Cannons § Flowers

Georges CZIFFRA

English translation by John Hornsby
Of György Cziffra jr.'s
French version of the Hungarian manuscript.

EN 1996 vbe Soleil Rac

GYÖRGY CZIFFRA, a giant among pianists of the twentieth century, was born in Budapest on 5th November, 1921 and died on 15th January, 1994. Born with outstanding talent in circumstances of dire poverty – such mixed fortunes were to be his lot all his life - he survived war, imprisonment and hard labour as a political prisoner, which left his hands and wrists seemingly permanently damaged. He survived to fight back and rebuild his career, improvising in nightclubs until 1956 when he escaped with his family to the West and became the idol of audiences and earned the admiration of colleagues as diverse as Alfred Cortot and Martha Argerich. However, a critical clique turned savagely against him, all the more when his wrists began to suffer under the strain of constant tours. Yet he achieved another dream: to create a foundation to help young musicians, which he did at Senlis, north-east of Paris, buying an abandoned Royal Chapel where he set up the Franz Liszt Auditorium in homage to his hero and compatriot. Yet barely four years after the completion of these memoirs, the most terrible tragedy of all struck Cziffra and his wife, Soleilka, when their only son died in a fire in his home at the age of thirty-eight. Though he gradually made something of a comeback, the remaining years of Cziffra's life were chiefly spent auditioning and advising young musicians.

The English translation of Cziffra's memoirs was begun just after Cziffra's death and finally published in 1996. The publisher closed down in 2004 when, just as this second edition was receiving its finishing touches, Soleilka Cziffra died. She had been the driving force behind the establishing of the Cziffra Foundation from the start and was so until just a few months before she died.

John Hornsby., July, 2006

INTRODUCTION.

Soleilka Cziffra

« Deux étions et n'avions qu'un cœur ». François Villon. ('We were two with but one heart').

I'm an Egyptian, born in Rome. Soleilka means 'sun'. Not that I'm being pretentious: the name was given to me by my parents just like yours was. My father used to say laughingly, "You're a daughter of the sun, Soleilka, and you will rise above everything."

He used to tell me that the rulers of Ancient Egypt were our ancestors and that I should be proud to be a daughter of the sun. And so I was – very proud.

Just for fun, I would go out into the garden and call out to the sun, "Shine!" Since we lived in Rome, it shone. That was easy. I would call to the wind, "Bring us some rain!" and it rained. If it didn't, it was just that the trees weren't thirsty. There's a simple explanation for everything if you don't want to lose heart.

I married Georges Cziffra, a Hungarian, in 1942. With him I lived through war and peace; he played for the living and the dead. We experienced death, fire, art, love and, above all, faith and resurrection. Then we lost our son. Then I lost my husband.

At this moment I, daughter of the sun and of the puszta, am in dark, damp crypt of the Chapel in Senlis. Surrounded by the collapsing pillars of the Carolingian monument, I am kneeling on the mud floor at the foot of the statue of the Bishop of Saint Frambourg. Sharp bits of gravel cut into my knees while my hands are busy collecting the flowers, strewn here and there by the anonymous faith of visitors, and putting them into vases.

Modest tokens of a reviving cult, the fresh wreathes bow gently over the ribbed sides of the stone chasuble. For an instant, my fingers brush against the feet of the statue, fixed in their eternal, holy expectancy. The rough surface recalls the cold earth I had clawed at on impulse like a terrier until there appeared, wrapped in decaying rags,

the statue now standing before me. I looked up, instinctively hiding my hands covered in earth and gravel. The Saint gazes through me dreamily to Eternity. From his blank stone eyes I feel a warm, appeasing dark wave coming from afar as if in answer to a prayer.

I often go into the Chapel to walk down the nave a little and relax. I walk with all my sorrows, dreams, hopes and faith. Over the speakers, the sound of the Rachmaninov concerto announces the start of the next visit. I sit for an instant on the hard-backed bench and listen: I feel within me the warm, appeasing, dark wave which shone in the statue's blank eyes. The dreamy gaze passing through me to eternity is the message of Saint Frambourg: "Your deeds shall be accounted for in the realms of the living and the dead."

Georges and I lived through war and peace; he played for the living and the dead. We experienced fire, art, love and, above all, faith and resurrection.

May, 1996.

PRELUDE

With a past such as mine, it is impossible for me to imagine a musician floating serene and imperturbable above the earth. This prelude is intended to remove any such misunderstanding.

People are, I feel, weary of descriptions with its executioners and martyrs, criminals and heroes, its processions of horrors and great deeds.

Yet as soon as I start to evoke that period of my life, images of major and minor events of the last war flit past me; my memories of a Europe aflame and flowing with blood intertwine, twitch and die. A Europe plunged into darkness by the eclipse of the human mind.

That long night explains why a major part of my experience has not been on the world's concert platforms but in the operating theatre of dreadful war. How many of us, when I think back, were waiting for the miracle of peace, longing for it, we the inhabitants of Budapest as much as those of Paris or the other cities of Europe!

I don't know whether such episodes in my life came back to me deliberately or instinctively. It is not so much a taking-stock as a confrontation between two worlds which know nothing of each other, irreconcilable fragments of eternity on different orbits.

With time, something obvious has occurred to me about my disordered memories: only the laws of relativity can explain why I can find no link between past and present, why my inner world is split into two islands.

That is why I can only reveal myself as I was at the time – a child then a soldier. Art and music had no part to play in war or the destitution of my family. It should be understood that during that period I was cut off from my past and my future: I had no time to weep nostalgically for my youth or dream of my future. My relationships with others were purely animal-like, mechanical and automatic. You should

realize that I can't write about it all philosophically, looking down peacefully from a height on the horror and absurdity of the good old times, thanking God for saving me from hellfire as though some arcane Providence had planned it all.

It is not the picture of a young man seated at a piano that comes to mind but that of a soldier wandering in no man's land. During the long war years, I forgot ever having touched a keyboard. My hands were no different from those of other combatants: hands for wielding a weapon, for eating, for surviving, hands raised under the menace of a machine gun, hands tied behind one's back. How could I have remembered what it was like to have the supple hands of a musician? Those had died with the war.

There are strange coincidences in life which I am tempted to see as signs. Emotional moments of parting or of return to life are the only landmarks in a harsh series of events of which the coming together in time and space passes all understanding. From his earliest years, my son György has been able to interpret the mysterious signs which pursue me now as they did in the past. I entrusted myself to him without realizing it, bit by bit by hints, even in glances and silences. These tales from my life have seen the light thanks to our invaluable understanding and are now available to all.

THE RAFT OF POVERTY

Inexorable poverty enshrouded my mother, sisters and me in the single tiny room where we lived. It beat incessantly against the walls and against the bath tub into which I fell when I was born. With it came destitution and, worst of all, starvation – 'The Great Daily', as it was known.

It assailed us until I was eight, passing over me without crushing the little child that I was or ruining my health, despite the paralyzing effect it had on us.

When I became an adult, the phantom of that pitiless cruelty which had viciously hounded our humble existence often appeared in our haunted dreams. Later, even though life has not always deigned to show me its sunniest side, I was able to look on those dreadful events with certain objectivity: had we really deserved such incredible hardship? Had all our sufferings really existed? Hadn't it all been just a nightmare, vanishing suddenly as if by some divine order the better to let us glory in our victory?

Whenever pictures of the past come back to me, I do not see them with my sensibility as it is now; I have gradually come to experience the past as I did at the time.

It is in this sense that the theory of relativity seems most appropriate in my case. It alone makes an utterly poverty-stricken past credible, while at the same time showing what a boundless distance exists between that past and the person addressing you now. There are two different states of awareness and yet the same man bears them within himself.

Isn't the secret of our resistance to the blows of Fate the ability to forget that life is ever-changing? Our salvation is in fact due to our astonishing ability to adapt which, if necessary, modifies our metabolism, both physical and mental. Such transformation ensures our survival, however great the distress, for the mind gradually puts aside all other

preoccupations until it can no longer even conceive of any other form of existence than the present.

For me, looking back is not just an evening reminiscing by the fireside or tears of emotion on looking through an old photo album. It means plunging into a strange, almost unknown world, which I gradually decipher. There is no bridge or pathway: to get to the other side you have to leap into the void and lose sight of the present world.

We were not alone on that raft of poverty. The scourge of God which fell upon us was the lot of countless families which tried like us to live – or rather stay alive – in the white wooden huts hastily crammed together on the outskirts of Budapest thanks to some humanitarian organization which had designated this unsanitary masterpiece a 'temporary residential block'. The spot was called 'The Land of Angels'. That was all we needed to call our dwellings 'Angel Court'.

My mother and sisters had had to move into the tottering hut, perched on piles, attributed to them not long before my birth. Removal was no problem: they did not have anything to move. How had they sunk to this when only a short time before they had been living in a smart flat in Paris? Quite simply because of the 1914-18 war.

A short time after the declaration of war, the French government had issued a decree expelling all foreign residents whose countries of origin were fighting against France. Their property was to be confiscated. Since he was a Hungarian citizen, my father was immediately imprisoned, then interned in a special camp along with several hundreds of others, also of 'enemy' nationality. My mother was given notice to leave French territory without delay by special convoy, each person having the right to five kilos of luggage. Their fifteen kilos contained the little that remained of my father's earnings from his years as a cabaret musician. The rest was simply seized: furniture, family souvenirs, everything representing some fragment of the happiness of their lives up till then.

Her arrival at dawn at Budapest station, shrouded in winter fog, cannot have been exactly joyous. Like most of her fellow travellers who, under the same sign of destiny, stared blankly and despairingly at the

world confronting them, she had nothing to look forward to and no-one to welcome her. The journey had drained her morally and physically. She had travelled the whole way seated in the corridor on her little suitcase with her second daughter in her arms.

The eldest lay near her on the floor. Many others journeyed in such conditions for they had all left France on an equal footing. The train carried twice as many people as there were seats and my mother, who was then thirty-eight, got out of the train on the point of collapse with no idea of where to go or with what objective. Resigned yet wishing with all her heart for some miracle to occur, she and her children made their way towards the exit.

At the end of the platform stood a few guardian angels sent along by the Hungarian Red Cross and waiting with an air of complete indifference for all those bewildered people so that they could be sorted. They were assembled and asked straight out if any of them would like permanent lodgings. In her exhausted state, my mother said yes without even enquiring where and in what conditions she was to be billeted. Her period of martyrdom began shortly before the start of my own life story.

All this was only a foretaste of the distress which was to wind its tentacles around her for years to come and of the daily anxiety the menacing shadow of starvation caused.

My first home, that hut wavering on stilts, comes back to me in a strange, misty halo. Why indeed was I born there of all places? I have no idea. It was my meeting place with Destiny and there my father found us all when he was released from internment in the French prison camp. Nor could I say if the right to live, granted to every human being when he comes into the world, was the greatest of rewards or a supreme infliction for a child born in ‘Angel Court’. Perhaps it was both.

The background of my early years will not take long to describe. The epicentre of the slough of destitution I lived in with my parents and sisters was bounded by the few dozen constructions, all alike, on the makeshift estate. The terrain was marshy so the City Council, in a burst of humanitarianism, decided to elevate the rotting edifices. These were

linked in fours by a wooden balcony which acted as a passageway. Every block was divided into a dozen rooms eighteen yards by twenty-one, each with an identical opening: a tiny window on a level with the door, looking onto the inner yard – a sea of mud in autumn, a skating rink in winter – the latter a paradise for children but a purgatory for the elderly.

The only staircase for the inhabitants was a model of its kind. It had been added as an afterthought, a sort of miller's ladder, its original rungs replaced by planks, with a symbolic handrail which children and old people alike made sure not to touch. Lodgings such as these could only encourage the spread of human degradation yet the public health authorities in all good conscience crammed in unemployed down-and-outs with their large, poverty-stricken families. No account was taken of the number of children or of their state of health: each family was allotted just one room. Apart from 'enjoying the rights' to the open space roundabout, the estate dwellers had no advantages, unless the constant supply of nauseous air from the nearby marshes counted.

