry.

"May I keep the cross for another two days?" she implored. "It would make all the difference to me if I could."

I looked at her. Her eyes shone with hope and fear.

"Of course, keep it," I said. "Keep it for two more days."

Two days later I found the golden cross under my pillow again. I knew now that things would go well—after one single hitch foreshadowed by the disappearance of my cross. What would that hitch be? I asked myself. Then I laughed it off—really, I told myself, I must not be quite so silly and superstitious.

And then, a few days before my first night, I fell ill with tonsillitis and could not appear on the stage as scheduled.

3. Vaganova

THE rehearsals for these performances were much more strenuous even than the normal training. Vaganova was merciless and expressed her dissatisfaction in no uncertain terms. She put the greatest emphasis on all movements; arms and head were just as important as the legs. One wrong movement with one little finger was enough to bring down her thunderous disapproval. On the other hand, nothing could be so rewarding and satisfying as a half-approving nod and a friendly grunt from her.

Pista's training was even more severe. On the day of his first appearance in *Blue Bird* he had to rehearse his part—from the beginning to the very end—about five times and when he was hardly strong enough to stand on his legs, he was ordered to do some strenuous exercises at the bar. For the first time in his life Pista protested to Gusev but he replied:

"I want you to feel strong and light."

Then a misfortune befell me. I was taken to bed with tonsillitis.

As the great day approached, I realized that I would not be well enough to appear with Pista and that someone else would have to take my part. I was told that strong lemon-tea would do me a great deal of good, but lemon was not available in Russia—or only very rarely and at a very high price.

I had a high temperature. I had just talked to my mother on the telephone—as I did every day—and she was anxious and excited about my approaching *début* on the Russian stage —which had been proudly reported and commented upon

in all the Hungarian papers, too. She was happy and I did not want to worry and upset her with the news of my illness. However, her looking forward to my success which—I knew—was not to be or was, at least, to be postponed, made me feel even more wretched and miserable. It was about 11 P.M. when I switched the light off and tried to go to sleep. Suddenly I heard a soft knock on the door. Before I had time to say anything, the door opened and Agrippina Yakelna Vaganova entered. She walked to my bed, placed a lemon in my hand, gave me a kiss and disappeared as quickly as she had come.

But even Vaganova's kindness could not cure me in such a short time and Pista was to dance with a Russian partner. Pista had a fair amount of stage fright but I was much more excited; nevertheless, I believe that neither of us was so keyed up, excited and anxious as Gusev. In a way, he had undertaken a grave responsibility by asking permission for this young foreigner to appear on the stage of the Mariensky Theater where—as we were fully aware—the very air still breathed the memory of great events and of immortal dancers of many generations. Gusev, quite apart from his personal responsibilities, took a Pygmalion kind of interest in Pista. Pista was his own creation; a work of art; and he was to be a masterpiece. Pista, to a certain extent, agreed with Gusev; he thought he had been an able and promising beginner on first coming to Leningrad and it was here that he had been turned into a dancer.

On Pista's first night I was well enough to go to the theater; and if I had not been well enough, I should have gone all the same.

Pista—when he first appeared on the stage—was received in deadly silence and there was a certain degree of tension in the air. But after the first few steps of his variations, sudden

applause broke out and it increased to such tremendous force that one could no longer hear the music. The applause grew into an ovation and Russian (as well as Latin) audiences are able to express their delight in a way the Anglo-Saxons are quite incapable of.

The Press was as generous as the public. Pista had been a sweeping success.

A few days afterwards my tonsillitis was better and my first night was approaching with alarming rapidity. I was to dance the Mazurka in *Les Sylphides*. Uhov was to be my partner and the second female part was given to Nona Yastribova with whom I was sharing a dressing room.

My strenuous training came to an end one day before the performance. According to Russian custom women dancers do not practice on the day of their stage appearance but stay at home, in bed, resting with their legs propped up in the air. I had received strict instructions not to leave my room—let alone the hotel—the whole dav, but I disobeyed my orders. I got up in the afternoon and sneaked into the Isakievsky Church next door. The church had been transformed into a museum but it still had the solemn atmosphere of the House of God. A few workmen were doing some job and there was a lot of noise, but I wanted to breathe the air there and felt rested and restored when I left a quarter of an hour later. I went to take a short walk on the bank of the Neva—hoping I should not meet anyone. Snow was falling on my face and the city was as white as the world of the Sylphides. I had not been brought up in the Russian tradition and I found a whole day's rest more tiresome than I should have found a whole day's rehearsal. But at last the evening came and I had to go to the theater.

I was quite calm when I arrived, nor did I feel any stage fright later on. Occasionally I still had violent coughing fits

and I had one about an hour before the performance. But even that did not worry me; it meant I would not have an attack on the stage.

When the curtain rises in *Les Sylphides,* all the dancers are on the stage. All went well. I heard the reassuring, indeed thunderous, applause but I knew, without any reassurance that I had been dancing well. We often say now—both Pista and I—that a long time will have to pass before we shall be able to dance so well again as we did in Leningrad. I became very emotional on the stage—I felt grateful and happy, my heart was full of love and I suddenly began to cry. I went on dancing but all the time I cried like a child. Tears were running down my cheeks making a frightful mess of my make-up. I could hardly see any more but I still went on dancing as though in a dream. When I finished, I knew and felt, that Vaganova had no reason to be ashamed of me.

People were shouting:

"Nora! Nora!" They were shouting other names, too, but the "Noras" were predominant. I would need to be superhuman not to be pleased with myself and proud. And I am not superhuman.

After the performance Pista dashed down to my dressing room and kissed my hand. "My little Sylphide . . ." he said. One has to know Pista and how reserved and shy he is to appreciate that such an exclamation for him ranked as the most frantic manifestation of abandoned delight.

In Russia there are no banquets. Indeed, there are not even cafés or little restaurants where artists congregate, have a late supper together and a post-mortem on the performance. So Pista and I returned to our hotel and, as it happened that our money was a little overdue, we dined on dry bread and still drier cheese. But to us it was a feast of feasts.

We danced many parts in Leningrad. Soon we appeared

together in the *Blue Bird* and the audience received us kindly —and more than kindly. We had success and we were happy, but the intoxicating joy of the two first nights could not be recaptured either in Leningrad or anywhere else at any time.

About a month later something terrible happened. Vaganova fell ill with pneumonia. Her condition was very grave and I heard that there was little hope of saving her since there was no penicillin available in Russia, except the Russian kind which was not very good. My mother had provided me with all kinds of medicines, among them English penicillin. So now I was able to send Vaganova a precious gift. She improved within a short time and I should like to believe that my penicillin had something to do with her rapid recovery.

She was still convalescing when I rang her up one day. By that time my Russian was fluent enough for me to converse with anyone without an interpreter. I asked her how she was and told her that I'd like to go and visit her. She was taken aback by this proposition. In Russia people do not visit each other at home. Private life is a branch of public life. People meet in public and going to someone else's apartment is a very unusual, rare and often suspicious occurrence. So Vaganova was silent for a few moments. Then she replied:

"Yes, do come. Come straight away. But don't tell anyone."

She lived with her son-in-law and his family. Vaganova's apartment was quite attractive but in prewar Budapest it would have passed as an extremely modest residence for a person of her status. There were seven people living in the small apartment. I was impressed by a beautiful Russian altar in one of the rooms—left behind from the old Czarist times.

Vaganova greeted me kindly. I sat down on her bed.

"I'm going to give you a book, Noroutchka," she said. "It is a book about me. It contains many pictures, too. Pic-

tures from my dancing years and pictures from my teaching years. I want you to remember me."

I told her that I would remember her without the book, too, but, of course, I should be delighted and grateful to have it.

"And I shall write something in the book. One day you may go abroad. I mean to the West. You may go to Paris and London—like Danilova."

She added: "Danilova was another pupil of mine,"—as though one needed to be told who Danilova was.

"If you go abroad, Noroutchka," she continued, "take this book with you. My few lines in it may help you. I think they still remember me over there."

She wrote a few lines and handed me the book. I did go "abroad" but I left Vaganova's book behind as I left all my other belongings.

She gave me three other pictures of herself and later said something which I shall never forget. I had just thanked her for the great trouble she had taken with me and told her how grateful I was. She brushed my gratitude aside and said:

"There are various ways of teaching. As a rule you teach because it is your duty. But some people mean a challenge to you and make you feel that teaching is a vocation. You were that kind of pupil, Noroutchka."

I left as quickly as I could because I knew I would break down and I did not want to cry in the sickroom. I never saw Agrippina Yakelna again. We had to leave Leningrad in a great hurry and a day or two earlier than anticipated and I did not have a chance of saying good-by to her. I wrote her many letters and received a few from her.

In 1951 I received a telegram in Budapest. It told me that Vaganova had died that day. Later I heard that the photographs of her favorite pupils were around her bedstead and mine was among a dozen others. Some of her pupils were with

her in her last hours; she asked her friends, pupils and relations to send telegrams to some of the others who could not be there.

I cried bitterly on receiving the news and my heart is still heavy when I think of Vaganova. She was a great personality and I loved her. I am not a worthy monument to her; but she lives on, not only in her pupils' hearts but also in their dancing.

4. Stanislavsky Brigade

As soon as we got back to Budapest we started working strenuously. The Hungarian newspapers wrote a great deal about our visit – the emphasis always being on Hungary's gratitude to the great Soviet Union, to Stalin and to the Soviet people. The Russians were our noble big brothers, they repeated many times, and our visit to Leningrad had only been another manifestation of their generosity and nobility of heart.

We received instructions to give a concert in the Opera. This was a great distinction because the Opera was only very rarely used for such purposes. The program we compiled consisted of six numbers; five of them we had learned in Leningrad. The sixth was a typical "decadent" Western number in Western style. We loved to dance it but had never had an opportunity to perform it publicly. Now, everybody supposed that we had picked up this number, too, in the Soviet Union, so it was received with rapturous admiration. The whole concert was a great success. We had to encore three of our six numbers–so it was very exhausting for us but we thought it worth while. We enjoyed the evening and we had the feeling that the audience enjoyed it,

too. The reviews and criticisms, however, were a little revolting. They were not only laudatory but obsequious; the critics wallowed in superlatives and fell back in admiration. Their vociferous adulation had, of course, very little to do with the quality of our performance. We had come from Russia, we had been taught in Russia, so we were wonderful and admirable; had we come from Paris or London and danced ten times better then—always assuming that we should have had a chance of dancing at all—we should have been deemed fifth-rate, provincial and inartistic.

A great deal had changed in Budapest during the six months we had been away. The atmosphere in March, 1950, was shockingly different from that of September, 1949. When we left, the Party had a commissar in the office. This commissar was Comrade Mihály, with whom we had had dealings when our journey was originally arranged. Now Comrade Mihály was gone and replaced not by another, but by a host of others. All the offices swarmed with various members of the Party machine. There were new and strange faces everywhere. We did not know what these comrades were doing but they were very much in evidence.

We were also warned that there were a few spies and informers among the dancers and singers, too. I still do not know whether this was true or not but we believed it and became even more cautious than before. We were frightened and subdued. The change did not really amount to much in practice but the carefree and bohemian air of the Opera was now charged with tension and suspicion.

Stalin's portraits had been hung up in all possible and impossible places. I was not particularly fond of Stalin but had nothing personal against him; in fact, I did not care very much about Stalin, one way or the other. But his ubiquitous portraits made me—like many others—resentful; we felt

provoked and outraged. One had the feeling that the famous "wise and benevolent eyes" followed one everywhere just like the gentle attention of the secret police.

Industrial production on the Soviet pattern had also started during our absence. There was a great deal of talk of Stakhanovites (shock-workers), and norms. All the factories were full of production charts: showing what the target was, whether it had been fulfilled, overfulfilled or not reached.

The walls of the factories were covered by wall journals containing, in addition to parochial news, a great deal of information, production statistics and other data. The workers were organized in brigades and each brigade had its own target and plan within the larger plan. The brigades kept challenging one another to production competitions. This method may or may not have been right in a factory—I do not claim to be an expert in industrial production. But all the details were slavishly copied in the Opera—and there all this looked like a feeble and rather pathetic caricature of something rather silly in itself.

We had our own wall journal full of meaningless news—the items of which were either well known to everybody or else utterly uninteresting. "Production" data were also given. They read something like this: "Dancers! This year we have appeared in 50 performances. Our target for the year is 60 performances. Let us overfulfill our plan!" The whole thing was utter nonsense. No one believed that we would be better artists if we performed sixty times a year instead of fifty times and, in any case, we had no say in the matter. Besides, more ballet would have meant less opera—but it is really embarrassing to go on explaining why the whole thing was stupid and idiotic. No one believed in it and no one took it seriously—and, of course, this hypocrisy was quite unbearable because nobody dared to laugh openly. Yet, the

industrial organization of the Opera did not stop even here. We were also organized in brigades and had to challenge each other. To do what? Nothing at all. There was no scope whatever in competition—no one could overdance his role by 138 per cent or overfulfill his plan by dancing a little more than the music permitted him. But we did form our brigades, challenged each other, accepted the challenge and left the matter there. Pista was a member of the Stanislavsky Brigade and I—if I remember correctly—of the Lepeshinskaya Brigade. One day our brigade did something praiseworthy and each member was awarded a biography of Stalin, full of pictures. I teased Pista a great deal because I left him behind in "Socialist rivalry." Soon enough, however, he won two books: a biography of Lenin, and another one called *Red Star*. I was badly beaten.

One amusing aspect of the picture was that our comrades were supposed to follow the great and glorious example of the Soviet Union. But we had just returned from the Soviet Union and knew perfectly well that there was no trace of this idiocy over there. Dancers danced in the Mariensky Theater and did not pose as Stakhanovite bricklayers. All this was the aggressive overzealousness of the convert; of the convert who remains at heart unconverted.

We were ordered to take part also in seminaries. In these seminaries someone reads aloud and "analyses" the day's leading article in *Szabad Nèp*—the official party organ—and instructs his pupils in Marxist theory or Party history. Pista turned up once at these seminaries; I not even once. We told the good comrades that we were busy. We could not have got away with such a superficial, indeed cynical, excuse —in those days no one could accept the thesis that dancing was more important for a ballet dancer than learning the history of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) Party—but for

another invitation to visit Comrade Rákosi. People thought that we were under his personal protection, so stopped worrying us.