The rooms were damp beyond belief yet, in the half-light of winter evenings, they were the only safety net left to all those whom even Fate had grown weary of battering. They lived stranded, cooped up in the hovels they had been allotted, all hopes dashed - and we lived in their midst. It would be incongruous to speak of comfort in such a context. The word no more existed in our vocabulary than it did in the brilliant mind of the property dealer responsible for the wooden slum. He had not even thought to provide the tiniest space for a stove on which, if only on occasion, my mother and her neighbours might have concocted one of those dishes, using a few scraps, of which only the truly poor have the secret. The water in the well at 'Angel Court' was no more drinkable than the liquid in the head of the Health Official who had had it drilled – again because of infiltration from the marshes round the estate. Promiscuity was forced on adults and children alike as they washed and relieved themselves in a bucket in one corner of the room. Each evening it was emptied into a pit situated, as luck would have it, at the other extremity of the estate. Those still healthy enough lay beside the sick and made

love in full view of everyone. Their way of life – if such stagnation could be called life – had soon rid them of any feeling of embarrassment or shame.

There were at least five people to a family in the shanty town. At first, my mother and sisters were not too cramped in their room. The living space was sufficient, if hardly acceptable, for three. When my father returned, our family grew and, after I was born, there were five of us to enjoy the lifestyle.

Some of the better-off neighbours could afford the luxury of an old mattress, which they set up on chocks. Others got hold of an old camp bed. Like most other families, we were not so lucky. Hoping for something better in the future, we slept on old jute sacks refilled regularly with fresh straw by our parents, and these made pleasantly soft beds.

The raft of poverty gathered speed as it was sucked into the maelstrom of degeneration. Even so, people went on living at 'Angle Court' with utter indifference. The unemployed remained unemployed; the dreamers dreamt; the hungry went hungry and the pessimists had nightmares. In actual fact, they had no need to: it was enough to open one's eyes and look around. Some time later, my sister told me that a younger sister, born shortly before me, had tied of TB as a consequence of so much privation.

As my mother later told me, I was a little over two when my younger sister had a quite unexpected chance to jump off the raft which was carrying us along. My mother hurried to fill in a form for the Dutch Red Cross, which proposed lodgings for a certain number of Hungarian children on a temporary basis, with charitable Dutch families paying their school fees, board and lodging, etc... The offer was limited to one child per family, providing he/she fitted the criteria of 'in special need'. As regards poverty, we were well up to the mark. It was not difficult to understand my mother's relief at knowing that at least one member of her family would be well provided for. So one day my sister left for Holland to spend her childhood free from want. Shortly afterwards, my

parents received a letter from her hosts asking them to take the necessary steps to have her legally adopted. The very idea was revolting to them. However, sick at heart, they accepted. What else could they have done? The threat of under-nourishment – an ever-present guest at our rare meals – and, worse still, starvation - the daily spectre – forced the decision on them. They just could not face any longer that feeling of helplessness and anguish which brought a lump to the throats of every parent on the estate every time a loss of energy in one of the family was noticed. Time passed. Like any child who changes countries at an early age, my sister learnt Dutch as quickly as she forgot her mother tongue. To start with, my parents heard from her regularly then the letters grew fewer and finally stopped altogether.

At least she had escaped from the ship which was slowly sinking beneath us. We were clinging on fast – but for how much longer? To cap it all, my father's health prevented him working full time. The poor man persisted in making his way to Budapest in the hope of finding cabaret work. The outcome was inevitable: either there were no jobs or the last one had just gone. In the evening, he downheartedly made his way back, sucking on an old pipe as empty as his pockets. On arrival, he sat down on his low chair in a corner of the room and, his eyes blank, brooded over his disappointment.

My mother's chief worry was, of course, of the same order. To a little boy, his way of discretely disappearing was as mysterious as his suddenly reappearing. I was at once astonished and delighted at his always being there. Actually, it was thanks to his gift for being in several places at once there he was able to pick up here and there just enough coppers to cover the cost of the paraffin we needed for our lamp in the evening. On those days when my parents both came back empty-handed, we went to be with the sun. He who sleeps forgets his hunger! My mother wrapped me in a sort of shawl and stuffed me inside one of the mattresses which made up the major part of our furniture. I was protected from frostbite, but how long those dark evenings seemed in

that room where the thermometer dropped well below zero – as long as a funeral wake.

On other evenings, and believe you me they were occasions for celebration, I fell asleep my belly as tight as a drum skin, with all the satisfaction of a job well done, dreaming I was eating all over again.

One day mother came back looking radiant. She came up to me where I lay, picked me up and, squeezing me to her, waltzed several times round the room. To explain her extraordinary behaviour, laughing aloud as our dance continued, she popped something meltingly delicious into my mouth. She saw how delighted I was from my puzzled look accompanied by a broad grin more eloquent than any words. As my first ever chocolate dribbled from the corners of my mouth, she suddenly grew serious again and explained that from then on I would be having more of this lovely stuff as she had found a job.

I must have been three at the time. I was so ludicrously small and weak that my mother had to leave me lying down all day. I was subject to frequent giddy spells and was constantly tired. I often fell flat on my face when attempting to take a few steps. Like many children handicapped, my mind developed precociously to make up, as it were, for my physical weakness.

The near religious awe with which those around me pronounced the word 'work' each day taught me very early on its fundamental importance. The frequent rumbles in my stomach, more often empty than full, taught me to respect it well before I understood exactly what its function was.

At the other end of the estate stood a building stood apart from the rest, the only one not on stilts, with walls of old, re-used, cracked bricks daubed with lime. At least the foundations were solid concrete. It was a makeshift grocer's thought up by some distinguished town planner for the poverty-stricken spot. Its aim was to satisfy the most elementary needs of our ghetto. Since the resources of the locals were virtually non-existent, it specialized in selling the most basic foodstuffs. Although 'Angel Court' was heavily populated, only a derisory number of customers

could pay for what they bought. But (there is always a 'but' in such cases) the couple who ran the shop had no children. They were moved by our dire poverty, which was notorious even in that 'Court of Miracles'[1] and offered to give my mother work from time to time. A child who had died young for want of medical care and food; another too weak to get up; a third obliged to go abroad to escape starvation; an elder daughter as yet too young to work; a semi invalid husband recently released from prison camp, unemployed – and all with nothing to eat. My mother was dogged by the attempt to makes ends meet. (By the way, congratulations to anyone who may suspect I am blackening these memories. This is perhaps the moment to point out to those who may consider the story of this period of my life as much the sort which certain journalists revel in that I too would rather read about it in a comfortable armchair than have lived through it.)

Thus it was that, due to the pity of those kind people, my mother at last had a little job. Sometimes she went out as often as three times a week to do the housework, laundry or work in the shop. Her modest earnings were our only income at the time. What rejoicing there was at home: for the first time in ages our meals contained sufficient calories and, more important, were daily. My mother kept her promise, bringing me back whenever she could a sweet to saviour blissfully after dinner.

As a matter of fact, the basic revenues of the families in our colony came from unemployment benefit, which arrived through the post every month. It amounted to the price of a large, five-kilo loaf. It was a pittance, true, but in our community the amount was acceptable. Destiny became the banker of those who found the market value of that modest banknote too low – for a time. It printed beautiful notes for them, as large as they were worthless, with a plethora of zeroes. Inflation was upon us.

Such was its gravity in Hungary that all social classes and all salaried workers began frenetically buying absolutely anything to be rid of the money as quickly as possible. When the value of the notes was

[1] A courtyard in Medieval Paris, the haunt of beggars, cripples and thieves.

virtually nil, magnificent brand-new ones appeared in all the colours of the rainbow. The face value of the smallest was fifty or one hundred thousand. The largest were worth a million, a billion, even a trillion. It was a time when anyone lucky enough to have employment was paid daily in the form of a large sack crammed full of banknotes – barely enough to buy a few kilos of sugar. Even then, they had to be spent quickly for the contents of the sack were soon worth no more than the price of a newspaper. I can still remember those great multi-coloured notes on which were stamped an impressive row of zeros – enough to set one dreaming, for a while at least.

Under such conditions, the avalanche of afflictions which swept down on the survivors of 'Angel Court' had an immense impact on all concerned until they developed a shell which made them indifferent to their fate.

What resignation and passivity I recall on looking back. My memory is subject to the laws of relativity – it is a mirror now reflecting the truth, now deforming it. The truth probably was that with time our misery must have seemed to my mother and sisters so bound up with our lives, so inescapable, as to cause them to lose all notion of time and even of life a few years earlier.

I now feel the concentration camp atmosphere, with all the families of the unemployed crammed into identical huts, was in its way salutary. The idea they were sharing their poverty with others stopped them giving up during the terrible hardship of the winter months.

Sometimes at different stages of my life I have wondered – as I still do – whether the war was the sole cause of that insane poverty. It is possible.

To me, such anger from on high is far more terrifying for someone who is destitute because it forces him to face up to his situation and robs him of all hope, draining him still further and also results in a self-indulgent blackening of his condition until the external poverty starts to eat away at his very being like an incurable disease, utterly destroying him.

I don't want to appear cynical or avoid confronting something beyond our understanding but you must surely agree that if you were to get out of that black hole sound in mind and body your willpower had to be riveted to your body.

I must have been four or five when I first became aware of the utter calm and passivity of my mother and elder sister in their deep distress. Naturally, they must have known their chance of survival was as slender as that of other families. Above all, this certitude led to a degree of resignation such that all notion of past, future and even present, plus the perception of time, gradually faded from their minds before disappearing to make way for a Job's poverty of such magnitude that they were under the impression just about anything could be imputed to it. Everything is relative.

I can still see my mother in the little room in the evening, her head bowed, her face like that of the grieving Virgin Mary, expressing infinite acceptance. She never forgot to mention all our names in her evening prayers.

The people in our block used to call in on each other. Sometimes they came to see us too. The meetings followed a set ritual. Everyone brought his 'seat' with him, usually an old crate slightly modified. While waiting for the others, the latest arrivals listened to the complaints of the earliest. Then all together they cursed their fate, their poverty, their future and, of course, the government. When everyone was at last settled, the most fortunate would take from his pocket a handful of cigarette-ends and roll up the shreds of tobacco in a bit of old newspaper. He licked the edge of the paper, examined the cigarette with an expert eye and lit up. With morose delight, he inhaled deeply then solemnly passed it on. Meanwhile, the others awaiting their turn spoke in a low voice of all the marvellous dishes they would enjoy…as soon as the occasion presented itself. The communal cigarette continued its rounds. The room reeked with the rank smell of re-used tobacco. Yet at the very mention of lovely stews or wonderful roasts a sudden resounding concert of empty stomachs reminded everyone it was time to change the subject. Each

took a final puff at the tiny stub to calm his turbulent innards and quickly went back home to digest his dream banquet in his sleep. That was, basically, our social life at the time.

Inflation continued to soar. Up till then, everyone had been guided by two delusions: the possibility of getting a job and the return of financial stability. Both had fallen by the wayside. So necessity became the law at 'Angel Court'. It must be admitted that thefts and murders were a frequent occurrence. To bet on keeping one's spirits up and on remaining honest in such surroundings was of a temerity bordering on the irresponsible.

Our situation had become worrying once more. This time fortune smiled on us by giving my eldest sister, who was just thirteen, a helping hand. She was taken on to do the washing-up in the canteen of some firm or other – in the back of beyond, it goes without saying. Every day without fail she was up at dawn, ready for the two-hour walk to our place of work. She never forgot to take with her a decent-sized saucepan. Late each evening, on arriving back, she set the saucepan of plenty, full of leftovers, on the table and served us generous helpings on our tin plates.