The new Party man—or rather one of the many new Party men—told us one morning that Comrade Rákosi wanted to see us and we were to appear in his office, in the Akadémia Street, at 4 P.M. on the same day. By now we knew the routine. We were received by the same commissionaire, sent up to his office, asked to wait a minute in the anteroom, and then led into Rákosi's room by his secretary.

"Good afternoon, children," he said, and stood up when we came in.

He told us that he had heard and read about our triumphs and was pleased with us. In Leningrad we had received a diploma—proving that we had passed the highest examinations of the ballet school—and we had brought this with us to show to Mr. Rákosi. He asked us many questions, inquired about our impressions and was as kind, polite and natural as ever. It was such a relief not to hear that awful dialectical Marxist jargon. In the whole of Hungary, Rákosi was the only person who did not talk like a Communist.

He asked us where we lived and whether we needed an apartment. A new apartment was beyond any mortal's dream in Hungary then as it is today. Pista told him that he had a room with a family who looked after him very kindly and he was happy there. But I told Mr. Rákosi that we were not so lucky as Pista, and my mother and I would be extremely happy if we could get an apartment.

"You'll have an apartment," said Mr. Rákosi and then went on inquiring what our further plans were. We told him about our forthcoming concert and he said he would come along to see us.

Rákosi was as good as his word in all respects. He came

along to our concert and about a fortnight later I was informed that I had been allotted a charming apartment in Petőfi Square—one of Budapest's loveliest spots, on the bank of the Danube.

5. The First Chance

One summer day in 1950 we were summoned once again to the office of the Opera. We were received by the chief Party representative who gave us an appointment in the Ministry of People's Culture. In a certain department of this ministry we were later informed that we were to visit Bulgaria.

Instructions of this kind were repeated several times thereafter and they always followed the same pattern. We were never asked whether we wanted to go somewhere or not: we were given instructions like soldiers to march. Nor were we consulted even on our own repertoire; we had no say in it. We were given orders: "On such and such a day you will dance such and such numbers at this place or that." I cannot say that we felt gravely insulted by this treatment. We realized that it was a simple question of manners and that Communist manners were bad—politeness being an atavistic survival of the bourgeois era. The nature of artists, however, being even worse and more uneven than human nature in general, we found these curt instructions, relating to our itinerary and especially to our own programs, more and more tiresome. On the other hand, we knew perfectly well that grumbling would not only be inadvisable but utterly unjustified. To be sent abroad was a rare distinction—even if "abroad" meant another satellite country, not the West. It was a privilege given to few. The team which traveled was practically always the same. Its core consisted of Mlle.

Annie Fischer, the great pianist and wife of Dr. Aladár Tóth, Director of the Opera; M. Ferencsik, a brilliant singer, and ourselves. Sometimes other people joined us but we four were always present and as we got on well with one another, we whiled away our time pleasantly during the long journeys. Now, apart from the moral prestige of these journeys and apart from the vast publicity they brought in their wake in two countries (our own and in the country visited), they brought in an enormous sum of money, too. We were extremely highly paid for these tours and, in addition, in the meantime we received our normal salaries at home.

So this time it was Bulgaria. We were given our timetable and the inevitable pep talk. We would be the guests of the Bulgarian people and would represent there the Hungarian workers, etc. etc.

In Sofia we were received like princes—or rather like heroes of the People's Democracies. Everyone was kind and attentive, we were photographed and interviewed ten times a day. There was, however, a heat wave in Sofia during our stay and dancing was not exactly pleasant in such conditions. Our unfortunate public, however, had an even tougher time. The big concert hall was overcrowded and people fainted in large numbers. They were borne out on stretchers one behind the other and the continuous coming and going of the stretcher bearers with recumbent figures, became a part of the performance and after a bit no one paid any attention to it.

The Hungarian team had a resounding success. One number of ours, called *The Cossack bids Farewell to his Bride*, we were ordered to dance everywhere. The Cossack goes into battle to save the fatherland while his bride stays behind. She is not keen to let him go but finally a sense of Socialist duty prevails and she sends him away. There is

some play with a red kerchief—I had to wave it and in the end Pista marches away using it as a red flag and brandishing it wildly. This number—which was not exactly our favorite, not because of its political implications but because of its crudeness—always brought the house down and, usually, we had to encore it. But we had one or two good numbers to dance as well, so we were quite happy.

We enjoyed our stay in Bulgaria. After our performances in Sofia we were given four wonderful days to rest at the seaside. The hotel—like all these showplaces—was excellent, the place had a poetic and, for us, strange beauty and, in the evenings, we could watch the folk dances of Bulgarian peasants performed with great skill, charm and gaiety.

Our plan was to go on to six or seven other towns in Bulgaria and repeat our concert performance. The tour had been planned for four weeks. However, as soon as we reached Varna, the second town on the list, we—Pista and I—received a telegram from Budapest ordering us to return without any delay because we were to be given another assignment.

We packed, said good-by to our colleagues and our hosts and flew back to Budapest. The World Youth Festival in Berlin was starting within a few days, we were informed, and we were to go there. It was explained to us that the festival was primarily political and the overwhelming majority of the delegates would be working youths, trade unionists, "peace fighters" and Party officials. But a team of artists was to go too, partly to entertain the delegates and partly to take part in an international competition where valuable prizes would be awarded.

"Before going"—the official in the Ministry concluded his instructions — "you will have to attend a camp for final training. You will also be given a DISZ uniform which you

will have to wear. No one will be allowed to go about in civilian clothes."

We did not mind the uniform too much. It consisted of a cream-colored skirt – or shorts for boys – and a blue shirt. The DISZ itself was the Hungarian Komsomol, the Communist Youth Organization. But going to a training camp was quite a different proposition. The thought of the interminable daily lessons and political indoctrination chilled us to the marrow. We put up a strong resistance to that idea. We told the official that we were tired—having just returned from an exhausting tour—and we needed rest if we were to give a good account of ourselves in Berlin. Furthermore, we had to go on with our rehearsals and practice, too, and we could not do that in the camp. In the end he gave in; we would be spared the camp but we had to wear the uniform.

We only spent a short time—I think only a couple of days —in Budapest between our arrival home from Sofia and departure for Berlin. We traveled by train and the journery was a nightmare.

At all the larger stations in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Germany there was a festive reception in our honor. We had to alight, queue up on the platform and listen to long speeches about the Soviet Union's determined and resolute fight for peace, the blessings of Communism and the wickedness of the imperialist powers. There was a slight improvement in Czechoslovakia because there, at least, we did not understand the speeches. In Germany we were quite amused by these receptions—until they grew unbearably monotonous. We did not understand German either but their method of oratory was a shattering and, at the same time, comic experience. They howled and roared; they shrieked and yelled. They rolled their bloodshot eyes and foamed at the mouth. In this way they assured us of their pacific nature, their desire

for world peace and their sentimental attachment to the dove.

In Berlin our quarters were in a suburb ten miles away from the center of East Berlin and the day journeys we had to undertake were tiring. The artists' team consisted of about twenty people and we were given a special bus and did not have to take part in the various conferences and did not have to sign resolutions. But every step we made was supervised and spied upon. Communication with West Berlin was open at that time—so the strictest measures were taken to stop members of the delegation from going over. The AVO men—agents of the political police—did not relax their Socialist vigilance for one single moment. Unless by accident; because later we had our chance to escape but let it pass.

We had to give concerts and take part in the international competition. Our dance won second prize after the Russians. In all numbers and all competitions the Russians won first prize. The juries had a majority of Russian members but even that was a superfluous safety measure: all the other members as well always gave the victory to the incomparable Soviet supermen. I must add in fairness that the Russian dancers were good. But I may add equally bluntly that we were better. I have a very great admiration for Russian dancing and I am fully aware of our debt to the Russians. I also know that had the best Russian dancers come to Berlin, they would certainly have deserved first prize. But the members of the Russian group in question, able and promising young people as they were, were mostly pupils of the ballet school and much too inexperienced. I say all this not to excuse our failure in not winning first prize—this was a foregone conclusion and we realized it. Yet I was outraged because I felt an injustice had been done. I was only nineteen then, but I still remembered the *Herrenvolk* theory of the Nazis and did not like the idea of the new *Herrenvolk* any better. We were the

better dancers; but they were the Russians—so we had to be content with second prize.

One evening we had to dance in one of the theaters, our appearance still being under the auspices of the international competition. The Germans had danced the night before and now it was up to the foreign visitors—including the Russians to give a demonstration. The Germans, to spite the Russians and the others, polished up the floor of the stage so beautifully and efficiently, that it was almost impossible to walk—let alone dance—on it. Trying to cope with this dangerous situation we gave the stage a thick coating of various kinds of powder. But part of the stage remained dangerously slippery and on the rest of it our Hungarian peasant boots—we were to appear in some folk dances—stuck in the thick pasty material. I dreaded going out on the stage and in a number—preceding ours and danced by the Bulgarian group—the leading ballerina fell on her nose. So I strongly refused to go out. Since the stage was not suitable for dancing, I said I would not dance. Our political watchdogs were sent for, but as the German conductor knew nothing about the trouble behind the scenes, he started playing our number. Pista got hold of me by the arm and dragged me out to the stage. Once there, I had no choice but to smile the most charming smile I could put on and do what I could. I did not fall nor did I sprain an ankle by a sheer miracle.

Pista asked me the next day whether I'd like to escape—to go over to West Berlin and not return. I said I would not go because of my mother but I advised him to go. He did not like this advice and declared that without me he would not go.

"Why?" I asked him. "After all we are not married."

"No," he replied. "We are not married. But if I go over

I'll have to start my career all over again. I do not want to go without my partner."

That made us all square. We went on discussing the pros and cons of an escape but I stood firm and refused to go.

Next morning there was an unpleasant scene in the theater. We were just about to rehearse when the rehearsal was unexpectedly transformed into a political meeting. A film cameraman had gone over to West Berlin to buy some photographic materials unobtainable in the East. He had spent about an hour in the forbidden part of the city and returned, hoping that his adventure would remain his own secret. But this was not to be; one of the detectives, disguised as a DISZ youth, reported him to the head of our mission.

About 200 members of the Hungarian delegation had to sit down in the auditorium and listen to an oration delivered to the culprit by our leader. "A decent self-respecting Hungarian working man"—the poor cameraman was told—"ought not to go over to the camp of the imperialist enemy." This was a shameful example, a wrong deed, an anti-Socialist action, etc. The leader concluded his very long and repetitive speech by remarking that, apart from his other crimes, the cameraman's action might create the impression that certain things were not available in the East while they were obtainable in the West. This was a false and harmful impression, he added. As we all knew that however harmful the impression may have been, this was in fact the case, we found this part of his speech rather entertaining and had to admire him for delivering it with a perfectly straight face.

When our leader finished, the cameraman stood up to make his self-criticism. He declared that he had been utterly wrong, that his step had been misguided and he made a solemn

promise never again to commit such a grave and foolish mistake.

Then he continued:

"There is only one thing I can plead in extenuation. The stuff I bought is extremely important and will be of great service in the interests of our people's democracy. There was no other way of obtaining these materials, but even so, I do admit and see now clearly—my step was foolish and criminal."

Although this last part of his self-criticism in referring to some material as unobtainable in the Democratic part of Berlin flatly contradicted the leader's main point, everyone pretended not to have noticed it. He was duly forgiven and taken back to the loving bosom of Communist fraternity.

In the evening we danced in the presence of President Pieck, Grotewhohl and Ulbricht and many other leading German Communists. There were more speeches, and many martial and threatening songs were sung about World Peace.

Next morning a party of us went rowing. Pista and I were in one boat and as we floated down the river we drew gradually away from the others behind. I noticed a watermelon lying peacefully on a field and as I was hungry, we got out and began on the melon. A peasant came up and we offered to pay for it, but he would not accept any money. We then asked him—all this in sign language—how far we were from West Berlin.

"Ten minutes," he showed with his fingers.

"Well, Nory?—what about it?" asked Pista. "There is no one near us; nobody has followed us. Let's take the plunge."

"I am not going," I said. "Go alone."

We climbed into the boat and rowed back to the others.

"We thought you were lost," someone remarked.

"No, we are not," Pista replied grimly.

Pista had a further chance of getting away which he almost took. Some of the male artists—among them Pista—were taken to watch a football match. On leaving the stadium there was such a tremendous crowd ahead that their guide and escort took them out through a side gate. On reaching the street, Pista saw small signs, about a hundred yards away, proclaiming the end of the "democratic sector." A dash—and he could easily have made it in the crowd. But he did not try it. He told me later that he did not want to go without his partner.

We decided not to escape but we also decided to go over to West Berlin to do a great deal of shopping. We had plenty of money and we wanted to buy good things. We knew that we might land ourselves in trouble but we felt our position was secure enough to stand up to any fuss. Anyway, as we meant to come back, our return would be a further shining proof of our devotion to the regime. Pista saw a Contax camera in an Eastern shop which he bought. We left all our other shopping for the next day in West Berlin.

But it was not to be. Next morning we heard that a worker —a member of the Trade Unionist delegation—had escaped and asked for political asylum in West Berlin. So we were all rounded up, given our prizes and various commemorative documents in an undignified hurry, hustled to the station and sent back home two days earlier than planned.

This journey had an epilogue. About a year later we were invited to dance at a matinée arranged for members of the political police. We were received there by an officer of the political police whom we had last seen in Berlin, dressed in cream shorts and a blue shirt, posing as a painter and looking around in the world with the dreamy eyes of an artist.

6. Russian Ballet Masters

WE went on practicing and having lessons from Russian ballet masters who came to Budapest and we learned a great deal from them. I should like to say a few words about these people, partly because they were an important influence on us and partly because their varied and colorful personalities make up, I think, a not uninteresting gallery.

While we were still in Leningrad, a Russian ballet master (the first in chronological order) arrived in Budapest. This was M. Vojnonnen, who was of Finnish origin. His first production—the *Nutcracker*—was an enormous success—perhaps the biggest the Opera had yet seen. So much so that it had to be performed about five times a week—an unheard of event since, as a rule, we had about three or four ballet performances a month, not five a week. The production was masterly, the *décor* beautiful and almost wastefully expensive. There was an unforgettable sea scene and also a most impressive and genuine stage snowstorm, unrivaled in any other production in my experience. Still a very attractive item in the repertoire, it has become the traditional piece for Sunday afternoon, mostly for the benefit of children. After our return we, too, had to learn the part and dance it but the initial triumph had been achieved in our absence and we had no part in it.

M. Vojnonnen's success proved to be his undoing. There was also a fatal misunderstanding between him and the political management of the Opera: they treated Vojnonnen too well and the gods—in Moscow—became envious or, at least, apprehensive.

M. Vojnonnen was a man of fantastic will power. He was a little too loud, rude and self-assertive, but we all appreciated his great knowledge and admired his art. His temper was not of the best and he could flare up—sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for no reason at all—very suddenly and in such cases he threw whatever lay to hand, light or heavy, at the offending ballerinas or musicians and stamped out of the auditorium. Whereupon his benign, taciturn and placid wife would run after him and pacify him with a few words and Vojnonnen invariably returned to continue rehearsal. These scenes may have looked somewhat rehearsed—Mme. Vojnonnen herself used to be a dancer, a member of the Moscow *corps de ballet*—but they were quite genuine. There was no doubt about Vojnonnen's temper or his wife's anxiety that he might do something foolish. Yet the exit in dudgeon, Mme. Vojnonnen's hurried scamper after her husband, the animated whispering and his prompt return followed such a routine that the scene was at least as amusing as it was frightening.

When they told Vojnonnen in Moscow that he was to go to Budapest he did not even know in which country it was. He arrived, looking shy and timid and badly dressed in shabby, ill-cut clothes and worn-out shoes.

But, as I have already said, he was the very first Russian ballet master to come to Budapest and he arrived at the height of the Stalin cult and Russian-worship. People bowed low before him and revered the very ground he trod on. For a long time he could hardly believe his eyes and ears. But the time came when he had to accept the fact: he—a person used to receiving orders and obeying them without murmur or comment—found himself expected to rule. He had only to express a desire—whether of an artistic or of a private nature—and it was fulfilled without delay. So his manners became

somewhat imperious and he came to believe that the obsequious adoration surrounding him was no more than his due.

The details of his contract had not been fixed before his arrival. He was asked by the Ministry what his conditions were to which he replied that he did not know. So the Ministry made an offer: he was to receive a certain huge sum as salary; a further huge sum for every ballet he produced; and yet a further huge sum for each performance of such ballets. On top of it all he was to receive a free suite in the Bristol, Budapest's showpiece hotel maintained to dazzle and mislead foreign visitors. Vojnonnen accepted and money started pouring in to him. I am sure that it is right to say—although I have no evidence to support my allegation—that the Hungarian People's Democracy never paid such a fantastic Hollywoodish salary to anyone before or afterwards. Mme. Vojonnen spent all her free time shopping and the couple were completely changed in no time. Their shabby ill-fitting clothes were discarded and replaced by the "export only" masterpieces of Hungarian *haute couture*. They bought furs and jewelry and watches and all the other treasures of a dream world—still obtainable in Hungary if one had the money to pay for them. Various Russian dance groups arrived in Budapest; Vojnonnen met all the dancers and sent princely parcels home with them to Russia—where his lavish generosity was widely commented upon in ballet circles. Vojnonnen was changing before our eyes; but in one important respect he did not change: he remained the fanatic priest of the ballet, and his teaching and stage work had an important and lasting influence in the Hungarian State Opera.

One day, quite unexpectedly, Mr. and Mrs. Vojonnen received a curt letter from Moscow instructing them to return forthwith to the Soviet Union. It was rumored that

Rákosi had heard about Vojonnen's riot of spending and also of the Opera's reckless outlay—Vojnonnen's visit was said to have cost more than 1 million forints, about $85,000—and that he himself had asked for the couple's recall; according to other rumors it was the prodigal parcels arriving in Moscow which caused their downfall. Be that as it may, they had to go and in sinister haste.

A number of dancers went to see them off at the station, Pista and I among them. The Vojnonnens turned up in their smart and outrageously Western traveling outfit, carrying many brand-new and luxurious suitcases. But then and there, a dark shadow fell over them. The train arrived; it had come from Berlin and was stinking and overcrowded. Most of the travelers were Russians, returning home. They were badly dressed, their faces were long and tired, their luggage consisted of ugly bundles and their children kept howling and yelling. They eyed the dandified Vojnonnens sourly. But the pampered and spoiled couple had no choice but to get in and find whatever room they could.

This was not the last we knew, or indeed saw, of the Vojnonnens. About a year after that scene at the station, a well-preserved, middle-aged man turned up in the Opera seeking a contract as a dancer. He was a Hungarian Communist who had managed to reach the Soviet Union, the land of his dreams, between the two wars and had spent twenty-six years there. Now, as Hungary had become a Communist state, he had returned and as he was a professional dancer he came to the Opera to see whether he could get an engagement. As he had uttered the magic words: "I come from the Soviet Union," he was accepted without much ado but, it should be added in all fairness, he was a perfectly efficient member of the *corps de ballet*. It was this man who told us that a little earlier he had been engaged by the Novosibirsk

Theater, in Siberia. A new ballet master arrived there, a man by the name of Vojnonnen. He was unaccompanied by his wife. The theater was quite a good one; in fact, they say it is larger than the Bolshoi Theater itself. All the same, Vojnonnen knew perfectly well that he had been expelled to Siberia. The gaiety of Novosibirsk compared ill with the gaiety of Budapest—even of Stalinized Budapest—and Vojnonnen became morose and frustrated. Our friend had heard of Vojnonnen's visit to Hungary and informed him proudly that he was a Hungarian. Whereupon the ballet master turned away from him in disgust and never spoke to him—never even looked at him—again.

Pista and myself visited Moscow in 1952 when, as it happened, Vojnonnen was also there, on a visit. We heard that he had to live on a beggarly salary in Siberia which was the reason why his wife could not accompany him. In Moscow she was able to find a job for herself and live on her own earnings. All trace of the sartorial splendor of their Budapest days had gone; they looked shabbier than ever—but this time it was not only their garments which were shabby and faded but their whole beings.

We met them at a reception, but they avoided us and all the other Hungarian artists as much as they could. They had aged greatly; they were two broken people.

Vojnonnen was followed by M. Pomomarev, a gentleman we knew from Leningrad as he, too, had given Pista occasional lessons. He was seventy, in bad health and he hated the very idea of being in Budapest. He was not allowed to bring his wife with him and his loneliness made him doubly miserable. He never complained to anyone, but his appearance and his manner of dealing with us eloquently proclaimed his sufferings. A few months after his arrival he fell ill with kidney trouble and died—maybe, because he preferred dying. His

body was flown back to Leningrad and buried in the earth he loved.

His successor was M. Messerer. He came from Moscow where he was—and still is—a soloist. Messerer is a strong personality and a man of great culture. When he came, the question of his contract had already been negotiated between our Ministry of Popular Culture and the Russian Legation and the mistakes committed in connection with the Vojnonnens were not repeated. Messerer received enough money to live in comfort but his way of living was certainly not ostentatious. He kept very much to himself. He shared an apartment with a Russian university professor and all his friends were Russians—mostly from the Legation. Privately we only saw him once: Messerer, a Russian film producer, and we two went down by car to the Balaton and spent a somewhat boring day together. M. Messerer was a silent man and not a great mixer; but he was an outstanding teacher.

The year 1952 saw the arrival of M. Zaharoff. He is one of the best of all ballet teachers in all Russia. The Russians obviously went out of their way to send really good people to us and the other satellites. Zaharoff was also an enthusiastic Communist. We knew him, too, from Leningrad as it was he who had produced us in the *Red Poppy* there. He speaks about five languages (including English) fluently and with a good accent, but he refused to talk anything but Russian and he communicated with us through an official interpreter. He was the only one who always kept in mind the political significance of a ballet instructor's position. He started his duties by delivering a long and eloquent speech on the beauties of Marxism, the blessings of Communism and the greatness of Russia, and repeated these little harangues whenever he had an opportunity or excuse. He also loved being photographed. If a press photographer appeared in the

theater he became elated, happy and keen and did his best to figure in all the pictures. He, too, kept to the company of Russians. He visited me once in my new apartment. Pista and two or three other people were present. Zaharoff only stayed half an hour. We met him once again privately at an official banquet given in his honor by members of the Hungarian Government. We represented the Opera. By that time I was the official *prima ballerina* and Pista the *premier danseur*. We shall remember Zaharoff as the man who was responsible for our greatest success and, perhaps, our most beloved part in a ballet version of Pushkin's famous poem, the *Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. To work with him was a pleasure because, in addition to his other accomplishments, he was a very good actor and mime, and always showed everybody what to do and how to do it. All his rehearsals were first class entertainment and, at the same time, we knew that we were in the hands of an admirable artist.

It was about this time that I married Pista.

7. A Bridal Reception

I WAS spending a short summer holiday in the Mátra mountains. One morning—before eight o'clock—I was called to the telephone. It was the nationalized Budapest "Hunnia" Film Company wanting to know whether I would be prepared to play the leading part in a film. I said I would. They added that there was no dancing in the film—it was an acting and singing role. In that case, I said, I should like to know more about the part and they, of course, wanted to see what I looked like on films.

They wanted me in the Budapest film studio at 2 P.M. the same day. I replied that this was quite impossible—even with the best will on earth, I simply could not make it. To which the producer, M. Bán, replied that he would come himself and fetch me by car. M. Bán and his assistant turned up before eleven and we did reach the studios in time. The trial shots were taken and I was driven back to the Mátra the next day. Three days later I was informed that the producer and his team thought I would be all right for the part but, before they could offer me a contract, they had to obtain the Minister's permission. I did not quite understand what the Minister had to do with the casting of a film but it was explained that he had a great deal to do with it and as I was a dancer and not a film actress, it was particularly important to get his approval. The permit arrived in due course and permission was also obtained from the Opera for me to be absent for a period of time. Then we all traveled to the charming country town of Pécs.

The film itself was extremely silly but I liked my part and some of the songs I had to sing. The story was typical Communist trash. I was a young worker in a factory and a good-looking boy was in love with me. The boy, however, was not a good worker but a chatterbox and a shirker. I tried to convert him and explain to him the beauty of work, his duties towards the Socialist state and People's Democracy. Once, when he wanted to kiss me, I would not let him until he had promised me that he would overfulfill his norm by 130 per cent. This—not unreasonably—was too much even for a young worker of the Stalinist epoch and he broke with me. Eventually, later in the story, we were reconciled, we got married and we both worked 145 per cent to the glory of Stalin and Hungarian Communist film production. This was the script. We had to stop working and to improve on it now and again; not because the script was too silly but because they

found it too good. To put it more clearly, all concerned were constantly afraid that objections might be raised against the film from the point of view of Communist orthodoxy, so every day still more dialectics, party propaganda and Marxist theory was worked in. In one scene—when my beloved boy jibed at 130 per cent—I left him weeping, telling him in tears that I never wanted to see him again. This scene was objected to by Mr. Révai, the Minister of Culture. It is natural, he said—indeed what could be more natural—that a girl should refuse to go out with a man who is not prepared to work 130 per cent; but—we were informed—a young Communist worker did not cry; not even for the sake of a man; not even if she was only seventeen and in love for the first time. So this sentimental scene had to be changed into a martial one and our great encounter ended in my summarizing the doctrines of the latest Party Congress. A further scene, after our reconciliation, showed my admirer driving through the lovely countryside on his newly acquired motor bicycle with myself riding pillion, both of us singing a charming love song. When the film was shown somewhere in the country in our presence, the producer, as required by Communist custom, asked the audience to give their criticism for our benefit and advancement. A shrewd old peasant got up and spoke:

"With great respect," he said, "it is all rubbish. How can people sing like that on a motor bicycle? And how is it possible that the noise of the engine is not audible at all? And how did they suddenly get hold of an orchestra? People riding motor bikes are not, as a rule, accompanied by an orchestra just in case they should feel like singing. Is that what you call Socialist Realism? My foot."

And the old man sat down.

The film itself was of less importance for me than the circumstances of its making. Pista was very much annoyed at

my absence from the Opera and refused to appear in any ballet, saying that he could not dance without his partner. I spent most of my time in Pécs and Pista was jealous. He had every reason for being jealous. One of the directors had fallen in love with me and proposed marriage. My mother was very much in favor of this proposal, in spite of my new admirer's age. He was just over fifty and I was twenty-one. Yet, my mother said that he was a serious man in a good position, who loved me. She also liked the man and she knew that my marriage would put "the Brigand"—that was Pista—out of the picture, a consideration of decisive importance.

I would give no reply to the proposal and the director started dillydallying with the film. Part of the delay was genuine and due to the necessary changes in the script; but the delay was partly artificial. He knew that as long as I was in Pécs, on the set and under his influence, he had a chance; but as soon as I was back in the Opera, circumstances would inevitably change. So he kept me in Pécs and whenever I had to return to Budapest, he came with me and took me out for dinner, always accompanied by my mother who insisted on coming with us as chaperon.

The unforeseen delay in making the film made the Opera authorities furious. For some time they put up with the explanations and excuses offered but eventually put their foot down. They said that I had been lent to the film company on the condition that I would return in September, and now it was November. "Mlle. Kovach," they continued in effect —"is our *prima ballerina* and not a film actress and if your film cannot be finished in time, well, that is too bad, we are truly sorry but can do nothing." This message was accompanied by a strict ultimatum and I was ordered to start rehearsals immediately and to take part in a few evening performances.

When I turned up for rehearsal, Pista launched forth upon a wise and paternal discussion with me. He knew all about the film director and about my mother's designs.

"It would be a great mistake," he said with cool objectivity, "to marry a film director. Your life is the Opera and your career is dancing. If you marry anyone outside our own world, you will be distracted and you will not be able to give your work the wholehearted attention it requires."

He went on in this vein for some time.

"I believe, Nory," he continued, "that the right thing for you to do would be to marry someone from the Opera. For instance, a ballet dancer would do very well."