These Gargantuan meals restored our good humour. Everyone was pleased except for my father. With a disposition such as his, he could not stand feeling useless. His outbursts became more and more frequent. He was inconsolable at the thought that one of his children, still of school age, should have taken over his role at the head of the family to look after our basic needs. By now, he was refusing to sit with us at table during our 'blowouts'. He sat in a corner of the room, silent, turning his back on us, his head buried in his hands, now and again shaking an accusing fist at heaven. His nerves already sorely tried during his recent captivity, were almost at breaking-point.[2]

At first, during this new period in our lives, my mother, as if somehow sharing his feelings, wept when my sister got back. But she gradually resigned herself to the situation. She relaxed, her usual good

[2] Interned near Paris at the outbreak of war as an 'undesirable alien', Cziffra's father along with the other prisoners had been subjected to false warnings that the prison was to be blown up.

humour apparently restored, and often took me on her knee and sang in a soft, clear voice popular waltzes or tunes from operettas or operas that she remembered from the past. I remember these moments so clearly because each time a strange, indefinable sensation of well-being spread through my body, warming it while at the same time leaving me feeling drained.

As I have said, I came into this world with virtually no physical resistance. Huge squadrons of microbes and germs of various infantile diseases regaled themselves on my feeble organism and then put my pathetic carcass up for auction. No-one could diagnose the exact cause of my problems. In 'Angel Court' it was utopian to think of a nice steak or of penicillin. The former was impossibly expensive, the latter as yet undiscovered. Besides, it was beyond our means to pay a doctor. The Health Officers neglected their duty since they feared to venture into the estate. Though their consultations were free, people avoided asking them in, knowing full well that the chief contents of their first aid kits were a stethoscope and a book of burial permits. I lay for months on end on an old sack stuffed with straw, yet my health did not improve in the slightest. I was all wound up in old headscarves, shawls and moth-eaten comforters.

Sometimes a fever would set me shuddering. I knew what to expect of these attacks and, weary of fighting back, waited stoically for my perceptions to grow dim so as to watch a show only I could see. I fixed my lethargic gaze on the ceiling. The grey patches on it grew multicoloured and then, so slowly as to be almost imperceptible, began to move. My nth nightmare was about to begin. As I tried hard to stop myself vomiting, the patches changed into grimacing faces all aflame. There were several of them: a scarlet monster, a gooey green devil and, most grotesque of all, a purplish blue ape-like creature. Their blinding white eyes, which grew dim after a while, were the only thing they had in common and it seemed as if they were about to disintegrate, but they did not disappear: only their consistency changed. I suddenly realized what they wanted and was paralysed with fear. The grinning masks became a

glaucous, jelly-like fluid constantly breaking up and reforming, all whirling together in a hideous mass, which trickled down the walls towards my face. My heart beat fit to burst and the blood pounded in my head. My whole body, bathed in cold sweat, begged to be spared, terrified at the idea the sticky liquid might touch me. Just as the frightful hallucination was preparing to swallow me up an electric shock shook my paralyzed being and I was back on my mattress, teeth chattering, head swimming and with a feeling of nausea.

My mother hurried to the rescue from the other end of the room. She placed a hand against my back and helped me sit up to try and relieve the choking sensation. Attacks like these could occur at any time. My mother was out of work again and gave up seeking a job for a while to look after me. She still had to leave me occasionally if only to see to the water. I dreaded the idea of an attack while she was out in case I had to manage by myself and raise my fever-racked body, shaken by spasms until it seemed about to fall apart, and remember what I could of the meal I had never had.

My father's worries ceased for a while when he too at last found work. Together with a spindly, shabby old violinist, he livened up a seedy bar, beautifying the odour of cheap wine with the sound of an ancient piano. The two artists speeded up the rhythm at which the glasses emptied, to the delight of the bar-keeper, and earned them enough each evening to fill the bellies of their families the next day. The cherry on the cake was the packets of cigarettes the tipsy customers gave them in gratitude – ironically, just when they could have afforded their own.

Alas! This was not to last. My father's nervous illness, a remnant of his captivity, grew worse. Wearied by the struggle, he spent more and more time at home, long periods of exhaustion alternating with strangely periods of over-excitement. Mumbling incoherently, he paced round the room raging deliriously. All of a sudden he would stop short and stare wildly at a point on the wall. I loved my father dearly but at such moments I was terrified of him. I shut my eyes tight and made myself as scarce as possible on my bedding. I tried to persuade myself that if I

could not see him he could not see me either. At other moments, at the height of his worst attacks, he began to howl like one possessed. Terrorized, I forgot my strategy and began to howl even louder. Sometimes he was so taken aback at not being able to hear himself that he calmed down. Luckily for us, such grave attacks were rare. On thinking back, these symptoms did not particularly affect us. Compared with all the tempests our raft had survived up till then, they were a storm in a tea-cup. Yet still we clung on. All of us. But persistent, virtually continuous spasms of trembling meant that my father was incapable of any kind of work and we suffered with him from every point of view. His condition compromised our hopes of survival and seriously undermined our resolve to keep going – and in 'Angel Court' it was as well to keep one's spirits up.

My elder sister, Yolande, applied herself zealously to her washing-up and brought back generous helpings of leftovers, cleverly transformed into shepherd's pie by my mother. With her meagre starting wages, we could not afford to add anything from the grocer's to our daily fare apart from bread.

My sister's attendance record was remarked on by her employers. They even found out that she had a little culture. Like most of her colleagues, she sang as she worked to give herself courage to face the Babylonian pile of dishes to be dried. There was nothing unusual about that except that she sang in French. A girl living in a place of such sinister repute as 'Angel Court' singing in perfect French in a grimy factory scullery miles from that bandits' lair seemed as out of place there as a banknote in my father's pocket. In short, she was moved to another department, an office, and her pay went up. One evening she came home from work and astounded my parents by declaring for all to hear that she intended to hire a piano. The decision was an important one but my father said nothing, trying to catch my mother's eye. Deep down, he could not have been displeased by the idea. He was himself a musician, after all. Fixing her large blue eloquent eyes on him, my mother replied,

“Yes, we used to have one in Paris…But in conditions like these…sheer folly…and if I ever…”

My father shut his eyes wearily. He already knew all about the idea, though they had not discussed whether the moment was opportune or how the plan could be carried out but he wanted to share the spark of unexpected joy. But my mother’s muted enthusiasm was as nothing compared with my sister’s zealous determination. In the end, not long afterwards, a horse-drawn cart drew into the backyard. We heard the pleading, ominous creak of the staircase and then my sister appeared in the doorway, flushed with excitement, her eyes shining and after her came two men heaving along a large, square object. My parents looked at each other, dumbstruck.

Without knowing it, I was looking at my first piano.

IN THE CIRCUS RING

Yolande came home from work each evening eager to get back to her beloved piano. Patiently and doggedly she taught herself the basic rules governing the positioning of the hands on the keyboard. After following the dreary track of tedious exercises to give her still hesitant fingers a measure of independence, she was soon able to take the terribly monotonous, endless highway of scales. Her hands ran ceaselessly up and down the keyboard and their mastery gradually increased.

I vividly remember those sessions, all the more as, still on my mattress, I did the exercises with her. Lying by the wall, my hands under the blanket, I carefully imitated each movement of her fingers. As for the problem of shifting the thumb in scales, I resolved – when my sister was out, of course - to ask my father to let me into the secret.

He tried to restrain my impatience and, in his usual reserved manner, told me kindly that he thought I was too young and, to stop me bursting into tears, promised to explain everything – in a few years. “In any case,” he went on, “I don’t see how you could take do anything so demanding with your poor health. You can’t even stay on your feet. You spend all your time in bed.” Dreamily, he added, “Spending hours at the piano every day is tiring work, as good players know all too well.” I was over three and more or less knew what he meant. But despite the basic truth of his words, I felt very bitter.

The ensuing days became sad, dull and interminable once more. Lying with my face to the wall, I would have nothing to do with anyone or anything, including meals. I searched for some form of punishment in keeping with my sorrow and tried to think of something else while my sister continued conscientiously with her exercises hour after hour. All in vain: such was my fascination with what she was doing that in spite of myself my fingers under the blanket followed her every movement to perfection even though her fingers on the keyboard were not visible. I had just understood how to play a scale. This time I was careful not to

breathe a word of my discovery to anyone and fell asleep as proud as Punch. And so it continued: my sister progressed and so did I. I re-did everything she could do on the keyboard under my blanket.

Strokes of luck never come singly. One morning I woke up feeling unusually well. The sort of column of fire, that parasite gnawing at my body day and night, had finally decided to change HQs. I at once asked my mother to dress me, which she was delighted to do. While washing me she gave me endless advice: don't go out; don't catch cold; don't run about in doors or you'll get too hot and all sorts of other things which I listened to sulkily. Anyone who has spent too much time lying on his back ends up knowing the ceiling better than the floor. I was sullen, a loner who spoke little. Playmates of my own age kept away from me. When I went to bed in the evening, I deliberately turned my face to the wall to avoid joining in any family conversation. Though I silently worshipped her, not even my mother could cheer me up.

Even so, my illness had been of some use. My mother had taken advantage of my endless appetite for pictures and of my being bedridden to teach me the rudiments of reading and writing – with success. By the age of four I could do both fairly well. I was pleased: I would no longer miss the company of friends so much. Of course, I still envied their happy, wild cries, which punctuated their games in the yard. My reading and my dreams were all I had. They enjoyed themselves with every part of their bodies whereas I had only my fingers. I observed their joy through our little window, wondering why they were granted so much and I so little. In the meantime, I read everything I could lay my hands on: stories and old albums full of drawings and strange characters which peopled my imagination.

I was soon to discover that this precocious maturity was Providence's way of making up for the missed games of football. Having watched my sister at the piano, I took it up – with my father's permission, of course. I closely watched her every movement, then took my turn and was amazed at being able to imitate her, however clumsily. I felt encouraged. The magical sounds and the intricacy of the keyboard

encouraged me to go further, with the aid of my father. I regretted that our shared evening lessons were so short and constantly asked for further explanations, which I put into practice there and then. I was fascinated by the variety of the work and would not get down from the stool. I caught up with my sister and for a time we did the same exercises. This did not last long for soon I was playing well-known little melodies perfectly accurately while inventing my own left-hand accompaniments.

I had become insatiable. There were no longer sufficient hours in the days which had previously seemed so long. I was making rapid progress. At the time we did not have any sheet music, which did not bother me since I was unable to read the notes in any case. I pestered my mother to sing me tunes to add to my repertory, which she did willingly, and I got to know a lot of extracts from opera and operetta. I usually retained them after a single hearing and let my fingers run over the keys before joyfully getting to grips with the piece. It was child's play to me, in the true sense of the term. Thanks to these games of 'tag' and 'hide-and-seek', my hands soon became autonomous, playing both separately and together, and this encouraged them to try further exciting experiments. My tastes broadened and my pleasure redoubled as little by little I entered the enchanted world of scales, the magical landscapes of chords and the boundless horizons of modulation. I grew ambitious, inventing introductions for the little tunes and embellishing them more and more. When my left hand could react as quickly as my right, I started on variations.

I was barely five at the time. When my father saw the rapid results of his teaching, he showed me stranger and more complex harmonies which to me seemed bizarre, potent dissonances. Once I had grown accustomed to them, I used them with assurance and embroidered the little waltzes and the pieces I invented for the fun of it.

I knew the main tunes from *Carmen* and even more by Gounod, whom I adored. I learnt the great waltz from *Faust* by ear (it was not until much later, when I was living in Paris, that I understood the full

diabolical beauty of this piece through Liszt's masterly transcription and made haste to record it – in memory of a memory.) Thanks to the great Strauss dynasty, Offenbach and many others, my daily work at the piano after the age of five consisted entirely of improvisation. It was more than mere pleasure: it was a power which enabled me to escape from 'Angel Court' whenever I felt the need.

How do I feel now about my musical apprenticeship? Setting out to learn the piano seriously without being able to read music cannot do any great harm. Quite the contrary: taking care of the practical rather than the theoretical helps and speeds up the flowering and development of reflexes. The learner's growing concentration is not saturated or dispersed by having to learn other notions his brain can well do without and he is able to work with maximum efficiency to develop his reflexes, the basis of any true pianistic technique in my view.

Do not get me wrong: I am not against theory and sight reading but I do not agree with their being taught too early. Any teacher faced with a self-taught beginner who shows exceptional skill at the keyboard will not fail to appreciate the truth of this. He should allow such hands to go their own way, while keeping an eye on how their skills develop so that the player will discover the laws governing the different phases of their spontaneity for himself.

It is far better to penetrate the mysteries of sight reading once the child, through the complicity between his fingers and the keyboard, has the all-powerful feeling that his will, as expressed by his hands, is moving over conquered terrain. This method was of the greatest benefit to me. With the help of exercises and, even more, of frequent periods spent improvising, my hands rapidly became autonomous. Freed from having to search for the notes on the staves and keyboard at the same time, I was able to learn the significance of those mysterious fly-specks in record time, whereas beginners are so often put off by their apparent complexity. With this method, there was no time wasted and nothing to discourage me so that I continued to progress rapidly as well as enjoy myself. I would suggest that those who pay me the compliment of

considering me to be the exception which proves the rule try this method, unorthodox though it undoubtedly is. I would go as far as to affirm that in every case the progress will be astonishing even if the pupil's skill never rises above average. In my own case, there is no doubt that the experiment was a success way above all predictions. According to my father, my achievements by the age of five, both in theory and playing, were comparable with those of a good amateur adolescent player. From then on I progressed as if by magic, in a manner beyond all understanding.

Shortly after all this, a strange, limping pedlar turned up at 'Angel Court' and he was to set my favourite pastime on the way to becoming a career. Twenty years later, he was to turn up again – this time to block my way and have me thrown into prison. I shall be returning to that.

From then on my piano became my shrine. I made a daily sacrifice at the ivory altar with all the fervour of the poor. I discovered the tormented world of duplets and spent most of my time thinking up cunning ways of compensating for my small hands. Despite this handicap, I managed to perfect my fingering and play scales, arpeggios in thirds, fourths and augmented fourths, chromatic and whole tone scales. Naturally, I continued to improvise daily, incorporating the new techniques into various little pieces I had invented. My hands flew over the keys with ever-growing delight. I felt they were subject to my power and that I was their sole master.

One evening after my father and sister arrived home, I gave them a surprise by improvising a *Grande Fantaisie Brillante,* designed to show off all my latest discoveries. My father, silent as ever, nodded in approval, which encouraged me to attempt there and then other romantic improvisations. My sister was standing by me. I was too occupied to look up at her but I sensed she was distressed, as if overwhelmed by a sorrow as great as my joy. I only looked up when I had finished. Her cheeks were red, her eyes brimming with tears. Without a word, she turned her back on me and walked unsteadily to her bed, threw herself on it and burst

out crying. This upset me terribly. I ran to her side and, not knowing how to console her, began to sob in unison.

She pulled herself together almost at once and smiled as she tried to stop my flow of crocodile tears with kisses and caresses. My joy was restored and I suggested in a naively learned tone that she should spend less time at work so as to be able to practice more. The spell was broken, however. She took out her book of scales more and more rarely. Weeks passed without her playing at all. Her enthusiasm had gone. After half an hour or less she would get up with a sigh. In the end, weary of dwelling on her former dream, she kept away from the piano altogether. By now I was spending as much as five or six hours a day playing. My mother kept a discreet eye on my growing ambition. She was even obliged on occasion to threaten to deprive me of my next meal to make me moderate my exertions. Yet I was right to redouble them: my first concert was not far off.

One summer morning, a smiling sun lit up our yard. Four brightly-daubed characters were jigging joyously up and down. They were clowns. The first two danced in a sprightly, comical way, bawling out comic songs enlivened by the others with the din they made on a badly played accordion and a pair of cymbals mounted on a drum and glittering in the sunlight. In their rumbustious humour they raised a cloud of dust and as it began to clear one of them announced in a stentorian voice that the most wonderful circus ever was going to pitch its tent in the next field. It would be, he proclaimed, nothing less than criminal not to come in great numbers to see such a fine show.

My heart leapt with joy. Suddenly, on some unknown impulse, I let go of my mother's hand, dashed downstairs and ran panting up to the most heavily-painted of the four. He was surprised by the speed of such a slip of a boy, caught me on the run and lifted me up at arm's length on a level with his rainbow-coloured face. Without even giving him time to put me down and in no way intimidated by his appearance, I explained all about my 'knowledge' of the piano. He was astonished and asked me my age and the titles of the pieces I knew, punctuating his questions with

various clicks, hiccups, howls and frequent clucking noises. Meanwhile, my mother had arrived and started pulling me in the other direction. By now the fellow's curiosity was aroused. Taking advantage of the crowd around us, he begged my mother in a resounding, persuasive voice to let me continue my story – with hearty support from the neighbours. Not wishing to be a spoilsport, she let me return to the clown-accordionist's side, which I hurried to do, beaming with delight.

My new protector started on a tune then stopped all of a sudden to ask what I thought. I nodded my approval, while pointing out that certain chords in the accompaniment were out of tune. At his request, I proposed the necessary changes. With a mischievous, conniving wink, grinning from ear to ear, he began again. When he reached the point in question, correct this time, he turned to the audience with whistles of admiration peppered with gurgles of delight. Encouraged by his three accomplices, the inhabitants of the huts applauded loudly.

It was a lovely day. Nobody wanted to leave. A few of those living on our floor shyly suggested I go back up and play something. Everyone approved and began to clap. To encourage me to make up my mind, the clowns added joyously to the general uproar with drum rolls and thunderous cymbal-clashes. My ears were humming with the din. Relaxed and reassured by the jovial atmosphere, my mother smiled at me and gave my hand a discreet squeeze of encouragement. A moment later, filled with unspeakable joy, I ran upstairs. You can imagine – I had never before played to an audience.

The door and little window of our room were opened wide and the whole yard resounded with my inspired, passionately lyrical improvising. Intoxicated with freedom and in their element at last, my hands flitted over the keys at the whim of my fantasy. My fingers flew from *Carmen* to *La Vie Parisienne* without pause, with a few Viennese waltzes in passing, the last of which I did in Turkish style to make a better transition to Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine.* Down in the yard there was an impressive silence broken by long bursts of applause. My mother stayed with the others and listened to the sound gushing from my

undiscerning heart with that look of calm happiness she always wore when I played just for her. Suddenly my mind, completely caught up in its inspiration, was taken to task by my stomach, which never showed any consideration for my artistry and used to warn me with the dull regularity of a factory clock that it was lunchtime. I crouched on my stool like a crab and prepared to get down to telling my mother, the fairy godmother to my cravings, of the alarming state of affairs. Shadows blocked the doorway: the four musical clowns had already stolen away some time before to watch me closer at hand. They were all smiling radiantly. My mother was already standing beside me without my having noticed. The delegation stood solemnly round us and one of them said in oracular tones, “The circus awaits you, my boy!” “It would be a sin, madam,” continued another, “if you were to deprive the public and the wonderful world of show business of the exceptional musical gifts of this little boy.”

As he spoke, he rolled his great bulbous eyes in the direction of the ceiling, which seemed to inspire him to prophesy: “If you didn’t already know, madam,” he continued with growing passion, “your son is a perfect circus artist, a second Offenbach!”

Frankly, I did not really understand his obscure tirade, which did not prevent me enjoying the aftermath of my triumph. Quite the contrary, when our visitors had left, I tugged at my mother’s arm repeating, “Did you hear what he said about me? Did you hear, mummy? You’ve no right to keep me hidden away! I’m an Offenbach!”

My mother laughed till she cried. Then she ran her slender fingers pensively through my hair. “I’m going to let you have a taste of glory at the circus,” she said, “to show you that I don’t intend to crush your talent. You’ll take part in a matinee because you mustn’t forget, Mr Offenbach, that you’re only five,” and she flicked my nose affectionately.

My father was taken aback by the news when he got home that evening. Listening absent-mindedly to a summary of the day’s events, he said straight out, “We aren’t a charity. Did you ask how much our son will be paid for playing at these shows?” Mother and I came down to

earth. We had never considered the question from that angle. We were perturbed by his very pertinent remark and ate a snack in silence before going early to bed – perhaps so as to have more time to dream about my first recital.

Early the following afternoon, polished like mirrors and all in our best, my mother and I went hand in hand over the rutted, marshy meadows to the circus. We were rather mud-spattered by the time we arrived but soon forgot about it when we saw all the bustle around the rather worn big top. We made our way with some difficulty to the entrance, where the clown with the accordion was standing. When he saw us, he literally snatched me from my mother and strode of through a maze of canvas, heading for God knows where. Far off, I could hear my mother indignantly storming at him for his haste. I was led up to someone scarcely taller than myself in a half-Harlequin half-Pierrot costume. He was so skinny and his face so sunken that I was scared. He must have been a real live midget. He stood motionless, his small piercing eyes supervising the constant comings and goings of the acrobats, conjurers and animal trainers who were warming up in the patched canvas wings, waiting to go on. He had his back turned to us and was so absorbed in all the goings-on that he did not even seem to hear the short presentation that my six-foot beanpole of a friend tried to whisper in his ear. At that moment he turned round, saw me and his fakir expression turned at once into a promising smile.

“So it’s you, my little friend,” he said, not without a certain kindness on observing my own diminutive size. Meanwhile my mother had caught up with us after making her way through the maze of canvas. The Midget turned to her: “Madam, my men have told me about the extraordinary find they made yesterday in that foul pigsty,” he said, nodding in the direction of ‘Angle Court’, with its stinking huts lowering on the horizon as if threatening his profits. “I’m the chief or, if you prefer, the manager of this little group and a performer like the rest of them,” he went on, pointing to his costume. “We share the best times along with the worst and we all love the circus. It’s a wonderful job,” he insisted,

“and anyone who wants to join us has to offer himself up to the flames at every show or lose all reason and means for living.”

To me, utterly bewildered as I was by the uproar coming from every corner of the big top, he looked like some ancient waxwork with his cracked parchment face under the outlandish make-up. His outdated Pierrot-Harlequin costume made him look even more like a gnome. .He went on speaking to my mother, haranguing her and gesticulating wildly. My ears rang with the yapping of the performing dogs which were watching a fire-eater fearlessly blowing impressive bouquets of flames. Ponies and donkeys were braying, irritated by a little troupe of tame monkeys on their backs, jabbering and squabbling over a few peanuts. From outside came the shouts of fairground wrestlers boasting of their victories among the pandemonium of the clown-musicians who were trying to transform the fermenting uproar into the joy of the fair. Without transition, the Midget’s voice rose above the uproar without losing its restraint, “So, lad, you’re fourth on the programme between Colossus the Giant and Hercules the Dwarf, who bends iron bars. Tee hee!” he went, laughing at his own joke. “But, tell me, what exactly is it you do?” he asked, perplexed and with such seriousness that I was filled with pride.

“Well…I…can invent all sorts of things on the piano…pretty things…” I stammered shyly, swallowing my saliva. “Fine,” he said, reassured, “We’ll ask the honourable audience to propose themes for you to improvise on. I’ll trust you,” he said, lost in thought. He sized me up with his piercing look. “Even though I haven’t as much as heard you, I have a feeling you’re going to make a name for yourself.”

His tone changed all of a sudden as he told my mother, so sharply as to be hurtful, to watch out for the boy in charge of the ring, who would see to us. With that he went off towards the exit, mewing and bleating at the top of his voice to get all the gawpers to the box-office. His talents as a stuntman and his fairly coarse jokes had people guffawing and soon transformed most of the idlers into paying customers.