Then he added quite casually:

"For example, me."

" 'For example,' you said?"

"Yes. For example." Pista nodded.

"Well, if this is a marriage proposal, I shall think it over."

Swan Lake was on the program that evening and we danced the leading parts. In our great *pas de deux* Pista bowed in front of me and put a real engagement ring on my finger. I was taken completely by surprise and deeply touched. Pista gave me a kiss; then the Swan—myself—flies away, as the prisoner of the Wicked Spirits. Everybody on the stage realized what was going on and there was great excitement; one little girl in the *corps de ballet* burst out crying and said afterwards that this engagement was the most romantic and beautiful thing she had ever seen in her life.

Our wedding itself was considerably less romantic and beautiful.

Pista arranged all the details with the utmost secrecy because I was terrified that my mother might hear about our design. No one in the Opera knew about our exact plans, not even our best friends. On the morning of our wedding Pista

arranged for two witnesses to be waiting at the town hall. I got up early and dressed quietly in the bathroom. My mother was preparing the breakfast, taking great care not to make a noise lest she should wake me. Eventually she called me and was greatly surprised not to find me in my room. Then she discovered me in the bathroom, already dressed and all made up—obviously on the point of going out. She was at a loss because we had been talking to each other the night before and I had said nothing about my early morning excursion.

"Where are you going, Nory?" she asked me.

I went out into the corridor. Then I put my head round the door.

"I am going to the town hall, Mother," I replied.

"To the town hall?" my mother asked, flabbergasted. "What on earth are you going there for?"

"Oh, just to get married to Pista Rabovsky."

I shut the door, rushed down the stairs, took a taxi, drove to the town hall and got married to Pista Rabovsky.

When the proud and happy bridegroom, after a large wedding breakfast in the Hotel Bristol, brought his young wife back to her home, he stopped his car in front of the house. At that very moment my mother threw a pot of flowers at him.

The pot was smashed to bits on the asphalt, making an impressive crash. It was only a near miss; but even my mother's enemies had to admit that it was a good try.

8. Family Intermezzo

PISTA and I were married now but we went on living apart. I still shared my bedroom with Muki, the teddy bear. Surprisingly, but not unnaturally, this state of affairs created quite a scandal in the Opera.

The Hungarian Opera is not a convent. By this I do not mean to imply that it is a sink of iniquity. It is simply like any other theater in the world; indeed, like any other institution in the world. People meet there, fall in love, and sometimes marry; sometimes they have love affairs and do not marry. Sometimes they live together but for one reason or another—which may not be anybody else's business—they cannot marry. No one takes any notice of such a state of affairs and, if it occurs, it is no cause for disapproval. But our own case had a scandalous appearance. That two people should be legally married and still continue to live apart—that seemed outrageous. The moral pressure brought upon us was so strong that we had to do something about it.

Shortly after our wedding, the film was concluded in Pécs in record time—there was no further reason for delaying it and as soon as I was back in Budapest I broached this painful subject with my mother. I was now married to Pista, I said, and there was nothing to be done about it. I added that husband and wife ought to live together and as Pista was occupying one single room, there was nothing else for it but to accept Pista in our own home. After some argument my mother gave in. The *ménage* worked fairly well, apart from occasional quarrels which grew more frequent later on. My mother lost some of her hatred of "the Brigand" but they never got on really well, so eventually I asked Rákosi to give us another

apartment, which he did. In this second apartment my mother dwelt alone.

Soon after our marriage Pista received a peculiar-looking letter in a semi-literate hand. It came from his brother Jóska. The letter read:

> My dear Brother. Do you remember me? I am your brother Jóska. We stayed with the same foster parents in Gyula. We haven't seen each other for 17 years. I should like to see you. And Mummy, too. Where does Mummy live now?
>
> Love,
>
> Brother Jóska.

Jóska—as it is clear from the letter—was Pista's brother who as a child had left his foster parents one day and no one had heard anything of him in the last seventeen years. Pista saw his sister fairly regularly—she lived near Budapest with her husband—but Jóska had become a vague and distant memory.

The address Jóska gave in his letter was Tatabánya, the mining town. He was a miner. Pista sent him a telegram.

> Come as soon as possible. Looking forward to seeing you. Pista.

For some time we heard no more from Jóska and we thought that he had changed his mind again and that after some further reflection he had decided not to emerge from obscurity. One night we played canasta till three o'clock in the morning. At five o'clock someone rang our doorbell. When Pista opened the door, a huge, filthy giant was standing in front of it. Before Pista could say Jack Robinson (although he was extremely unlikely to say that) the giant fell on him, embraced him and kissed him fondly on both cheeks.

Jóska, having finished his shift, was so impatient to come up to Budapest that he had not even washed. He was black with coal and grime and his boots were indescribably filthy.

"Where is Mummy, Pista?" were his first words. "I want to see her."

After the reunion, Jóska told us—I had got up in the meanwhile—that many years ago he had been given out to new foster parents who had treated him very badly, had starved and beaten him up even more often than was customary, so he ran away. Knowing that he had done wrong, he added, he had never dared to face his mother. But now, he thought, his mother might have forgiven him so he wanted to see her.

He told us all this sitting on the edge of Pista's bed.

"Where do you live now?" Pista asked him.

"I share a room with several other miners."

"Well, why didn't you change before coming up to Budapest?"

"Oh, I've got a very fine black miner's uniform," he answered, "but I was in such a hurry to get away that I did not want to waste time putting it on."

Soon we suspected that this story about his beautiful black miner's uniform was not true. He had nothing else but the rags he was wearing but he was ashamed to confess it. Pista gave him shirts and underwear and a suit. Pista is not tall while his brother was a veritable giant but even these ill-fitting clothes meant a vast improvement in his appearance. We could do nothing, however, about his boots. Pista's shoes were much too small for him, so, for the time being, he had to go on wearing his huge dirty boots which were hardly holding together.

Later Pista bought shoes for him, gave him a lot of money and took him to Margit, their sister. All this pleased Jóska but

he kept on inquiring after his "mummy." The word sounded pathetic in his mouth and it soon became evident that Jóska —physically a giant but mentally a child—had developed a strong mother-complex during all these years. His longing for his "mummy" was like a child's, so Pista promised to take him down to the country where she was then living.

It was a very touching reunion. Jóska stayed in the village to be near her, but soon Mrs. Rabovsky had to send him back as he had no identity papers and—in Hungary—he who has no identity papers has no identity either. He cannot get a job and the police are after him in no time.

Pista gave Jóska some more money, and sent him down to the village near the River Tisza where Jóska had last had a proper job and proper papers. There he succeeded in equipping himself with the necessary documents and then returned to Budapest.

He told Pista that he had been able to trace him because he had read about him in the papers. (This was a slight exaggeration, too. Jóska was not illiterate but his ability to read was far from perfect and he never read a paper. No doubt, others had drawn his attention to Pista.) Now he wanted to know why Pista was such a famous man? What did Pista actually do? Pista took him to the Opera to see us dance. In the middle of the performance Jóska fell asleep and his snoring echoed in the vast auditorium, supplying a strange accompaniment to Borodin's music.

Eventually he went to live with Pista's mother in a village near Lake Balaton. Everybody likes him there—he is a peaceful and kindhearted man. He works very hard and asks only to be near "mummy." The prodigal son had returned home—and was generously forgiven for having been naughty seventeen years before.

9. Csárdás

We went on traveling a great deal. We were sent to Rumania where we danced in Bucarest and also in the towns which, until 1918, belonged to Hungary. Between the two wars Transylvania was still regarded by Hungarian public opinion as part of "Greater Hungary," under temporary foreign occupation. Revisionism and anti-revisionism were the most important features in the local politics of Central Europe and the Little Entente. Nowadays this old-fashioned patriotism and chauvinism is condemned and forbidden. But, in reality, everything goes on as before. The Hungarian element still hopes that by some miracle Transylvania will be given back to Hungary—although as long as both Hungary and Rumania remain under Russian rule there is little to choose between them; and the Rumanians still try to oppress the Hungarian minority and language as before, although under different slogans. However, in spite of both Hungary and Rumania loudly professing to be great friends happily united under the supervision of Big Brother, chauvinism both popular and on government level is unchanged.

In December, 1952, very soon after our marriage, we were instructed to go once again to Russia along with the usual team of Hungarian artists. This time, however, the team was larger than usual. We danced in three towns: Kiev, Moscow and Leningrad.

In Leningrad we went to see our former friends. The town and its life had not changed, except that Vaganova was no longer alive. While we were in Leningrad there was a Vaganova Memorial Concert in which I, too, was invited to

dance. Gusev, Pista's former teacher had left Leningrad. Gusev's family had always lived in Moscow which meant that he himself had to travel much between the two cities. Finding this tiring he had applied for a transfer which was eventually granted and now he lived and worked in Moscow. Some of the younger artists known to us from the old days had made great progress and a few of them had been awarded the Stalin Prize.

But the atmosphere in Leningrad and Moscow was very different from the easygoing and happy atmosphere we had lived in three years before. We were no longer allowed to move about freely. We were accompanied everywhere and our meetings with the Russians were cold, formal and official. The Russians were tired of us and I cannot blame them for it. After the "liberation" all the satellites had instituted Russian friendship months. During such months, Russian artists, scientists and workers are sent to the country in question and, at the same time, artists, scientists and workers from that country are sent to the Soviet Union and Russian-Hungarian friendship month is regarded as a nuisance and a bore in Hungary, too, but a month is a comparatively short period of time. The picture, on the other hand, is very gloomy for the Russians. They have too many satellites and there is always one friendship month or another due for them. Delegations from the Hungarian, Bulgarian, Rumanian, Albanian, East German, Polish or Czechoslovak People's Democracies turn up in Moscow one after the other in rapid and unending succession. They always express their eternal gratitude to the Soviet Union for their liberation and other benefits and blessings, they all repeat the same speeches month after month, year after year. So the Russians are only moderately keen on visits from the grateful satellites and no Russian wants to see more of them than is inevitable.

Then the Russians knew very well that even if they happened to have a good personal friend in one or two delegations, it was advisable to forget about him.. Personal contacts are always suspect and it is easier and wiser to offend a friend than to provoke the attention of the secret police. Pista was very keen on seeing Gusev because he was genuinely fond of him and grateful to him. But Gusev was evasive. He was never in when we phoned and none of our messages, it seems, ever reached him.

The two great Russian cities had latterly changed in another respect, too. They were now richer and much better off. Exploitation of the satellites had borne its fruit. We were not in a position to judge the living standard of the people, but the shop windows were full of things which had been conspicuously missing before; and most of these treasures had been imported from one satellite country or another. There were plenty of furs from Poland and Bulgaria, shoes from Czechoslovakia, foodstuffs and wine from Hungary. I do not know who could afford to buy these things. I heard that really good things—such as Czechoslovak shoes—were sold out in no time because goods of really high quality were still scarce. On the other hand, there was no denying that people were better dressed and looked more prosperous than before. Moscow had grown more American-looking. In spite of the incessant attacks on America and the American way of life, they seemed to be bent on building skyscrapers and imitating the American style of architecture. Americanism in America, it seems, is a wicked thing; Americanism in the Soviet Union is most desirable.

Personally we had great success in all three cities. *Pravda* and *Izvestija* gave us enthusiastic reviews and published our photographs—a rare distinction. Pista danced the *Spectre de la Rose*—a number never seen there as even Nijinsky himself

had never danced it in Russia—and the applause turned into a friendly ovation. We had to give many encores and the public at the concerts could not have been kinder and more appreciative. Yet we all knew that three years ago we had been members of the Russian ballet company and belonged to them while this time we formed a team of Hungarian visiting artists who came, performed and were expected to leave. We were pleased to find that our photographs were still on sale in the Leningrad Theater. We had not been forgotten.

At a soirée in the Hungarian Legation, we met Lepeshinskaya, Zaharoff and Messerer again; there was a lot of informal singing and dancing and the whole affair was a success, but nevertheless there was an undercurrent of tension below the surface which put everybody on guard; the small talk was friendly enough but somehow you could not forget that you'd better watch what you were saying.

We did a lot of shopping in Moscow. Tea, coffee, pineapples, caviare and vodka were cheaper than in Hungary—indeed some of these things were unobtainable at home at any price. We bought an immense quantity of goods—I remember for example that Pista bought fifty pounds of canned pineapple imported from the U.S.A.

In Hungary, after our return, we continued our work in the Opera. By now our position was not only good but almost too good. We belonged to a privileged class and were spoiled and pampered both by the public and the government.

We belonged to a small group of popular artists—and this was not altogether through our own merit. Plays, films, and books were all impregnated by Communist propaganda and practically all the arts had declined in popularity, with the exception of music and dancing. Of course, it was possible to interfere with music and dancing too, and the government did interfere to some extent. Yet, the interference was less

direct and much less successful than was the case with the other arts and that is why the popularity of all our performances—whether opera or ballet—had grown to an unhoped for and amazing degree. It was not easy to get seats for any performance in the Opera and there was a great deal of black marketeering in tickets.

Our own art had the additional advantage of being international and consequently we were sent everywhere—from Moscow to East Germany—where Hungarian art was to be represented. Our salaries were high—as high or higher than those of ministers—and although large sums were deducted on various pretexts (we, too, had to make our "voluntary" contributions to all sorts of causes), we received every month a sum which seemed fabulous. Today, in America, we receive more in one evening than we did in a month at home but in Budapest prices were much lower. And, in any case, there we belonged to the highest income bracket. We had our own apartment; we could afford domestic help; the best clothes; and good food. All these things were great luxuries, beyond the reach of all save very few.

Pista sold his Contax camera—bought in East Berlin—added to the proceeds all the money he had made abroad and bought a little villa on the Balaton. He, and later both of us, spent a great deal of time in these lovely surroundings, and Pista was very happy with his flowers and vegetables. Eventually he installed his mother there and later his brother Jóska—providing both of them, we hope, with a home for life.

Whenever we had free time—and we had plenty—we drove down to the Balaton in the little car which Pista had recently bought. One had to obtain a special permit to run a private car and few people were in a position to ask for such permission. Fewer still received it.

On March 13, 1953, we received a telegram which read:

> On March 15 please appear in Parliament in order to receive the Kossuth Prize which has been awarded to you in acknowledgment of your outstanding services to Hungarian art.

We had no warning of the honor and it came as an utter surprise. The Kossuth Prize is the Hungarian equivalent of the Stalin Prize. It means not only great distinction but also a large sum of money. We were the youngest people to receive the prize in its history—which, admittedly, was short.

We appeared in Parliament as instructed. Most of the other recipients were scientists with long beards and white hair or artists and writers of great fame and we felt a little out of place. Three of the top Communist leaders made speeches and then Mr. Dobi, a former member of the late Smallholders' Party, read out the list of the recipients. We were given our prize—he said—for our parts in the *Fountain of Bakhchisarai* and in *Keszkenö*—i.e. for one Russian and one Hungarian ballet; all very nicely balanced. Our prize money was about eighteen hundred dollars—a very large sum in Hungary.

In those days we were invited to many diplomatic receptions. On one occasion—a banquet arranged in honor of the Soviet Marshal Voroshilov, now Head of the Soviet State—Rákosi's secretary came up to me and told me that Mr. Rákosi would like to dance the *csárdás* with me. I said I was delighted and joined Mr. Rákosi, who danced with me—quite well, I must say—and complimented me on our recent successes in Moscow. His wife had been there at the same time, he said, and had told him that Mlle. Annie Fischer and we two had made a real hit in the Soviet cities. He also complimented me on my dancing—that

is to say dancing the *csárdás* with him adequately—and I said I was pleased that he found my *csárdás* up to the required level. Later Pista and myself were asked by Rákosi to pose in a "family photograph." There were five persons in it: M. and Mme. Rákosi, Pista and I and Marshal Voroshilov.

I know that all sounds a little boastful. I apologize for this but, quite frankly, boasting is my aim in this chapter. I want to convey to the reader that we were really on top of our own world: we had money; we had a lovely place to live in and our own villa on the Balaton; we had our own car; honors and distinctions were heaped upon us; we were on good and friendly terms with the rulers of the country and with the all-powerful Russian dignitaries. Pista—the former little vagabond—and I were relatively in a more privileged position than the most spoiled member of the aristocracy had been during the Horthy regime. Money, success and honor lay at our dancing feet.

Six weeks later we escaped to the West.

PART V: BERLIN (NORA)

1. The Reason Why

In March, 1953, we were told that some time in the late spring we would be sent to Prague while some other dancers were going to Berlin in May. In April this plan was reversed and we were instructed to go to Berlin while another team went to Prague.

Reflecting on the original decision and its reversal, we can now see fairly clearly what happened. There were a lot of complaints in the Opera—voiced by other dancers—that Pista and myself kept going abroad while no one else was ever sent. Party officials always promised to consider these complaints but never did. But the case of Berlin belonged to a special class in itself. In spite of all the supervision by the secret police and all the restrictions imposed on movement by the East Berlin authorities, the West was dangerously and temptingly near. Some people had already escaped and the possibility of other escapes could not be ruled out from the minds of those who selected the artists and were responsible for their return. Now, it was a hard and fast rule that whole families were never allowed to leave Hungary together for a West European destination or for East Berlin. If the wife went, the husband had to stay at home, and vice versa; if the parents went, the children were kept in Hungary. But

our case was exceptional. There was no point in sending one of us without the other. We were partners and we were either sent together or not at all. And we did not have any children to be kept as hostages. But our position was exceptional in another way, too, and I am sure that is why they relaxed the rules in our case. There seemed to be no earthly reason why we should want to escape, or, indeed, even entertain such a notion for a moment.

As usual, we were called to the Ministry and given our instructions about East Berlin. As soon as we heard the word "Berlin," our hearts beat faster and our throats became dry. We needed all our self-discipline to look casual and unconcerned. This was our great chance—we felt. And probably our last one.

We noted our instructions, exchanged a few noncommittal and friendly remarks with the official and then left the Ministry. We said nothing as we drove home. Pista stopped the car in front of the house and turned to me:

"Well?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I am not going."

We sat in the car for about an hour discussing the pros and cons of escape. We came to no definite conclusion; we were only weighing the arguments. Why then did we in the end decide to escape? I am unable to give a brief answer to this. If I say something rhetorical about "longing for freedom" and "breathing the blessed air of liberty" it would not be true. Yet that consideration, too, played its part, although we worded it in more prosaic language.

No doubt we had all apparent reasons to stay. In the last chapter I described our position at great length. To sum up: there was no one—including the all-powerful political leaders of the country—who was better off than we, either socially or financially. Nor did I wish to leave my mother. And I could

not discuss the matter with her. I could not even explain or apologize in advance. I knew perfectly well that the faintest allusion to rouse her suspicions would send her to the authorities to beg them not to send us to Berlin. Finally, we were also very much aware of the grave danger we ran in an attempted escape. Many people had been caught before. What if we should be? As Pista put it concisely:

"If I have to stay here I'd rather stay as a prince than as a convict."

And who knew what was in store for us over there, in the unknown West? We were successful dancers behind the Iron Curtain but that could not mean much west of the Elbe. Did anyone know about us? We should probably have to start our careers all over again and it might take years before we achieved some degree of eminence. And it seemed quite likely that we should never achieve the same position we enjoyed now.

We were agreed on all this and yet we knew from the first moment the magic word "Berlin" was uttered in the Ministry that we were going to take the chance and all discussion, all weighing of pros and cons was self-deception. Why? I am still asking myself.

First of all, we had our own political reasons. "Freedom" is a very relative concept and as it is rather a big word we instinctively shrink from using it. We ourselves, had a great deal of freedom—yet not enough. We were in a privileged position—and that was our first reason for going. I am sure that no more or less decent person enjoys holding a position of privilege. He feels guilty. We loved our own art and endeavored to become as good dancers as we possibly could; but why on earth should we be the pampered children of society while others, often worthier people than we, suffered and were persecuted? It would not be true to say that we

were constantly tormented by such thoughts. But once the possibility of escape came into sight, they came into our minds more and more clearly. There was also the memory of certain recent events which haunted us. I think it was in 1951 that a large number of innocent people were brutally rounded up from one hour to the other and dragged away from their homes to some unknown destination. There was the cold breath of horror over Budapest. It is true that these people were not sent to Auschwitz and were not killed in gas chambers—although suffering, cold and exposure killed many of them. The memory and horror of these deportations lay heavily on our minds, particularly as we knew that in some cases the same people were torturing the same victims as during the bygone Nazi times. The tormentors were Nazis then and called themselves Communists now; the victims were called Jews or anti-Nazis then and labeled "bourgois elements" now. The slogans had changed; but the deed remained essentially the same.

We also felt imprisoned; and imprisoned in a provincial jail. I think if they had let us out to the West—at least occasionally—we should not have escaped. If we had had the feeling that we could go and see the other world, we would have been willing to return. We longed to reach the real capitals of the world. We knew that being stars in the East was a provincial affair—in spite of the undeniable excellence of the Russian Ballet.

And I wanted to wear nice dresses and put on lipstick (which I did even in Budapest but I was frowned upon by the bigoted and the orthodox), and I wanted to be able to say what I had in mind without considering whether it pleased the authorities or not. English and French words—whenever I happened to hear these languages—had always had a magic effect on me. They were the song of the Lorelei—and I knew

I would follow that magic music even if it led me to destruction.

Yet, while sitting and talking in the car, it was Pista who was the counsel for escape and I who found all the arguments against him.

Pista shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps you are right," he admitted. "After all it is incomparably better to be the *prima ballerina* and the leading dancer of the Budapest Opera than to be unemployed artists in the West. I suppose there are many dancers over there, perhaps hundreds of them much better than we are."

"True," I said. "And who knows whether we can become even unemployed dancers. I mean, what if they keep us in a kind of camp year after year? We are, after all, privileged members of Communist society and it would not be at all surprising if they received us with great suspicion."

We sat there in the car in silence, each of us deep in thought.

"So the answer is No?" asked Pista.

"The answer is No," I nodded.

"It is a pity, you know."

"Maybe," I agreed. "But there is nothing to be done."

2. Salami

Before we left for Berlin, we drove around Budapest and visited all the beautiful spots which held some personal memory for us. We kept discussing the possibilities and weighing our chances—we had in fact no other thought in mind—but all our discussions of the idea ended in its rejection. All the same, we were fully aware that now we were saying

good-by to Budapest however unbelievable it seemed to us.

My mother came with us to the station.

"How I hate saying good-by to you," she said quite unexpectedly.

"We shall be back in three weeks," I replied.

"I know," my mother replied. "And I know it is silly of me to say so. But I can't help it. I hate saying good-by."

And she started crying—something she had never done before on such occasions.

In the train I had a terrible dream. I am not very much interested in dreams—either in my own or anybody else's—and I hate the dream-bores. I hardly ever remember any of my dreams and I cannot remember ever having had a nightmare before. That is why this particular dream made a specially horrible impression on me. I dreamed that there had been a revolution in Budapest and the Communists had been kicked out. We were delighted by these events until a body of men—they were dressed in a mixture of the uniform of the Arrow Cross thugs and the AVO, the Communist Political Police—came to arrest us and we were told we were going to be hanged. We tried to explain that we had not belonged to the Party and had nothing to do with the Communists. They snarled at us: "You were the Communist pets, you were Rákosi's pals." And another hissed at us: "You danced the *csárdás* with Rákosi." We were dragged away. Then I remember another frightful scene: there was a scaffold erected in a huge square and we were being dragged towards it, rather as in *La Esmeralda* but this was ghastly reality and no ballet. We saw the ugly, jeering faces of the crowd. We were surrounded by Quasimodos who all shook their fists and howled and shrieked at us: "While we were suffering, you just danced!" they yelled. "While we were in prison

camps you received the Kossuth Prize." We were being dragged towards the gallows when I woke up, bathed in cold sweat and shivering with horror. I woke up Pista who calmed me down as much as he could. Our train was rumbling on—every hour took us nearer to Berlin. We switched off the lights again and lay in our bunks speechless and sleepless. Each knew the other was awake and deep in thought. I could not get rid of the terrible effect of my dream although I was well aware of the deeper meaning of it. Subconsciously I had wanted to go; subconsciously I had known that we would go. And now, in my dream, my subconscious came to my help and supplied me—in its own way—with a perfectly reasonable and logical argument. Of course, we would be identified with the regime. This was not a question of physical danger—there were no signs whatever of the Communist regime being overthrown. But that was not the point—we would be identified with the regime in the minds of people who were suffering innocently. We were not members of the Party; I had never even attended a Party school and Pista had gone once to a seminary just to see what it looked like. No, we were not Communists but we were beneficiaries of Communism—without the excuse of really belonging to the Creed. Oh, yes, the West did mean the Great Unknown for us. It might mean—I knew—a camp or unemployment; but that—I suddenly realized—was no reason for staying behind. That was the very reason for going. To get away. To dissociate ourselves from a cruel dictatorship; to dissociate ourselves from our own privileged position; and to associate ourselves with those who had to suffer, in prisons and in camps in Hungary because they did not happen to be good dancers. Every minute took us nearer to Berlin and every new thought pointed towards the only possible solution.

I had nearly fallen asleep when I heard Pista's voice:

"Ever since I was a child, I've always wanted to dance in Paris," he said.

I did not answer him.

It was on May 13 that we arrived in Berlin. Once you start interpreting signs and omens, everything conspires and tends to point in one direction. Arriving on the thirteenth was such an omen. Everything of importance had always happened to me on the thirteenth day of a month. I was born on the thirteenth; I received my first letter from the Opera—inviting me to the entrance examination—on the thirteenth; the telegram informing us about the Kossuth Prize came on the thirteenth and now we arrived in Berlin on the thirteenth. (Four months later, it was on September 13 that we arrived in America.)

In Berlin, we were driven to an hotel in Thaelmann Square and our first impression was that we were surrounded by Hungarian, German and Russian police agents, spies and informers. We received a suite, consisting of three rooms and two bathrooms, furnished with lovely antique furniture, a radio and all possible comfort—but we had the feeling that even the chambermaids and waiters belonged to the secret police. This may have been an illusion; but it was stark reality that there were policemen posted at all exits, that the hall was full of policemen in mufti, ostentatiously engaged in reading newspapers and solving crossword puzzles; and that we had our own Tilda, a woman of Russian origin who was an AVO agent and without whose permission we were not allowed to go out to the street and buy a newspaper. In all the corridors on every floor there were constant patrols—watching everybody, listening to every word and observing all comings and goings.

"I am hungry," I told Pista. As it was about an hour till

dinnertime, I suggested that we should go up to our rooms. I opened one of my suitcases and took out a huge piece of Hungarian salami.

"Give me a knife," I said to Pista.

"I'll cut it for you," he said and started looking for a knife. He found one and was just about to cut the salami when I took hold of his hand.

"Stop!" I cried.

"What is it?" he asked me, slightly taken aback.

I was looking out of the window and something mesmerized me. Right in front of us was the entrance of an underground station. We both looked at it for a long time without uttering a single syllable. It had a magic effect on us. The entrance looked like a large hungry mouth—gaping at us, yawning at us, ready to swallow us. Or it was an eye, winking at us encouragingly, or even impishly at times; a moment later it looked like an open grave, and then suddenly it looked like the entrance of an underground station. And that was the most dangerous of its many forms, appearances and *alter egos*. Yes, that entrance to the underground station looked uncannily like the entrance of an underground station. I could not forget about it.

I took the knife out of Pista's hand.

"Yes, I saw," said Pista. "And I'm thinking the same as you. But let's have some salami, all the same."

"No. We shan't," I said. I don't know why I said this. At that moment I certainly had no plans for the salami.

"Where do the trains go from here?" I asked Pista.

"How should I know?" he replied, perhaps not too politely but with full justification.

"We must find out," I told him.