When it came to my turn to go on, my colleague the Giant, who was the flea-trainer, made me sit in the palm of one hand held perfectly

flat and steady. He raised me gently at arm's length above his head to the level of the platform. While the children applauded the feat, the grown-ups were already yelling out an avalanche of song-titles they wanted me to improvise on. Of course, they all wanted something different. Luckily, the ringmaster sprang to my assistance. Thanks to his eccentric acrobatics, he managed to staunch the disorderly demands of the unruly crowd. The sight of all those wildly excited people was enough to make me wish I'd been a thousand miles from such a den of perdition. Once calm was restored, my boss explained to the tamed public that they were to hear an infant prodigy and assured his distinguished audience that the best way to savour music was to shut one's face. Even those from the depths of 'Angel Court' were stupefied by such wisdom. After this highly cultural introduction, he helped me onto my stool and, amid a religious silence, asked quietly for a few well-known tunes. He chose three from several proposed and, with a conspiratorial wink, gave me a sign to begin. Now I knew what I had to do. I threw myself into my playing, now linking, now superposing the three melodies, decorating and embellishing them at leisure. My hands were swept along on the wings of my fantasy. They flew all over the keyboard, ablaze with energy.

When I began the audience was quite silent. Certain music-lovers, to show how sensitive they were and how deeply interested in my playing, encouraged me with words acquired from long experience of neighbourhood brawls: "Go it, lad! Hang on tight! Keep hard at him! Let him have it with your left! Show that short-arse a 'Court' artist has two arms!" Whistles of admiration, accompanied by louder and louder applause, greeted each of my feats. My hands grew in ardour and daring. After a while, I noticed silence had returned to the Big Top. But it was not silence imposed by a dwarf: it did not have the same consistency. It was a respectful, willing silence.

I had entertained the crowd and won its esteem. I had won a victory and advanced to the edge of the platform to take a bow. The wave of disciplined applause accorded an artist was quite different from the ovation for a stuntman. Suddenly, just in front of me, I saw my mother at

the foot of the podium. Overjoyed at seeing her again and forgetting where I was, I jumped into her arms. She took me backstage, almost at a run, and wrapped me in a great scarf, an old friend which had often shared my nightmares, and we made our way to the exit between the rows of people on their feet applauding even louder. At the exit, the dwarf ringmaster and my great pal the clown-musician were waiting to say goodbye. After the standard compliments, by way of wishing us goodnight they said to my mother as if it were the most natural thing on earth, “Tomorrow. Same time, same place. Right, madam?” She stared at them, round-eyed with astonishment and replied firmly, “Gentlemen, not for all the gold in the world would I let my boy go through that again!”

The two men looked quizzically at one another, then the dwarf continued, emphasizing each word, “Madam, your son does not need all the gold in the world. He is already a seller of dreams. Beautiful dreams cost a lot and I am no miser. As from today he will be paid five crowns, five real silver crowns,” he said to my dumbfounded mother. “Five crowns per show for three weeks. What do you think?” Mother was breathless with emotion. All the while I stood silently beside her and, realizing the importance of this extraordinary offer, squeezed her hand as hard as I could to get her to accept without delay.

The government had managed to put an end to inflation. Fifteen crowns was the salary of a good worker and I was being offered five a day. Heavens! With that amount we could buy the whole family new clothes – which they were more than ready for – and still have more than enough to live on for some time. My mother had not given her full consent before leaving but presented the wonderful news to my father and sister, who had just got back home, as a foregone conclusion which there would be no going back on.

The next morning at dawn somebody knocked at the door. It was the accordion-playing clown wanting a definite answer. He was not yet made-up and out of breath. Perspiration flowed from his bald head. He seemed very pleased that my parents agreed. When all other questions had been gone through with my father, he got up solemnly, cleared his

throat and said, “We aren’t rich but we’ve made a collection for our little artist. We’re going to have a suit made for him to perform in – a matching waistcoat and trousers plus top hat – so that he’ll be able to carry on his career with panache worthy of his devotion. Welcome to the circus, dear young colleague!” he exclaimed by way of a goodbye, shutting the door behind him.

And so my stage career began. I arrived punctually at the circus every day and set to work, dressed all in my best and as serious as the Pope, improvising on an incredible variety of themes – fodder thrown to me by the audience. Afterwards I bowed from the four corners of the platform and, my eyes shining, was acclaimed in triumph. Sometimes the magician, the sword-swallower or my clown friends, got up to their antics or played outrageous tricks on each other to try and make me laugh. As the youngest member of the large family, I was their mascot and lucky charm.

For the first ten days everything went wonderfully. A fortnight later I felt fatigued and feverish but still carried on as the infant prodigy of the fairground. The next day I had to give up: despite all my efforts, the piano had become a great hazy blob before my confused eyes.

Lying stretched out on a beautiful new bed, the fruit of all Yolande’s work, I stayed at home. My father went to see the manager for the last time to present his apologies and cancel any further appearances. However, we all hoped, without daring to say so, that a few days’ rest I would be able to return to my job, which was, after all, enjoyable and profitable. Alas! My physical resistance was simply not up to the excessive demands I made on myself. Each evening at the circus required four or five hours’ practice a day. My number only lasted half an hour but, being the star turn, I had to play last in order to make an impression. It was too much and I discovered at the age of five and a half the price of fame for any star: overwork. This lesson cost me three weeks in bed with countless attacks of fever, dizziness and hiccups. While my body, like a figure on a tomb deprived of its substance, encouraged itself

to get better, my mind went off in search of its vanished hopes. The travelling circus was far away…and I was still in ‘Angel Court’.

THE PEDLAR'S PREDICTION

I was beginning to feel a little better and one morning asked my mother if I could go outside. I was still far from fit and she was none too keen on the idea. Even so, she agreed, thinking to herself that some fresh air would be an excellent antidote to the piano.

The great dressing ritual began. It was a real ceremony: it was not enough for my mother just to put my clothes on. I had to be fully rigged out. My feeble constitution was always close to crisis point. The insignificant weight of my body was still too much for my matchstick legs. The slightest gust of wind would have bowled me over so she put some ballast in my shoes and padded my get-out to prevent the first wild and mischievous autumn gust turning me into a weather vane. To start with I pulled on two long pairs of thick socks, then a long-sleeved vest, a thick lined shirt and a huge pullover which would have done service as a tunic. A patched old overcoat (which I could have fitted into twice without all the aforementioned) reached to my ankles. My mother would not shorten it as I had no long trousers. These plus a long shawl knotted round my neck and a pair of shoes whose length and heaviness must have equalled a quarter of my height and a third of my weight respectively, made me look like a scarecrow. Mother Nature must have thought I was off to the North Pole when she saw me all dressed up like a guy. In fact I was only going down into the yard. My goings out were subject to very simple rules laid down by my mother. First, illness was a costly privilege reserved for the rich; poor people kindly refrain. Second, why whet one's appetite in the cold air when one can go hungry in comfort at home? Third, God looks after his own. This philosophy was the vademecum of many other families and was immediately followed by a shower of further advice before I was allowed out into 'dropouts' jungle'.

The preparations over, she helped me downstairs for at that season the old planks of the balcony/walkway were slippery, as were the stairs. When we reached the yard, she patted the top of my head and

swiftly went back up. There was no-one else in the yard. I walked carefully through the mud looking for a playmate and thinking nostalgically of the great events of that summer.

The rainbow bubble of my dream was burst when a horde of kids dashed in, on the way back to the warren after a good time in a nearby field. There was just the right number for a good game of cops-and-robbers, I thought, happy to see them. Most of them were known to me because they lived in the same block. When they caught sight of me, they stopped in the middle of the yard to exchange a few words then started slowly to approach. I realized from the nasty, sullen way they were looking at me that there was nothing to be gained from waiting there and yet I did, intrigued as I was by their behaviour. They formed a circle round me. They seemed to be weighing me up as if they had never set eyes on me before. Apart from a few of my own age, most of them were about ten years old. As I in turn looked at them more closely, I realized to my surprise for the first time how like beggars they looked with their torn, ragged clothes. Mine were all patches and no better than theirs except that my mother washed and mended them regularly so that I should look less like a stray dog. Even so, compared with what some of those who were staring at me with such persistence were wearing and by the norms of 'Angel Court' it must have looked as if I were dressed in *haute couture.* My recent exploits at the circus, still the chief subject of gossip on winter nights, only made things worse. Angered by such superiority, the gang in its menacing silence obviously found it difficult to accept that such a weed had done something not even the toughest in the gang could have. In their eyes, such showing-off could not go unpunished. They pressed round me, preparing for the kill. In a flash I was pushed to the ground, punched repeatedly and rolled in the mud, and after that bombarded with lumps of muck. I got myself sadly up out of the puddle and heard my aggressors sniggering as they ran off: "That'll teach him to be such a bighead and earn so much! I've seen him fooling about...ugh!" The yard was deserted once more. I hobbled back up to our room. My mother let out a cry when she saw me returning in such a

state. To cut a long story short, I pretended I had bumped into something from not looking where I was going. Punishment was immediate: a week without any piano. I was undressed *manu militari* and ordered to bed without supper. While the others ate, I examined my hands as if they contained some shameful secret. The excuse I gave my mother was only a half-lie. The invisible object into which I claimed to have bumped did exist: the power of my hands to induce emotion. Such power could arouse feelings of hatred as well as of love. As I began to doze off, my eyelids half-closed, I thought with disbelief of the impotent bitterness of boys I had thought were my friends as they stupidly tried to take away the only assailable thing I had. Being a weakling was something to be ashamed of in 'Angel Court'. In the world of the rejected, adults and children obeyed the same law: that of the hardest-hitting fist.

Occasionally, I went along with my mother to the grocer's shop. She would put a tight bandage round my wobbly knees over my two pairs of long socks and wind another round my ankles, which had an unfortunate tendency to go out of joint. I was thus able to walk in a straight line and fall over less often. I preferred our neighbours' looks of commiseration behind our backs to the gusts of autumn wind which blew me around like a straw. By force of circumstances, I became a stay-at-home.

My former friends were replaced, with advantage, by a cluster of extraordinary characters, whose wonderful exploits I discovered during my bouts of voracious reading. Captain Nemo, Man Friday, the Seven Dwarfs, filled my dreams and worked on my imagination whenever they chose. But my piano was my only confident, at once my master and my slave. The devilish instrument was a lodestone round which my chief preoccupations turned and a faithful mirror of my deepest feelings.

My father wanted to continue giving advice for a while in an attempt to temper, or at least channel, my ardent and rebellious talent. He was not able to do a great deal. The robot-like obedience with which my hands, as if pre-programmed, sounded out the mysteries of the keyboard was to him so astonishing that, though I was only five and a

half, he did not dare intervene for fear this apparently superhuman gift, of which I was the privileged receptacle, should lose its vitality. It was as though I was drawn to the piano each day by some strange magnetic force. My father no longer felt of any use at home and returned to his wanderings with apostolic zeal, in search of the job of his dreams.

My mother had gone back to the grocer's as a 'maid-of-all-work', only coming home to feed me at mealtimes. My sister continued to leave at daybreak and return late in the evening. Although I was lonely, the time flashed by, what with piano-playing and reading. In the evening neighbours sometimes called in for a chat. As always, they paid for the imaginary food they had brought with the cheerful clink of a non-existent silver crown. Inflation was under control and the purchasing power of the new coin was astonishing. On the other hand, half the unemployment indemnity which had been the salvation of many had melted away. As their nest egg diminished they were obliged to spend as little as possible. In such hard times, nobody needed a shopping bag. A few potatoes, a half-portion of cooking-oil, a single slice of bread for each member of the family and just a quarter of a candle to light their feasts – this became the norm again. The only way of putting a little aside was to fast or at least become a vegetarian.