By suppertime we were very hungry but could not eat much. Supper was a dreary affair. We were the guests of

the East German Government. Oddly enough, they offered us their hospitality in our own hotel, obviously to avoid any necessity of leaving the building. All movement was to be reduced to a minimum and we were treated as prisoners—with veritable warders at the gate, checking up on everybody who entered and even more closely on those who tried to leave. So supper was an official affair—with a sprinkling of ministers and other dignitaries. I was sitting next to a female minister but could not speak to her because of language difficulties. That was all the better—I was not in a talkative mood in any case. Profound silence reigned over the table. The whole affair was tense and stiff. People did not dare to speak and had, in any case, nothing to say. I thought of West Berlin and imagined what a gay affair a banquet over there must be. I started observing people. I asked myself: would anyone laugh during the whole meal? No one did; no one even smiled.

After supper, Tilda—our own secret police woman—arranged a conference in our suite and gave us her instructions. There were about six or eight artists in our group, Miss Annie Fischer among them and also Miss Lili Neményi, the opera singer for whom I had danced fourteen years before as a child and who had patted me on the cheek, making me very happy and proud at the time.

Next day—Tilda told us—we were to go and see the State Opera where the gala performance would be held. We could have a rehearsal in the morning if we wished. On the fifteenth—the day after next—we would rehearse again in the morning, rest in the afternoon and then, at seven-thirty the great performance would start. It would be a Protocol Performance—she said—meaning that no tickets would be sold to the public; all members of the audience would be there by official invitation. All the members of the East German Government

would be there, the Russian Ambassador with many members of his Embassy as well as members of the democratic (i.e. satellite) diplomatic corps and everybody of importance. Then she gave us the rest of our itinerary for Germany. We —Pista and I—were to stay in Berlin for another four days and dance on two evenings and then go to a provincial town—I forget which—where there was a big industrial plant named after Matyas Rákosi. We were to give a concert to the workers of that plant.

After receiving our instructions, we chatted a little. We could see the Brandenburg Gate from our window and one of the artists asked Tilda what the curious structure was.

"That is the Brandenburg Gate," she said. "Beyond that are the imperialists. You must not even look in that direction."

It was quite obvious that all the members of our party were annoyed and irritated by this childishly stupid remark but nobody made any reply. Later on someone asked Tilda for permission to go out and take a walk around the hotel. After some hesitation she agreed.

"But not more than half an hour," she said. "It is extremely dangerous to walk about the streets. East Berlin is full of imperialist agents and any of you may be kidnaped in the streets. You can't be too careful."

We saw some helicopters flying in the distance.

"Look at them," Tilda added. "It is known that some of these helicopters land, people are grabbed, gagged and pushed in the machines which fly away."

It sounded wonderful. How nice to be kidnaped by helicopter! It would simplify matters beautifully—I thought. But we knew, of course, that the danger Tilda dreaded was not that any of us might be kidnaped by helicopter, car, or even by simple pedestrians.

Now I must change certain tiny details in this narrative,

because I do not want the person I am describing to be recognizable. But this small personal disguise does not affect my story—all the material events occurred as related. We met this person somehow and had a chat with her in the hall. She was wearing a very elegant, and well-cut, two-piece suit made of wonderful material.

"You've got a very nice suit," I said.

"Oh yes," she replied, "it is nice. I am so pleased with it. Of course it comes from over there." And she pointed westwards.

"I should love to have a suit like that," I said cautiously, groping for her reactions.

"Oh, that's quite impossible," she said cheerfully, having no idea that she was giving me information. "You see, two years ago it was quite easy to go over to the West. You just took the tram, or bus, or underground—or simply walked over. But today you need a permit."

"A permit?" I asked her as casually as I could, hoping that she would go on.

She did.

"Yes, a permit. Today only those people are allowed to go over who work in the West or live there."

"You don't mean to say," remarked Pista, "that all the people on the trams or the underground are always asked to produce a written permit?"

"Oh, no, not always," she said. "But you never know whether they will ask you to produce a document or not. And if you are caught trying to cross without a permit . . . well, it may have—to put it mildly —unpleasant consequences."

"What a pity," I said.

"Why?" she asked me looking at me in surprise.

"Well, I wanted to go over," I explained. "I wanted to do some shopping—material for frocks, and also some cos-

metics. . . . Oh, it would be so nice. Don't you think we could go even for an hour?"

This *naïveté* put her at her ease again. She told me that the length of such a visit mattered little. It was quite impossible to go over at all. We changed the subject and talked of other things. I liked her and trusted her. We had to confide in someone and I decided to take her into our confidence. She was the most unlikely person even to be suspected of having helped us. I thought things over carefully and came to the conclusion that the danger of speaking openly to her was small. She was unlikely to report us. She might try to dissuade us from taking a foolish step—so I reasoned—but she would not report us because the simple fact that we had ventured to discuss such a thing with her would be regarded as incriminating her. After our departure she would not breathe a word, that was certain, though beside the point; I felt convinced that she would not give us away.

So half an hour later I turned to her and I said without further preliminaries.

"We should like to go over to the West."

She turned quite white.

"You mean for an hour?" she asked, but she knew very well what I had in mind.

"No. Not for an hour. For good."

She did not say anything for a long time. Then she asked me:

"Have you no children in Hungary?"

"No. We have no children."

Another long pause followed, then Pista asked her:

"There is an underground station in front of the hotel. Where do these trains go to?"

"Ruhleben is the name of the terminus," she said. "And Ruhleben is in the West."

That was the first thing we wanted to know. I felt grateful to her.

"Do you like Hungarian salami?" I asked her.

"Oh, I love Hungarian salami. I adore it. And I haven't tasted Hungarian salami for years."

"Come up to our room," I said. "We'll give you some."

We went up to our suite and gave her the huge piece of salami. She thanked us for it and said good-by.

"Don't try to go over," she said before leaving our rooms. "It is very, very dangerous. If they catch you, you are finished."

She took something out of her handbag, pushed it into my hand.

She banged the door behind her and disappeared.

I had a map of Berlin in my hand.

3. A Short Walk

THAT night—it was the fourteenth of May—there was another large scale reception—again in our own hotel. I tried to be as entertaining as I could but my mind was far away. I could not leave my map in the room—the possibility that our belongings might be searched by one of the many secret agents could not be excluded—so I slipped it into my corsage. I was worried lest it should show; lest it should fall out in front of everybody; or what if I lost it without noticing it? I kept thinking of the map and another word kept hammering in my thoughts:

"Tomorrow . . . Tomorrow. . . ."

I knew it had to be next day or not at all. Next day everybody would be busy with the great gala performance.

Everybody would be preoccupied with other worries and it seemed evident that it would then be easier to slip away than at any other time.

"Tomorrow . . . Tomorrow . . ." I kept repeating to myself.

I had no chance to speak to Pista during supper or afterwards. He was busy talking to some German artists and a Russian diplomat. Suddenly he walked up to me and said one word:

"Tomorrow. . . ."

The reception was soon over and Tilda ordered us to go to bed early. Next morning we got up much earlier than usual and were waiting for the others in the hall. We were to go to the State Opera to inspect the stage and have a rehearsal.

"You are early," Tilda greeted us. "What has happened?"

We told her that we were anxious to go to the Opera.

"You are much too early," she repeated. "We can't start for at least half an hour."

"What a nuisance . . ." I replied. "Listen, Tilda, we'll go out for a little walk until the others come down."

"Oh no, no, no . . ." she said energetically. "You must not. It's much too dangerous. You may be kidnaped by the imperialists."

"We won't be kidnaped by the imperialists," I said. "We want to take a walk and we'll be back in half an hour."

"Well, you may go for a quarter of an hour. But you must be back in fifteen minutes and don't leave the immediate neighborhood of the hotel."

She made a sign to the German Secret Police agent at the door to let us out.

We walked round the hotel because we knew that there was another entrance to the underground station on the other side. The first entrance was bang opposite our hotel door and seemed too dangerous to use. The other was better

placed. Our idea was to go down and see whether the trains really went to Ruhleben. We could not afford to make a mistake.

Before the half-hidden entrance we halted with a start. There was a blind beggar standing there, wearing a yellow arm band—as all the officially licensed beggars do in East Germany—and holding his cap in hand. I looked at the blind beggar and I had the feeling that he was looking at me. The man is not blind at all, I thought, and he isn't a beggar. He is a secret police agent and he will report us in no time.

I gave him a few Pfennigs—German pennies—and looked hard at his eyes. Well, you cannot say whether a man is blind or only pretends to be.

I turned to Pista and said to him:

"Come!"

He got hold of my arm.

"Nory, you are mad . . ." he whispered.

But he could not keep me back. I was rushing down the stairs and he was following me. I was not worried. I knew how such things worked in the Communist world as I knew I had been right in taking the risk with our lady friend, too. If anyone met us now—he would escort us back but would not say much about our encounter. You just do not speak about such things at all. I thought of Tilda: she kept talking about the danger of being kidnaped. She—or anyone else —never mentioned the possibility of anyone absconding. This possibility was officially not recognized; no one could possibly wish to leave this Paradise and abscond. Such a possibility would not be mentioned even if we met someone here. So on we ran until I saw huge letters announcing:

RUHLEBEN

That was all we wanted to see. We turned back. We rushed up the stairs and looked about us as though we had escaped from some terrible danger. No one took the slightest notice of us. Hundreds of people were descending those steps and emerging from the station every minute. The blind beggar was still there holding his cap and still looking blind.

"Not bad," I pointed out to Pista. "This entrance is almost completely concealed by the public lavatory."

"Lovely," nodded Pista. "This entrance can be seen from only two or three windows in the hotel." Then he added: "And one of those windows is Tilda's."

Good heavens—he was right.

We walked around the Square for five minutes and then returned to the hotel, talking a shade louder and more gaily than usual.

"You are still too early," said Tilda. "If you want to go back for another ten minutes . . ."

"Oh no, thank you," Pista replied. "We'll sit down and wait."

"All the same to me." Tilda shrugged her shoulders. As we had returned once we were not likely to walk off on a second outing. "I only thought that you might want to look around a bit . . ."

"Thanks," said Pista. "We don't want to get tired before the rehearsal. We've seen all we want to see."

4. A Car Accident

We were driven to the State Opera House where we got into our practice dress. There was a large audience watching our rehearsal—German dancers and Opera singers. We danced

with great gusto and pleasure and when we finished our efforts were greeted by loud and friendly applause.

"Oh, I can hardly wait until the evening," said an attractive German girl to me, shaking my hands warmly.

"Nor can I," I replied. I found it amusing and annoying at the same time that an air of unreality had begun to surround us. Escaping—well, it was not a thing one does in real life. One reads about escapes but one does not escape oneself. This conspiratorial, Sherlock Holmesian air was tense, exciting but comic, too, and I found it a little tiresome that every commonplace remark—like the one quoted above—should possess a double meaning and a special, deep significance. It was childish; it was ridiculous; but it was almost unbearably exciting, too.

In my dressing room I examined my dresses. I gave minute instructions about ironing my costumes and cleaning my ballet shoes. I was fussing a little more than usual. They reassured me repeatedly. Everything would be in perfect order for the evening performance. I went back from the door and asked the dressing room attendant not to forget to order a dozen safety pins for me. She promised not to forget.

Tilda took us back to the hotel where we had some guests for lunch. The Minister of Public Education and Enlightenment—a lady—sat next to me and we had a pleasant conversation. She asked me whether I had ever been in Berlin before and how I liked it. I told her that this was my first visit and I could not tell her anything about my impressions because I had seen nothing except our hotel and the Opera stage.

"What a shame!" she said kindly. "Well, today you are going to have a tiring and exciting time but tomorrow I shall call for you and drive you and your husband around Berlin. There is plenty to see here. Ours is an interesting city."

After lunch—about four o'clock—we went up to our

rooms because, we said, we needed a rest before the great performance. As soon as we reached our rooms we locked the door and proceeded to change our clothes. I told Pista to put on his best shoes because he might have to wear the same pair for two or three years. We put on good clothes and our raincoats. Then, on second thought, I put on two extra pairs of warm pants—wearing three altogether. We decided to take no other extra pieces of clothing. The most inconspicuous extra garment, the smallest unusual item, might call attention to us and that would be fatal. However, I put all my jewelry in my raincoat pocket.

"Now we'd better have a long rest," Pista suggested, "and wait. About six o'clock when everybody's rushing around, then we'll see what we can do."

A few minutes before six o'clock I went to the ladies' room, tore my map in tiny bits, threw them into the lavatory and pulled the chain. Then we walked down the stairs. I did not think of my mother at that time. I had only one single thought: Let's get it over.

We reached the hall and in a casual and absent-minded fashion approached the main door leading to the street. A German political policeman stopped us.

"Where are you going?" he asked us tersely.

"Out."

"What for?"

"To take a walk."

"Impossible. You can't go out," he said curtly. It sounded so final that we knew there was no sense in trying to argue with him.

We took the elevator and went up to Tilda's room. She was busy packing a large number of presents she had bought for her various friends at home. We admired them all, then I said:

"Listen, Tilda, I want to go out for a walk."

"You can't," she said. "No one is allowed to leave the hotel."

I flared up.

"What the hell do you mean? I have a headache. Can't I even go out to have a walk for half an hour to get rid of it? Stanislavsky said that the artist should take a walk before each performance. I could go out in the morning but I can't now? Are we prisoners?"

Tilda was taken aback. I pressed home my advantage.

"Do you think we want to escape or what?"

"All right," she said after some hesitation. "You may go for half an hour. But not a moment longer. Keep an eye on the time, will you?"

"Thanks," I said. Then I turned back from the door: "By the way, will you please phone down and get your thug at the door to let us out."

"Yes, I will," she replied with a smile.

My anger and my disrespectful tone did it. Only "one of us" could afford to talk like that. Two minutes later Pista and I walked out of the hotel.

We did not make a dash for the underground. First of all we did not know which entrance to choose: one could be seen by everybody, the other could be seen by Tilda who was now in her room. Every single person in the street looked like a disguised secret police agent and we had no doubt that everybody was keeping an eye on us. We came to a pub and went in.

We ordered two glasses of beer by gestures because our knowledge of German didn't go that far. We had to hand over some coupons for the beer. Then I suddenly had a terrifying thought. Even if we could get down the underground, how were we going to ask for tickets? I did not say

anything to Pista—I could not be sure that we would not be overheard by someone who understood Hungarian.