When a limping pedlar as tall as a house arrived in the yard with two battered suitcases, he certainly knew what he was about. His arrival caused unusual excitement among the diehards of 'Angel Court'. Rain had washed the colour out of his cases, bursting with samples of cloth of all kinds. Scarcely had he put his bags down than a mass of people crowded round. He spread out his cloth, got people to feel its softness and suggested that the riff-raff looking on should have a leg cut off rather than miss such an opportunity. His brash patter mesmerized the audience and made the advantages of his 'penny-by-penny' instalment plan, as he kept repeating with an odd snigger, seem irresistible. It was true. This wandering pedlar was offering a horde of out-of-work people who were constantly hungry such bargains as would have made the Good Samaritan's charity pale in comparison. The fellow knew all that

was said about ‘Angel Court’ and that it was not a good place for trade. Consequently, he offered to deliver the following week the quantity of cloth of their choice or a ready-to-wear garment. He would go on to other slums, prowling the region endlessly like a bogeyman, collecting the money owing him in sums of £2 a quarter, £1 a month or even 10p a week! The usurer of fashion was the acme of Providence to all poor untouchables for whom such opportunities were as rare as the temptation was great. Standing round this King of the Highway, the crowd of beggars with their bottomless bags excitedly consulted each other in their racy language. At the judicious moment, the hobbling hawker conjured up a large book shiny with grease. He meticulously noted down the name and order of every victim he had managed to set on the road to ruin. Then he put away his samples in a flash and, raising his long, ape-like arms to the sky, swore by all the devils in Hell and half a dozen Bibles (those were the terms he used) in a voice suddenly grown wheezy to get on with the work. As the crowd dispersed, the crookback got up and with his deep-set, restless eyes began searching where the strange melodious sounds of a piano, which had been intriguing him for some little while, were coming from. He waited on the alert for silence to return to the yard and then the dark, starved-looking silhouette climbed the worm-eaten stairs.

As usual at that time of day, I was by myself engaged on a complex, poetic improvisation, sitting with my back to the door. It was not easy to catch me unawares because while playing I made a mental note of all the familiar sounds in the block, which resonated like a drum with the echoes of various comings and goings. Without so much as raising my eyes from the keyboard, I could tell what was happening in and around the block from the creaking of a stair, the squeak of planks on the balcony-walkway and even the distinctive groan of our front door.

After a while, I stopped and let my arms fall. Staring ahead, I wondered if I would dare continue the terrifying story of the Ogre which devoured children as readily as I did Shepherd’s Pie. I finally decided to wait for my parents to return before making such a daring decision, for I

was as fascinated by the story as by the pictures in the old book I had come across. The afternoon was drawing to a close and in the silent, half-dark room the pale light was reflected by the piano keys, yellow with age. Even the thought of my tea – a dry crust and a few pieces of sugar on a tin plate within easy reach – had me thinking of the monster's ghastly meals. I was suddenly awakened from my musings by a slight creaking of the floorboards and my eyes opened wide with fear. I was sure someone or something had come into the room and was standing motionless behind me. Before even trying to see what the intruder looked like, I was convinced it could not be a mortal since it seemed to me humanly impossible to catch me out without my knowledge or without making the slightest noise. I sat as if glued to the seat, not daring to turn my head. The voice of conscience, repenting too late, echoed in my head, "If you keep reading about ogres, you'll end up meeting one." Summoning up such courage as remained to me, I spun round on my stool, holding on tight so as not to fall off. In the darkening room there stood before me a strange, ghostly man with a blank gaze, extremely tall and thin. He looked lie a mummified devil. "Thank God!" I whispered. "At least it isn't the child eater!"

"Not everyone would dare go where I do," said the visitor in a grating, otherworldly voice. "I've been listening to you for some time, lad. I like your work but I'd like you to play even better." He gave a hollow laugh. "Alas! No magic can replace the pinch of sulphur which will soon make your playing different from others'. But that's of no importance for the moment and even I can do a good dead on occasion," he mumbled half to himself.

"But who are you, sir?" I asked politely, astonished by the character's appearance and absurd remarks. "Who am I?" he croaked in a strangely jovial manner, which struck a false note. "Dammit, you've got more curiosity than your fingers, lad. Well, for you, let's see now…I'm the deacon of Destiny, ha, ha! Is that good enough for you?"

I still failed to understand what he was getting at. Luckily my mother turned up unexpectedly and the conversation took another turn.

Weighing up the lofty, skeletal figure with one glance of her bright eyes, she realized he was a pedlar. “Sir,” she said politely, but in a tone admitting of no reply, “we aren’t just poor, we’re very poor. I’m sorry to have wasted your time so if you would kindly…” Very grandly, she opened the door for the pedlar.

“Madam,” said the decidedly odd creature, “I haven’t come to sell my wares, though you could do with them. You should also know that I never waste my time,” he muttered, stressing the final words. “I came to tell you that your son has exceptional talent. His place isn’t in a big top but at the Budapest Academy of Music founded by Franz Liszt.” His words admitted of no contradiction either. “But how do you know?” my mother ventured to ask, quite taken aback. “Madam, I’m no more than a humble travelling-salesman but, er, well, I know what I know,” he replied obsequiously. “As proof of my good faith I’m going to make an appointment for you with the Director of the Academy so he can audition your son.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that you know him personally?” retorted my mother, looking sharply at the stranger’s frayed clothes. “Madam, I have every reason to believe he will refuse me nothing,” he replied with a sardonic laugh. “Be sure to be ready: next week I’ll be back to confirm the day and exact time of your appointment and then – what will be will be! My respects, madam. See you soon, young master!” and away he went, shaking with laughter. He picked up his load from the landing and this time I heard his ringing laughter and slightly limping walk dying away as he went down the stairs, which groaned under his weight.

Darkness fell early over ‘Angle Court’ that day. As usual, my father and sister came home exhausted. My mother told them excitedly about the odd, sphinx-like character who looked like a tramp and spoke like the Prince of Darkness. For me, once and for all, he was the terrible Ogre in my story to the life even if there was no outward resemblance. I was most careful not to let such a frightful secret be known, for nothing would induce me to let the image of myself as someone far older than his

years be tarnished – an image I polished repeatedly. When my father was told that one of the top musical dignitaries was to audition me very shortly thanks to this odd fellow, he went wild with joy. I could not remember ever having seen him so happy and exuberant. Over supper, he made great plans for my future as a famous pianist. After all the exhilaration, my parents' conversation took a decidedly less enthusiastic turn.

"There's no question of taking the boy to the Academy in that urchin's get up," declared my mother, her voice breaking. "They wouldn't even let him in dressed like that." "What he needs is some new clothes," added my father, sighing wearily. "And decent shoes," added my sister pensively as she got up from table to go to bed. The soles of her shoes were like sieves. "Don't wait for me for supper tomorrow: I'm behind with my work and will probably be late," she said as she finished undressing. "Good night, all!"

She got into bed, turned her face to the wall and fell asleep at once. I did the same. My parents went on talking, trying to resolve the tantalizing problem. Where were they to get the money from? Next day we were back to our usual routine. I stayed at home alone, riveted to the piano stool, my hands brushing the keys and constantly looking round uneasily, either behind me or at the old yellowing book, expecting to see the menacing image of the Bogeyman rising out of it. I got off with a scare.

My parents and I were just finishing our meal when my sister arrived, flushed with emotion, a large parcel wrapped in coloured paper under her arm. She held it out to me silently, smiling. This form of generosity was not the rule in our community and I stood there, arms dangling, not knowing quite what to make of it all.

"Come on, take it, silly, it's for you!" she cried, laughing at my shyness. Greatly embarrassed, I took the beautiful parcel and placed it carefully on the bed, really sorry to have to tear off such lovely wrappings. I clumsily began to open it, putting off the moment of revelation as long as possible. My parents and sister gazed at me tenderly

as I undid the last knot in the final ribbon. The parcel was undone. A dazzling sailor suit plus a pair of real leather shoes, with such a shine on them that it reflected the flame of the paraffin lamp, lay proudly in their box. Five minutes later, dressed in my wonderful suit, I was strutting round the room bursting with joy while my family gaped in admiration. The amazingly big collar was like a lord's; my first long trousers with their immaculate creases fitted just right.

"How were you able to guess his measurements so accurately?" my mother asked in astonishment. "Quite simple," my sister answered. "Last night while you were all asleep, I got up and measured him from head to foot." "How did you find the money so quickly?" asked my father, perplexed. "Just as simple," she replied evasively. "I used all my savings! My dear little brother," she went on, containing her emotion and kissing me, "You'll go to the Academy for your audition and it'll be a sensation."

I could not sleep that night. By now I was quite ready for Nosferatu to reappear and keep his promise. Meanwhile, I had made a firm decision to read no more stories about ogres. Would I keep to it? In the huge album with its dog-eared pages I found a story with a musical title: the strange fable of a piper. It brought out the Sorcerer's Apprentice in me. I wondered what tunes the ragged wanderer played to his mysterious rhymes in order to mesmerize the rats and children of Hamlin, getting him to follow him everywhere. I wanted to do the same.

I calculated that I had some chance of success since there were at least as many rats in 'Angel Court' as in Hamlin. I sat down at the piano, determined to conjure up a dozen or more. I was a little afraid my mother might tell me off if she came back to find the place overrun with rats so in the event of my magic not making them disappear in time I planned to chase them away with a broom.

I played for more than half an hour, doing my utmost to draw irresistibly magic sounds from my piano. Despite my efforts, nothing happened and by then I would have been satisfied with a couple of mice. But it was no good: not a pointed nose in sight – yet I had even looked under the pedals. Disappointed and not a little put out, I told myself that

either the Piper improvised better than me or it was one of those stories, like catching birds by putting salt on their tales, invented by adults to shake off children over-obsessed with magic.

While we got dinner over, I asked my mother with feigned indifference if she believed in the Piper's prowess. The question amused her and she explained in a kindly manner that elves, goblins, ogres, as well as the Piper, were all part of an imaginary family whose characters, though famous, had never existed outside stories and legends invented for little boys such as myself. Upon which she got up, washed our cracked plates in no time at all and returned to the grocer's, warning me to behave myself at least until she got back. I was alone once more. Outside the weather was gloomy. To pass part of the afternoon, which looked like being endless, I decided to re-read the Piper's story, laughing to myself at my previous naivety. My reading was interrupted by some indefinable noise and I stopped. A high-pitched whistle, like a long lament repeated over and over, became ever more piercing as it approached. It was somewhat like a catchy tune yet there was something pleading about it, at once fascinating and unbearable. I had never heard anything like it. In my curiosity I opened the window to take a look at the performer of the unearthly hymn. It was the Bogeyman. Who else? He was still some way off. This time he carried not only his two great suitcases but had on his back a haversack of apparently considerable weight as it caused his long, starved-looking carcase to bend.

He modulated his strange chant until it became a strident whistle, still walking in the direction of our block and limping slightly. I realized with astonishment that it was one week to the day since our first encounter. He was on time for his appointment. I do not know if he had guessed my thoughts but he nodded at me from a distance, which I took for a greeting and automatically answered with a wave. Deep down, I was almost pleased to see the strange, whistling Bogeyman again: he had become a part of my world. All of a sudden my pleasure turned to fear. People looking as if they scarcely knew what they were doing came out of their houses as he passed and, marching like sleepwalkers, fell into line

behind him. The procession grew before my eyes and was fast approaching the entrance to our yard. When everyone was inside, the good shepherd stopped whistling and, turning round, called out to his flock, “Come on, you sexy lot! It’s time to rejoice! I’m back with you again!” He broke into a forced, devilish laugh. Having recovered from their stupefaction, his flock stood in line and applauded him, tittering as they did so. They found him irresistible. He let them gorge themselves on the hilarity he had provoked then raised his long, skinny arms in the air. An oppressive silence at once fell over the crowd. He gravely opened his great black book and in his extraordinary screech owl voice called out the names of his debtors one by one. They came forward as if hypnotised and went, heads bowed, up to the small folding table behind which stood the seller of illusions, proud and generous.

To each one he handed the roll of cloth he or she had ordered and, with a grasping gesture, swept the tiny pile of small change the people had humbly placed before him by way of a down payment. Good salesman that he was, he did not neglect to make the noses of the boozers glow by unashamedly paying court, with attempted ribaldry, to the sunken-faced women. He picked out one nice girl with an emaciated face standing among her friends, all withered and faded before their time. With an obscene gesture he exclaimed, “By the fallen angel, I swear when I see so many virtues in a single person it makes me long for a bowel movement! I’d rather stuff you than the Pope’s mule!” The girl thus addressed went and hid herself behind the others in embarrassment while they guffawed. The Bogeyman went on titillating the women with other such compliments, knowing full well that his latest conquest, a notorious prostitute, was waiting patiently behind a nearby fence for him to honour his promises.

Once everyone was satisfied, the pedlar climbed up to our hovel. “Hi, kid! Tomorrow’s the day!” he said in the voice of a well-fed trooper. “Mr Dohnányi, the Director of the Academy, will be expecting you at his home at eleven o’clock sharp. Be there without fail,” he went on, turning to my mother, who had just arrived. “No,” turning towards me again as if

he had guessed what was on my mind, “I’m sorry I won’t be able to go with you but I really am very busy at the moment. I’ll make sure you get a decent welcome just the same. Good luck, lad. Perhaps we’ll meet again.” Those were his final, enigmatic words as he stood in the doorway before limping off.

Next morning, my mother and I were up at daybreak. The Director’s home was on the other side of Budapest. We had an hour-and-a-half walk to the tram terminus, a two-hour journey across the city, then another hour’s walk. It was the first time I had been out of ‘Angle Court’. How beautiful the capital was with its flashing car lights, fairyland shop fronts overflowing with treasure and wide, leafy avenues with palatial dwellings on either side. It quite took my breath away. Dotted here and there were hansom cabs, buggies and antiquated carriages which all became inextricably entangled at every crossroads. Old hacks pulled buses and splendid teams of horses with shining harness and gold-plated bits waited for them stoically, taking not the least notice of the limousine drivers bursting with impatience and blasting furiously on their horns to try and get past. Crowds of overdressed people strolled along the pavements. Haughty-looking women, heads held high, wore hats defying the laws of gravity, or indeed laws of any kind. I gazed admiringly at one with a tropical forest on her head made up of peacock, ostrich and cockatoo feathers, and a few others besides. Another wore, with great dignity, a three-master in full sail on her hair, which had been elegantly let down. The most beautiful of all had a hat covered with fruit. There was something for everyone: an apple, a pair, a bunch of grapes, a tomato. It was not a hat, it was a cottage garden. We had descended from the tram and my mother was hurrying ahead so fast that I had to run to keep up. It was nearly eleven o’clock. We were now in a smart residential district full of pretty flower beds. Far below us, a superb view of the winding streets of the city appeared to our delighted gaze. We had reached our destination.

Just as we were arriving at the home of the ‘Lord’ of the Academy, the richly decorated gates opened. An impressive car with

copper headlamps drove noisily out and sped off towards the town centre. The doorkeeper gave such an obsequious bow as it went by that we had a presentiment something was not quite right. His act of homage over, the Cerberus-flunkey, who was probably used to sending away mothers and their children, cut short any possible conversation as, with a blank stare, he recited in an expressionless voice, “The Director only sees people by appointment; he cannot bear child prodigies and he thinks that, Liszt apart, all pianists past and present aren’t worth a shovelful of sh…”

A smell of burning followed by the dying sigh of a tyre pertinently illustrated his words. An elegantly dressed man with greying hair came briskly towards us. “May I respectfully point out, sir, that madam recommends the car should not be taken out on Friday 13th?” intoned the minion in an oily voice, bowing low once more. “Change the wheel and mind your own business,” replied the other, repressing a laugh. “Who are these people?” he asked, seeing how upset we looked. “The usual sort, sir,” whispered the wit, raising his white gloves in a gesture of helplessness. “Yet another prodigy longing for fame.”

Indignant at his servile hypocrisy, my mother protested, “That is not true, sir! We are very poor and have come a long way for an appointment with the Director of the Academy so he can audition my son, as that rascal of a pedlar promised, may the Devil take him and his hypocritical face!” “But I am the Director, madam, and I’m not expecting anyone this morning,” the head of the household broke in, leafing through his diary. “Who is this pedlar you mentioned?”

“I don’t know what hoaxer played this trick and I beg you to excuse us for troubling you,” my mother said, bowing her head in dismay. “But you should know, sir, that we’ve been travelling since dawn and no-one goes miles by tram, not to speak of on foot, just for the pleasure of getting surly treatment from a dolled-up squirt with a po-face enough to make you want to go and hang yourself, even if his nose is like a whole book of drinking songs.”

The description was so apt that the Professor had to hold his lips tight to retain his dignity. While his factotum, red with embarrassment, went off to change the wheel, the Director showed us into the garden and said in an amused tone, “Come in and play me something, my boy, while my … is seeing to the car.” He led us into an immense living-room with incredibly lavish furniture. Two concert grands had pride of place in the middle. I hoisted myself onto one of the red velvet-coloured stools and waited. In one corner, my mother was silently crossing herself and I heard the voice of the master saying encouragingly, “You may begin.”

So I played. Everything and nothing. I played the Bogeyman, the Piper, my joys and sorrows, swept along by the elation of at last being where I belonged. I don’t know how long it lasted. I remember the phone ringing, the Director staring at me as if hypnotized and only going answer reluctantly after some time. “No, I really can’t come… What? The rare pearl retaining me? You’re on the wrong track, dear. This isn’t a rare pearl, it’s the pearl of pearls, the Koh-i-Noor!” The word was magic to a child’s ears.

This is not the place to go into the hidden forces, magnetism, telepathy, which certain types of journalist wrote of in connection with me. The future of this heaven-sent child – or had he been sold to the Devil? – admitted to the Academy under curious circumstances had to be decided on without delay. There was a pseudo-critical outcry and soon two clans of ardent combatants formed. The first spent its time trying to prove to the second that the Chosen are the playthings of Fate. Unless it be the contrary, retorted the others.

Meanwhile, I went to lessons on foot to save the price of a return tram ticket and with the money bought out-of-season fruit, especially in winter, which I then resold in the smart districts at quite a good profit. This small sum enabled me to start a sort of music library with things bought by the kilo from junk dealers at the rate for old paper. These were brought back triumphantly to ‘Angel Court’, often by the cartload. Did these books and scores do anything for me? A great deal and, in the last resort, nothing.

My first teachers at the Academy were just as perplexed as my father had been: they did not know quite which class to assign me to. My talent was a form of bond with my instrument that permitted my manual skills to make sense of and straightway put into practice all I learnt from the sort of methodical teaching which seems an avalanche of odds and ends to most children. Things incomprehensible to me at ten became conditioned reflexes activating my hands before my brain could provide a rational explanation.

It was not yet possible to tell how far my talent would take me before the weaknesses in my playing were revealed so I was allowed, indeed ordered, to attend the Holy of Holies, the piano masterclasses. They were quite different from any classes I had been to up till then. One was not taught how to play well but how to become a part of one's instrument until the soul of the interpreter, visible to all, became the messenger of music, restoring it in all its original clarity.

Only a few 'grown-ups' aged twenty-five and more came to these classes. They were virtuosos, with a technique far outstripping my hesitant beginner's effrontery, who came along to perfect their already considerable mastery under the eye of Istvan Thomán, who made an indelible impression on me. He had been a pupil of Liszt's and was subsequently the revered teacher of Bartók and Dohnányi. He had been appointed to the top class at the Academy late in life and was its Tree of Life – an authentic, first-hand purveyor of the teaching of Franz Liszt.

I can still hear his voice roaring like an old lion's after a pupil had played Liszt's *Grande Polonaise* and Chopin's *Fourth Ballade*. "I once played these pieces to Liszt in this very room." What Liszt had told our master was handed on to us as if it was something completely new, a password for generations of young interpreters. He died while shouts and the stamping of boots were already drowning the celestial voices. People talked far more about the possibility of a war 'like nothing anyone has ever seen' than about their next concert.

The class was suspended until someone else could be appointed. Soldiers went into the universities to encourage young people to

anticipate the conscription order, tempting them with the promise of various advantages. Recruiting officers beat their drums outside the Academy. When it came to my turn, I replied that I would rather get married than drive myself hoarse singing the Nazi hymn while goose-stepping through the streets. I was eighteen.

Less than a year later I met Soleilka. It was love at first sight and a few days later we got married without our parents' permission, stealing our identity cards to do so. At the town hall we were told that two witnesses would have to sign the marriage certificate. We hurried out and came back with two tramps we had found nearby. After the ceremony, they congratulated us but went away disappointed at not being invited for a drink. We literally did not have a penny. All they got was a warm handshake. Our wedding breakfast consisted of some horse sausage, eaten on a nearby bench. We were in heaven. Even now, thirty years later, the bond between us is still as strong. Not long afterwards, I was called up and had to leave my wife behind.

HAIL, CAESAR!

The autumn of 1942 was drawing to an end when my call-up papers arrived. True, I had been expecting the Hungarian State to give some sign of its solicitude for several months. I knew my turn would come. In fact, most of my classmates had already made brief appearances in uniform, grey-faced and undernourished, their hair cut in regulation style. They had twenty-four hours' leave to visit their families and disappeared just as suddenly from civilian life the following day. Such lightning visits became rarer and rarer as the situation constantly worsened and the training camps had to speed up their work so that, after a little preparation, all this human matter could be carted off to the various fronts.

When I left my family one winter dawn, I was bitter at heart, so certain did I feel that I was leaving this life behind for a considerable time. My presentiment turned out to be true. My young wife was expecting our son, György, when we parted. This, far more than the possibility of dying on the Front, really upset me. The thought of being sent there at once did not worry me unduly. I knew that, though there was need of us there, the minimum training period was ten weeks. With a bit of luck, I thought, if I pretended to be a bit of an idiot, this might be prolonged to my advantage. After that, we'll see. Something is bound to happen – perhaps Hitler will visit Stalin in Moscow and tearfully beg his pardon. Or the armament factories may go on strike. Anyway, something unforeseeable or unexpected might alter the politicians' minds and we'll all be sent back home. Anything was possible: that was how things stood. In any case, a lot can happen in ten weeks, I whispered in the ear of my little wife, who was crying softly. And I might even be home earlier, I said to myself, none too convinced. It was not to be.

Military training is nothing more than the art of drilling a civilian once he has been tamed and crushed. It seemed to me an unspeakable aberration. Amongst other examples I remember a brutish drill sergeant, who looked like a caveman, making me wash down the whole wardroom

because my boots were not clean. Standing stiffly to attention, we were expected to salute, looking him straight in the eye, and say loud and clear, “Yes, Sergeant! Your order has been understood and will be obeyed without fail!” After which, raising one’s leg briskly and as high as possible, one had to let it fall and strike the ground three times: once saluting him; once doing an about turn and a third time before departing in the direction of the task to be performed. Something about my manner of saluting must have displeased him as I was made to repeat it eight times in succession. “What’s the use of such idiotic antics?” I often asked myself and never found an answer. In short, I was more often ‘in solitary’ for insubordination than training with my platoon. The heavily-barred cell window looked onto the yard of the barracks. In the morning I would peep out at the company off on manoeuvres and saw them returning at midday dirty, exhausted and looking decidedly less soldierly. So the days passed and I was beginning to think I could have been worse off. True, I was unlikely to put on any weight. A soldier’s rations ‘in solitary’ were the worst part of the punishment: three hundred grammes of bread and a little water per day. The two sentinels on duty outside my cell were relieved twice daily. They must have been a little older than I was: the ripe, pertinent aspersions they cast on army soup revealed a far greater experience than mine. My jailors, thinking they could easily find themselves in my place some day, occasionally slipped me a bit more food or even a cigarette. On such occasions they were much more vigilant, fearing the sudden arrival of a superior officer, which would certainly have got us all into serious trouble. Another time, during my fourth spell in the ‘institution’, I managed to get myself another four days for not saluting an officer who had his back to me. One fine day all that changed.