We were sitting in the pub. One precious minute passed after the other but we did not move. Twenty-five minutes had passed since we left the hotel. Thirty minutes. Thirty-five. People might be looking for us by now but we were still sitting there stupidly mesmerized by fear. We knew that we were wasting the chance of a lifetime. Perhaps that was what we meant to do.

Pista looked at his watch for the hundredth time and stood up. We walked out to the street and went towards the less obvious entrance of the underground station. There we stopped. A lady was standing there with a little dog and looking at us in a queer fashion. We looked back at her. About half a minute passed. Then I turned to Pista:

"Come," I said. And I walked down the steps.

"Come back, Nory," he said. "It's too late. They are already looking for us."

But he followed me. We did not run. We walked comfortably and slowly. We walked with great self-assurance, following the sign: Ruhleben. But every single step was torture. I heard—yes, I had the feeling that I did actually hear—my heart beat. Every step was a hammer blow; every step meant something final and irretraceable: if caught now—could we still give an innocent explanation for our presence at the underground station eighty minutes before the gala performance? . . . Our steps were steady and slow. No one could look into our hearts.

We reached the booking office. There was a pretty young girl before us. She said something to the booking clerk who replied with one word which sounded like:

"Document."

They did ask for documents! We were trapped. Was it

still possible to turn back? Or would it be too suspicious? Pista grasped my arm.

"Nory . . ." he whispered. "Back. . . . We must go back . . . ."

I stepped to the booking office window. I did not know what to say or how to ask for a ticket. So there I stood motionless and speechless. The clerk looked at me and I looked at him. There was a moment's pause which seemed an eternity to me.

"Zwanzig?" asked the clerk .

"Ja," I replied, using practically all my knowledge of German. I gave him a mark—my last—and collected some change. I walked on and he turned to the next person.

That person was Pista.

"Zwanzig," he said with nonchalance. We walked on and noticed that the clerk was smiling. Why? What was the meaning of it, this smile? Had I done anything funny? Or did he want to start a little flirtation with me? Or was there something I ought to have done and had omitted? I did not know. The main thing was that by good luck we had not been asked to produce any documents. I thought that my hair style, make-up and clothes looked so typically Western that the clerk had no doubt that I was returning home.

We had crossed one serious obstacle but now we found ourselves in terrifying danger. Minutes after minutes passed and the train did not come. Had there been a breakdown? The half hour allowed to us had passed about ten or twelve minutes ago. If they started looking for us, the first thing they would do would be to rush down to the underground station. Others had used the underground before so the idea to start any search here was quite obvious. And here they would find us—waiting for a train and in possession of tickets. We waited a good seven or eight minutes when the

train, at last, came in. It was chock-full but we stormed it with wild determination and got in.

The time the train stood at the station seemed interminable. It was so long that we became convinced it was no normal delay. Policemen were already going through the carriages, we thought, looking for us. Why on earth had we spent so much time in that pub?

The train started moving but after a few hundred yards all the lights went out and it slowed down. I nearly collapsed with fear. Once I had heard a story of the train having been stopped by a cut in the electric current and people caught when they were only a few yards from their goal. But a few seconds later the lights flared up in our carriage and the train gathered speed.

We traveled four stations—perhaps eight minutes altogether. It was an uneventful journey for others—but full of incredible and hair-raising adventures for us. We knew: if caught now there would be no mercy for us. The search must be on and we were still in Eastern territory, in a crawling train which wasted minutes at every station. In the fourth station, the loud-speaker blared something which sounded like, "Something, something" and then, "*demokratischen Sektoren.*" This should mean that that station was the last in the democratic Sector—which, of course, meant the Russian Sector. But could we be sure that this was the real meaning of the announcement? It was pretty obvious—but it was very easy to make a mistake by jumping to conclusions and we did not really understand the announcement. The next station was Wittenberg Platz. Pista jumped up and dragged me out.

"Come . . . Come . . ." he whispered. "Let's get out."

I was in a dream by now. I did not want to get out but I followed him. On the platform he told me:

"We are in the Western Sector . . . I am sure of it. . . ."

Two years before, when we were about to leave on our first journey to Berlin someone had made a jocular remark to Pista, telling him that if we wanted to escape to the West, we should remember that Wittenberg Platz was the first Western Station. Pista paid no attention to this leg-pulling at the time but now—having seen the name in writing—it all came back to him.

We ran up the stairs. As soon as we reached street level we stopped in dumb amazement. In a tenth of a second we realized that we were in a different world. Lights were blazing; well-dressed, cheerful, smiling people were walking around us; there were bright shop windows all around and—an almost incredible sight—a barrow was standing right in front of us, laden with oranges and bananas. These were rare, practically unobtainable treasures in Eastern Europe. I had not tasted a banana for more than eight or nine years and now here was a barrow-load of them, and people were walking past paying no attention to the miracle.

* * *

The auditorium of the State Opera in East Berlin started filling early. People handed over their invitation cards—serving for tickets on that occasion—and the omnipotent political leaders of East Germany, and their Russian masters were taking their places. Splendid uniforms, glittering epaulettes and shabby, ill-cut evening dresses were being paraded in the corridors.

Seven-thirty . . .7:35 . . .7:40 . . .7:45. At last the lights went off but instead of the orchestra starting up, a pale and worried man appeared in front of the curtain and made an announcement.

"It is my unpleasant duty to announce to our comrades," he said, "that the two leading performers, Mlle. Nora Kovach and Comrade Istvan Rab will not be able to appear on the stage tonight. They have suffered a serious motorcar accident."

He bowed and disappeared behind the curtain. I think a large number of the audience realized that we had done the same. Disappeared behind the Curtain.

5. Frocks and Handbags

We hailed a taxi. The driver was an old man who eyed us curiously. I think he grasped the situation. We were in a state of frantic excitement and expected everybody to know and feel that history had arrived at a crossroads: we had escaped from the East. We bawled and shouted at the poor old chap.

"Police! *Polizei! Rendöség!*"

The last word is Hungarian. For some unknown reason, in my excitement, I kept addressing everybody in Hungarian and also raising my voice to make certain that people understood.

The taxi driver took us to the police station. We had no money on us at all, except for a few Eastern *Pfennigs*, hardly worth a few coppers.

At the police station, we asked the driver to wait and invaded the place, pushing everybody aside with gestures, and we tried to explain to the police in charge that we had just come over from the East. We repeated our names many times, rather expecting him to jump up in wild excitement, ring up someone important in London, Washington or Paris

and act as befitted the importance of the event. But he remained unmoved and shrugged his shoulders. He had seen many refugees before and his main concern was to wash his hands of them.

We were told that it was "*nicht gut*" to have gone to the German police. We should go now to the British Consulate, he said, and was obviously relieved when we dashed out and disappeared in the same whirlwind fashion as we had broken in.

When we got to the British Consulate it was after office hours. A porter told us that it was "*nicht gut*" there either. We told him that we had no money for the taxi which worried us. His gesture indicated that it might worry us but it did not worry him in the least. He gave us much good advice of which we understood three words: British Military Police. So we ran back in a semi-hysterical state to our unperturbed, kindly taxi driver who drove us to the headquarters of the British Military Police.

There we were received with a certain cool British efficiency which had a tonic effect. They let us shout a bit, knowing that that was good for the nerves and then inquired what languages we spoke. Hungarian was no good at all, they had no one there who spoke that exotic tongue. When it was clear that we spoke Russian, too, an interpreter was brought in and the link of a common, civilized language established. Before anything else, we explained that we had no money to pay the taxi. An officer nodded and told us that they would pay the driver. I asked, would they give him a good tip because he had been very kind. The idea may have crossed the officer's mind that next time I should be generous with my own money rather than with his, but he said nothing.

I could not tell my story in an intelligible way. The unbearable excitement had been too much for me; I was in

a state of near-collapse and my nerves could stand no further strain. I jumped up and had hysterics. I screamed that the Russians were after me, they would kidnap me and take me back. Then I happened to notice a large number of revolvers in a half-open cupboard. The sight did nothing to calm me down; but our officer looked at me, smiled with his reassuring, modest, British confidence, shook his head and declared:

"No, they won't."

That was enough. He looked much more like a plum pudding than a hero; but I knew that I could trust him. I knew they would not take me back. I knew I was in good hands.

Then we began to tell our story. One of the officer's first questions was whether we had any near relations in Hungary. For the first time I thought of my mother. Heavens, what had I done! I felt myself turning pale. I nearly fainted. Then I jumped up and started shouting:

"I want to go back . . . I must go back. . . . Let me go back. I cannot leave my mother. . . ."

I went on like this for a minute or two. The officer never uttered a word. He watched me with perplexed wonder mixed with a great deal of sympathy.

"You can't go back," he said softly. "It's too late now."

I felt very much ashamed. This was not the place to make scenes and behave like an old-fashioned stage heroine. Everyone was so calm, composed and matter-of-fact, these dramatic outbreaks were very much out of place. Then I ooked at Pista and felt furiously angry. He looked so gay, nd self-satisfied. He knew that the danger was over and eemed happy as a lark. It was I who had made him come— thought, somewhat unfairly but not entirely untruly—I it was who had led him down those terrible stairs; I had bought

my ticket before him and now he was sitting there quite composedly without a care under the sun. I could hardly control myself.

"Don't just sit there . . ." I screamed. "Do something!"

"What do you want me to do?" said Pista, a little perplexed.

"Never mind," I said and began to laugh. For a second I was scared that I was going to have a worse fit of hysterics but I pulled myself together and gradually the aftereffects of the terrible strain passed. There was, I suppose, no reason to feel ashamed. After all, we had been in mortal danger. Our heads had been at stake. It now seemed that we might be allowed to retain them.

A car came and we were driven to a charming little villa. They advised us to take a good look at the car and memorize its registration number. We were given detailed instructions. We were not to leave the house at all, except for short strolls. We were not to board any vehicle, public or private, under any circumstances. Should a journey become necessary we were to undertake it only on official instruction and only in the car in which we had traveled tonight. In our villa we were not to talk to anyone about any private, public, personal or political matter.

There were five or six people living in the house—some of them were decent, some looked frightened, one or two were revolting types and we soon realized that some of our fellow inhabitants were suspected of being spies and informers. The villa was pleasant enough but to us it looked like a prison. Quite an attractive prison, but a prison. Over there, in the East, the gala performance was by now drawing to a close. Would we ever dance again in the future ?

We spent the next few days in the villa. The food was good English food—in other words pretty mediocre. That did not

worry me because I could not eat in any case. I thought it insulting and infuriating that Pista should consume immense meals with the healthiest of appetites—as if nothing had happened. He was in high spirits although our position was far from rosy. During our interrogations we had mentioned that we had been in Russia. That sounded fishy and raised many eyebrows.

A few days later we were taken over to the American Sector and kept there under guard. I was given a nylon bag, with a toothbrush, a comb, a hairbrush and cosmetics; Pista received similar basic necessities plus a razor. This was my first encounter with American efficiency and I was impressed.

A young man—a Czech by nationality—kept persuading us to visit his aunt who he assured us was a charming person, an excellent hostess and very fond of Hungarians. We were so terribly bored by then that we accepted the invitation. We started out on our journey and we were already going downstairs to the underground when I suddenly got cold feet. I remembered our instructions that we were not supposed to travel except by the original British car or by an American one, similarly impressed on our memories. I turned back in sudden terror and Pista came with me. Where did the young Czech really want to take us? I shudder to contemplate this question. But I do not really know. Maybe, to his aunt.

Then suddenly someone realized who we were. It had taken them about a fortnight to realize that the arrival in the West of the *prima ballerina* and the first dancer of the Hungarian Opera—both former guest artists at Leningrad and both Kossuth Prize winners—had some news value. The Press was informed but no reporters were allowed to see us.

Next day I suddenly fell ill with pneumonia. For some days I felt like a dying woman. The radio was switched on

in our room and day and night I heard our names on all wave lengths and in all languages. The sensation had burst and we were told that the news had hit the headlines, in all the newspapers of the free world. But I was in no state to rejoice; I could hardly understand what I was told.

When I recovered—or rather seemed to have recovered—everything suddenly changed around us. An American—oddly enough a male American—took me to the hairdresser's and from there to a number of shops and I was allowed to pick and choose whatever I fancied. That little excursion was the dream of any woman: we went from shop to shop and I was persuaded, encouraged, almost begged, to choose something else, to buy a few more things, to accept more frocks, hats, stockings, shoes, handbags, cosmetics and whatever I could think of. My companion knew little about fashion but he certainly encouraged the wildest extravagance. I, the little refugee whose worldly possessions a few days ago had amounted to a raincoat, a frock, a pair of shoes, three pairs of pants and some modest jewelry, found myself in possession of more, better and smarter clothes than I could ever have dreamed of. I was sitting in my new home in a brand-new, silk dressing gown of Japanese pattern, painting my nails red once again, when an overdressed dandy marched in, wearing a suit with exaggerated shoulders and a hideous multicolored tie. He beamed at me and claimed to be my husband.

6. Marriage And Engagements

IT was about three weeks after our escape that an American military plane flew us to Munich. Now we were in the West proper and the constant danger of being kidnaped—which had had to be kept in mind and which had happened to many people—no longer hung over our heads. But Pista who had been happy and cheerful from the moment we reached safety, lapsed now into the darkest gloom. He had an idea that we would be kept in a camp for two years and he knew that if we had no chance of dancing for such a long time, we would be finished.

I did not argue with him. Indeed I could not even try to convince him that his fears were groundless because I again fell ill and was in a very low, in fact dangerous, state when we arrived in Munich. There we were taken to the house of Mr. and Mrs. Alessandro of Radio Free Europe. It was their kindness and care which cured me in no time.

As soon as I was well again, we were taken on a further shopping expedition. By now I was a spoiled little princess—fussy and immodest—but, at the same time, truly grateful. I was encouraged to buy whatever I fancied—and I fancied a great deal. If you let a woman loose in a well-equipped American department store and tell her to go ahead and never mind the cost—well, you are asking for it. But fate was kind and incredibly patient with me. Having chosen three

different French perfumes and feeling guilty and just a little ashamed, not enough to upset me though, I was asked whether I would not care for a fourth and fifth.

"Oh yes," I said nonchalantly. "I forgot about them. How silly of me."

Pista looked very smart in his new outfit and I fell in love with him once again. All the better, because for some reason or another, I had to marry him. We had no identity documents whatever and the American officials suggested that we should get married again. So we did. I am now in the rather unusual situation of having been married twice and as a result of two marriages I have altogether one husband. I do not like being cruel to Pista but when he annoys me, I remind him that my first husband was a better man. Splendidly equipped and looking very smart we were taken to a Press conference. We were looking forward to meeting the Press because we had no idea what such a meeting involved. There were more than a hundred journalists present along with about eighty photographers and film cameramen. The journalists fired their questions at us and the photographers their flashlights. The whole thing reminded us rather of the siege of Budapest than of anything else. We were new to this game and found it very tiring. It was only later on that we understood that newspapers of the free world do not thrive on handouts and if you are "in the news"—well, you are in it.

A few days later we were asked to make a little documentary film, called *Dance to Freedom.* This occupied us for a few days. (The film was eventually bought by an American Television network.) We also went—partly to shoot a scene of this film—to dance in a refugee camp. We were glad to give our not very carefree audience a treat and also delighted to dance once again. We had a wonderful audience; they were

touching and deeply touched and there were a number of emotional scenes we are unlikely to encounter again.

A member of the Voice of America staff suddenly remembered that a gentleman called Jerry Severn, formerly Sebastianoff, was somewhere in the Western Zone of Germany or Austria and might be able to do something for us. M. Severn had been connected with the ballet world all his life. For a time he held an important position in the Monte Carlo ballet company and was formerly the husband of Irina Baronova, the great ballerina. Munich phoned all over the place but M. Severn could not be found. At last he was traced in Vienna—at three o'clock in the morning .

He was not in the best of tempers when awakened at this hour. He was given the news:

"Listen, Jerry, there are two dancers here."

"So what?"

This was chilling. Our friend in Munich tried to convince M. Severn of our unique importance but did not succeed until he mentioned that we had danced leading parts in Leningrad's Mariensky Theater.

"That's quite different," he said, "but it's three o'clock in the morning. Give me a ring tomorrow."

But when rung next day he was not at home. We were informed that he had left Vienna for an unknown destination. This was very upsetting.

A few hours later, however, he turned up in Munich. From the moment he arrived he was our dear and intimate friend and gave us immense help. It was he who found out that Mr. Hurok, the impresario, was in Nuremberg. In the preface of this book Mr. Hurok has told about our first meeting, about the engagement he offered us, and the first dollar check he handed over to us.

Our first public appearance in the West—not counting our

little concert at the camp—was in London. We were very well received and the reviews were as kind and appreciative as the audience—to express myself with a certain British understatement. From London we were taken to New York where we appeared on television in Ed Sullivan's program with such success we had to repeat our appearance in the same program a week later. We danced in the Broadway Theater with Roland Petit's excellent French company and then we got an engagement in a night club in Las Vegas. "Night club" sounds bad but it is not bad at all. We danced classical numbers, before a charming and enthusiastic audience for a fortnight. We are told that there is no place in the world where higher fees are paid to artists. We quite believe it. Marlene Dietrich was the star performer who preceded us at the place. From America we went to Spain where we were delighted by the fiery Spanish temperament. In America your audience knows a great deal about ballet and you can make a lot of money, if you are lucky; in Britain they appreciate you if you are good and will remember you many years later; but in Spain they acclaim you with wild abandon, they throw flowers at your feet and wave their handkerchiefs and shawls. You feel a popular hero and it is a feeling I like.

Paris and Brussels each impressed us in its own way, Brussels with its very cultured and metropolitan audience, but it was Paris, of course, that had for long been our dream. French ballet had its great names—and illustrious past—and Paris had enormous symbolic and real importance for us. Then we returned to London and danced with Mr. Dolin's Festival Ballet and also in Manchester and now—at the time of writing—we are about to leave for a tour in Canada and the United States with the same company.

So we had reached our destination and been given our chance sooner and in a more generous manner than we had

dared to hope for. The rest is up to us: we can conquer or we can fail—and we shall do our very best not to fail. The world is ours. Or—to be precise—half of the world. But I have been a modest little girl (as the reader has no doubt gathered) all my life; I am satisfied with half of the world.

PART VI: THE WEST (ISTVAN)

1. Conclusion

NORY has concluded our story and there are only a few words I should like to add.

We heard that our departure, naturally, had been a great shock for Nory's mother and if there is anything Nory is not quite happy about, it is that she cannot see her mother. Our apartment in Budapest was seized by the police and the only object handed over to Mrs. Kovach was Nory's teddy bear, Muki—her intimate companion since childhood. Muki was for years a substitute for something very important to Nory; now he is the substitute for Nory herself in her mother's eyes.

We also heard that a few weeks after our departure a meeting of the whole Opera company was called in Budapest at which it was announced that we would not return. That was all. No comment was offered and no questions asked. Neither the post of *prima ballerina* nor that of *premier danseur* has yet been filled.

I have just said that "if there is anything Nory is not quite happy about it is the idea of her not being able to see her mother." One may say such things as a manner of polite speaking. But in this case, I feel, the question should be put: is it true? Are we entirely and unconditionally happy about our escape? I think the question is a fair one and an im-

portant one because even a persecuted man after reaching freedom may be tormented by nostalgia. And we were not persecuted—on the contrary. Whatever happens to us in the future we shall never occupy the same social position as we did in Hungary. So was it worth while? Have we regrets?

We received our first and one of our most enduring impressions of the Western world in the first few seconds after emerging from the underground station in West Berlin. The lights, the splendor, the well-dressed, happy people and the little barrow with bananas and oranges made a deep and unforgettable impression on me. I was not then in a state to sum up and word my impressions clearly but I instinctively felt that I had arrived in a happier, richer, fuller and more real world.

As soon as I had a chance of appearing before a Western audience I dropped my name "Rab" and resumed my real family name of Rabovsky. When Nory asked me why, I explained that it was my real name and there was now no earthly reason for using a Magyarized version of my name. A plausible enough explanation. It was only some time afterwards that I realized that there was another deeper and Freudian explanation, too. "Rab"—as I have already mentioned—means a prisoner, a convict, in Hungarian. I felt that I was a free man now, not a *rab;* or even a Rab.

And although such words as "freedom" are usually very lightly used and tossed about, I did have the feeling at home that we were in prison. Our position was in many ways very enviable—that is true; we were well off in all respects. But if we were not in prison ourselves, we lived in the prison precincts, all our neighbors were prisoners and we did not know when we might be moved to a cell ourselves. And even so the prison gates were closed before us. A prison remains a prison even if it is a big one; even if it covers half the world.

It would be easy to pick on small things in Western life and criticize them. It would be easy but it would be silly and pointless also. The only question which is of any importance to me: do I like it on the whole or do I wish I had never taken the step I took. To this question my answer is unhesitating. I am glad to be able to live here. The risk we took was worth while; we are happy here and we have no regrets whatever. I used to live in darkness and now I live in the light—that is my overwhelming feeling and impression.

And yet I feel uprooted. I never had a family in the proper sense of the word and the Hamalas even if they were kind and loving people were not my own kin. I hope my mother is happy in the house I bought for her on Lake Balaton but she was not what a real mother is to a normal child. I never belonged to anybody or anything—except to the Opera. And now I have lost my background. I miss its atmosphere, its routine—but it is even more than that. For a long time I had a terrible feeling of insecurity. Finally it was borne in on me that my feelings of insecurity had a financial basis. Nory laughed at me: financially we were much better off than ever before. We had more money than we ever possessed and as we had no reason to believe that we might be unemployed in the near future, we had no objective reason for worrying. Yet, I was worried. And then I suddenly understood. I was not getting my salary on the first day of the month. I used to be on a pension-scheme but I have no "established post" now. In Hungary all artists employed by the Opera were civil servants in a sense—not only in Communist times but also in the past—and it was not the artist but simply the bureaucrat in me which rebelled at having lost my prospective pension. I found it worrying not to have a secure job—and I still find it worrying.

I was also disappointed in the ballet in the West. We had

heard so many lies about the West that we had thought everything we heard was a lie. We were told that Western ballet was not better than Russian ballet so we thought it must be something magnificent, something perfect and superlative. Well, it isn't. I shall try to explain in detail what I mean and what my impressions are but Western Ballet, although not disappointing in itself, is not better than Russian Ballet and this fact was a bitter disappointment to me, personally.

My first surprise was—to begin with a minor point—that here I had to dance too often. In Hungary I danced four or five times a month—here I had to appear on the stage six days a week and also on matinées twice a week. Naturally, I contrasted my former bureaucratic comfort with—what I termed—the commercial eagerness of the West. But on this point I became converted and I think the Western system is the better one. Indeed, in Hungary the reason why one did not dance more often was simply because the stage was occupied by opera performances most of the time and we had nowhere to dance. Dancing little was not a principle but the natural consequence of stage limitations. It is no hardship to have to dance often. After all, it is a dancer's duty and job to dance. It is good to be in constant practice; I like the permanent excitement of the stage. In the West—just because one is permanently on the stage—one can get on faster in one's career. If one is lucky—as we have been up to now—one can make a name for oneself in a short time. Here—if our luck continues—we shall need two years to make our names fairly well and generally known; in Hungary (not counting the period of training) we needed five years.

Here I am often accused by my colleagues and sometimes by the critics of being an acrobat. The proper relationship between acrobatics and dancing is a much debated question

and an important one. If you mean that a dancer is only an acrobat—that he has a certain physical skill but no art, no power of expression and if I may use this much abused word, no soul—then, of course such a dancer had better leave the ballet stage and join a circus. I feel and hope, however, that the critics had something else in mind when they called me an acrobat and with regard to this second and more usual meaning of the charge, I have no apologies to make. I belong to the Russian school and I cannot change my views overnight —nor do I intend to. If the dancer—provided he is a dancer—can express something by his acrobatic movements, can convey some feelings or even ideas to his audience and do more than just move about rhythmically—then "acrobatics" is quite in order, indeed, very desirable. I feel that no real dancer can be reproached for being able to leap like an athlete and not like a sick and elderly bear. If you have to leap, leap high; if you have to make *tours en air* make them vigorously, if you can make eight turns instead of one and a half—make the eight. It is not enough to please the eye only; I admit that a variation may be difficult, yet it may lack all artistic qualities. I also know that a certain layer of the public pays too much attention to the difficult as opposed to the artistic. Yet, once the artistic qualities are there, skill, vigor, energy, or if you like, acrobatics, will increase the total achievement. The West wants charm and grace. Without charm and grace there is no ballet; but the most ethereal grace and the most languid charms are not enough—and especially not enough in a male dancer. A vigorous technique is also needed. Nijinsky could leap high. Indeed, he declared: "The art of ballet is simple: leap in the air and stay there." I believe that if I stop leaping so high, turning so rapidly and moving with athletic vigor—I shall become a worse and not a better dancer.

There is another question which brings out a slight contrast between Russian and Western styles. (Now I am speaking of Western style collectively although this is not quite exact; the French style differs from the English and my defense of acrobatic skill will sound, I know, much more convincing to American\than to British ears.) I'refer to lifting and carrying the ballerina. This is an important and essential—if not always enthusiastically welcome—feature of the male dancer's art. Some of my Western colleagues do their best to get out of this duty. They find it tiring—they maintain—if they carry the ballerina too much to and fro they have less strength left for their own variations. Which amounts to saying: if the ballerina wants to get upstage, well, she can jolly well walk.

I think the question is not quite as simple as that. In Russia we were taught the most incredibly difficult lifts. Holding the ballerina aloft, treating her as something beloved and precious, is an absolutely essential part of ballet dancing. Some of the great Russian dancers—whom I called great "partners"—excell in such things and they are not the less artists because of their skill in this field. And all Russian male dancers—the greatest soloists among them—regard it as a basic and even enjoyable part of their dancing—and they do fantastically difficult exercises, using their ballerinas almost as weights.

But these reflections are not intended to be—and I feel sure, they do not sound—in the least derogatory. There are great artists in the West who would be leading dancers in any part of the world. Perhaps Russian ballet is often better rehearsed and the work of the *corps de ballet* is more precise. In Russia every member of the *corps de ballet* goes through the same training as the solists—i.e. about eight or ten years' hard labor. No one is allowed to appear on the stage—even in the smallest parts—except after two years of training, and

sometimes more. The difference tells on the stage. On the other hand, in many respects Western Ballet is far superior to Russian. Costumes, stage technique, decorations and the production as a whole are not only more spectacular and costly but wittier, more expressive and altogether on a higher level. All these are as much parts of the ballet as the dancing itself; and while dancing here is in many cases as good as the best dancing in Russia, the all-important general impression is incomparably better.

In other words both Russia and the West have something to learn from the other. Diaghilev, one of the greatest of all impresarios, and Fokine did not do more, after all, than unite the best elements of Russian and Western Ballet thus giving their immense public the very best of two worlds. That is our ideal, too. Coming from Hungary and having been trained partly in the Soviet Union we shall try—in our modest way—after all we are neither impresarios nor choreographers—to unite the best we have seen and learned in our two worlds. I am no politician; on political matters I have neither the wish nor the ability to express any views. But in the world of ballet, coexistence is desirable and possible.

(*Continued from Flap I*)

ment, servants and even that inconceivable Iron Curtain luxury, their own car.

For after early privations, fortune had smiled on Nora and Istvan. They first met as children at the Ballet School of the Royal Hungarian Opera, and were soon drawn to each other. By the time they were sixteen and seventeen they were offered contracts to dance at the Opera and became partners. When the great Russian dancer Ulanova visited Budapest, she so praised the work of the gifted two that they were sent to study in Russia with the legendary Gusev and Vaganova. They returned as stars to Budapest, and finally in 1952 they were married.

A year later their great chance of escape was offered to them. The account of their dash from East to West Berlin is one of the most vivid episodes in an exciting book. This is a fascinating, romantic and wholly winning story of two young people whose talent, luck and hard work drove them to the heights in a Communist country, and who gave it all up to start over again in the freer air of the West.

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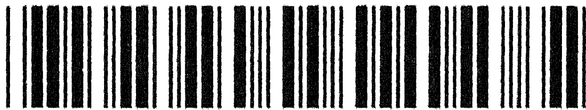

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