It must have been around ten in the morning when a voice barked outside my cell door asking the guard, “Where is this celebrity, then?” I could not see him as the door was shut. A moment later I heard a short, sharp backhander resounding on the face of my sentry. “Oaf!” yelled my visitor. “That’ll teach you to open the door a bit quicker!” “Good

God!" I thought, "That must be the Boss." I had never seen him in the prison but remembered the many stories running round the camp concerning his sinister reputation. He was more of a myth than a real person as far as I was concerned. When I arrived, he had been temporarily been posted elsewhere on account of his unspeakable behaviour. His dreadful brutality was one of its lesser manifestations. At any rate, he was back and this visit boded no good for me. All were agreed that it was impossible to get on with him. His mood-swings were extreme and the apparent calm with which his cold, blue eyes appeared to be looking into the distance without noticing the subaltern standing stiffly to attention before him or the regulation salute of those he passed was only a sly game. In a fraction of a second he was quite capable of giving a loud bark as he stopped to bawl out some lower-ranking soldier going peacefully about his duties. The poor fellow, taken aback by such aggressiveness, at a loss for words and petrified with fear, could expect the worse for the man's aim was sure.

Such was the potentate who burst into my cell like a cannon ball, putting to an end my tranquil solitude. To start with, he grabbed me by the lapels and threw me out. I was expecting yells and blows but nothing happened. Instead, he stared with his expressionless blue eyes into mine and said quite calmly that this life of luxury had to end. He promised that in future he personally would organize my time – the final days of a life which I had done nothing but waste up till then. "Yes, your final days," he said with an icy glare, "because you're soon going to die in any case, you dog!" He pointed to the ground as a sign that I was to precede him. He took me back to my hut, which created genuine panic among the sub-officer instructors who, despite their stripes, were under his orders. They were petrified with respect and fear and stuck out their chests even further than regulations required. Motionless, they waited for the ever-unpredictable orders of the great swollen-headed barrel. It was a barrel tipping the scales at more than seventeen stone and looked it, with its enormous, deformed belly. His face, though shaved with great care, sagged and he was on the short side, which made him look even more

out of proportion. His complexion was strangely waxy. Even his liver hated him.

Though this is a mere detail, his been equivalent to that of a lieutenant in the French army. The Commander of the barracks – 'the father of the regiment', as he was commonly known – was his superior. Normally, he should have used his authority to put this lieutenant in his place. Yet the latter was so insolent to his chief that even we common soldiers were shocked. He was so bursting with arrogance one might have thought they had exchanged uniforms. Strangely, the Commanded seemed – or pretended – not to notice anything. How was it that the superiors of this creature put up with him without having him downgraded or at least struck off the officers' roll? Perhaps a domineering, dictatorial person makes an impression on every social group. People certainly seem to feel the need on occasion to accept that some arrogant person among them – not necessarily the strongest physically – should be permitted to override their opinions.

One often feels the best way to treat a vain, aggressive megalomaniac is with silent contempt. It is also the easiest way out, even if it cannot be called cowardly. However, such passivity does have a major flaw in that it gives the advantage to the adversary so that he has a free hand to impose himself on all around him: silence is, after all, consent. Such individuals excel at forcing their opinions on others. I would go so far as to say that such people are to be found in every walk of society.

Let us climb the wall of the barracks to escape for a while from this tin-pot potentate. You can meet such types in civilian life who use methods more insidious than physical violence. The servility which we in our weakness are led to adopt when faced with a megalomaniac is a widespread phenomenon.

The first thing to note is that this disease finds the elements necessary for its survival everywhere it goes: in offices, factories and in that hothouse where it flourishes best, social life. The tyrant is one of the mad Caesars: his mania bedevils the life of those closest to him, their

primary duty being to serve him faithfully and without question. A more predictable tyrant would not be so bad: he would be easier to pay court to. But his own mania turns him into a social tyrant and that is what makes his disease more deadly. For a start, he crushes those around him by showing off his knowledge. His culture descends on his subjects like an avalanche and makes them incapable of thinking for themselves.

We crawl before his greatness and the least of his affirmations – or rather edicts – passes for gospel truth. We are so fascinated by his charisma as to lose control of our own actions and decisions. Not only does he give the illusion of being all-powerful, he is the great steersman of our destinies and careers. If an interpretation of Chopin is not deformed according to the wishes and rules he lays before his adoring public, the punishment will be exemplary. The world of the arts to which I belong also has its 'Miraculous Mandarins' who control the artist's rights and prerogatives. To take an example, a potentate of the first water would not accept being spoken to like an ordinary mortal but with luck, providing His Majesty is in the right mood, one might perhaps dare to stay timidly, "Sir…" only to be frozen to the spot by his pale, indifferent stare. Without so much as hearing the sound of his voice, you realize his whole being is crying out, "Call me 'maestro', my dear fellow!"

His face puffed up with pride, his blank gaze quickly sizes you up. Then with a sharp movement of his neck he dismisses you and turns his inspired features elsewhere. What is he thinking? Perhaps he believes in the apothegm concerning the Académie française: "Run it down but get elected if possible."

For my part, I feel he is to be pitied. Despite his efforts, he never really makes the grade as a true potentate. He knows as well as anyone that a few facts about music history learnt from second-rate books full of platitudinous phrases, which he juggles with in order to shine, will not suffice any more than his obsequious manner of spouting this knowledge in an attempt to scale the Olympus of professional critics. A ram cannot pick its teeth with its horns. Yet we go on begging the great man to reveal

the mysteries of perfection so that, by his example, we may come to worship him even more.

He is that rare bird who cannot survive without a daily bath of homage and devotion. I do not dare to think what would become of us without him. There should be a campaign to protect the species so that it may be fruitful and multiply.

Megalomania is despicable, a sort of virus, the worst to have hit humanity since the Creation.

Such were my thoughts on coming across my first tyrant during military service. True, he was more clodhopper than intellectual. Even so, all things considered, his methods were the same: getting others to respect him through fear, which was the only way open to someone so insignificant. The stripes on his uniform gave power to his ideas on human relations and his systematic crushing of subordinates. Thus, in the guise of a warlord, the great Barrel could put into practice his favourite maxim: “An iron fist in an iron glove.”

I will pass over in silence the dreadful treatment I had to endure subsequently thanks to this man. My physical resistance was sorely tried by his insane, gratuitous cruelty and the flood of contradictory orders this lunatic submitted me to. I was constantly exhausted and he took a malign pleasure in maintaining me in this state. There was still some time to go before I was due to be sent to the front, and so much the better, I thought. This was to underestimate the Barrel.

One morning on parade we were standing to attention waiting for the day’s orders. Suddenly, my name was called out. I took three steps forward in the manner described above, saluted and remained motionless. I was trying to guess what sort of disciplinary task was to be the reward to redouble my enthusiasm for dying on the battlefield. I already knew the joys of twenty-five mile marches under a boiling-hot sun, in full kit – apart from a water bottle. Then there were the charms of the marshes I was made to wade through certain nights (rainy, if possible) until dawn, under the orders of a valiant drill sergeant strolling casually by my side and giving friendly encouragement in language

obscene in the extreme, intended to prove once and for all that there was a parallel between an animal's sex organs and the first words of Hamlet's soliloquy. To add weight to his argument, he cited my ancestors as an example, tracing my family tree as far back as Attila.

This time it was nothing of the kind. The warrant officer on duty ordered me to the Commander's office. The top man was actually waiting for a common soldier! I hurried off with all the haste of a criminal anxious to know his sentence. What else could I have done? As the order was being read out I noticed the Barrel standing not far off. I felt his empty gaze on me until I reached the veranda, when I was lost to view. I went up the steps four at a time, froze in salute before the Commander and stated my identity. I was ordered to get all my kit together and prepare my combat equipment as I was one of the 'volunteers' leaving for the Russian Front next morning at six.

Enough said. I gave the regulation salute and left the office feeling completely drained. I slowly went back down the steps looking vacantly ahead. Up till now my life had been a series of foregone conclusions. Civilian life had accustomed me to hardship and I had learnt from a variety of unpleasant events and experiences, accumulated in record time during my military 'training', to take the blows of fate without a murmur. As I reached the foot of the steps and came out of the shade into the dazzling, sunlit yard, an object rose up before me: I found myself face to face with the Barrel. Once again I gave the regulation salute. Very gently, he asked, "Well, you poor chap, is the news bad?" I told him briefly what had occurred. He listened without comment, glanced over the top of my head (hoping to see the halo which was soon to encircle it) and walked slowly away. In a flash I realized my rapid promotion to the rank of volunteer was entirely due to him. I was in my eighth week of training and logically was not due to leave for the front for another fortnight. The procedure was of course illegal, but effective and unassailable. The Barrel had said he would see to my final days personally and had kept his word. So before finishing my regulation ten weeks' stay in the barracks I was to leave my final haven the following

morning. I tottered to my room and sat on the bed stunned, incapable of thinking clearly. Then I started examining everything around me down to the tiniest detail. I do not know if it was a way of saying farewell or of fixing in my mind objects which, quite insignificant not so long before, now seemed so important because they might ensure me a further fortnight of life. No fatigues or punishment could have plunged me into such despair as that news. The Barrel truly had accomplished his task well.

I was suddenly seized with anger, not so much at him as at my own inability to defend myself. The boom of Stalin's death-bearing cannons was already resounding in my ears. Plunging my head in my hands once more, I feverishly tried to think out some way of defending myself by detailing all the injustice I had been subjected to. I was sure that when the top men at the War Ministry got to know of this the entire General Staff would be so indignant that their first humane action would be to search for me, combing the whole Russian Front if need be, and the second to repatriate me so that I could finish my fortnight's training at the barracks.

In such a topsy-turvy world, aberrations like this one were frequent. The unnatural rhythm of the kind of life I had been subjected to for some time now was beginning to shake the foundations of my mental stability.

When I came down to earth again I was resigned to the fact that any attempt at putting off my departure would be like attacking a windmill. If I did not want to join the next convoy of cannon fodder, I would have to die before morning. Nothing doing: I had no inclination whatsoever to hang myself and even less to be killed in two days' time somewhere out in the Ukraine. What I wanted was the fortnight here which was my due, far from the marksmen who, if the Barrel had his way, would transform me into a sieve on the first day. So I got up and went out into the yard. All of a sudden a solution occurred to me: I had to fall ill there and then.I wasted no time pondering on the unlikelihood of my plan working. I put it into action on the spot in full view of all the

others. Without cushioning the blows with my hands, I threw myself on the ground and lay there quite still with my eyes shut, wondering how things were going to turn out. I could not be accused straight out of faking a fall in which I had hurt myself badly. I knew what a risk I was taking because anyone caught shamming just before leaving for the front was cured once and for all by the comforting words of a priest sent by the military tribunal before summary execution.

There was no going back now and no knowing the outcome: not just my freedom but my very life were at stake. The many years in military jail (where discipline was even more draconian) to which I might at best be sentenced would give me the chance to meditate at length as to whether I had the right to simulate a giddy turn. But I no longer had any choice: the die was cast.

The Barrel cannot have been around at that moment. My eyes still shut, I realized people were crowding round me. Then I heard a warrant officer order me to be carried to my hut and, once I had regained consciousness, to be helped to the Infirmary – to my greater satisfaction. I was lifted to the camp bed which had been my home and place of rest for two months but disaster always strikes when least expected. Once I had recovered a little, two soldiers supported me by the waist as we went towards the Infirmary some way off, my body covered in bruises and my face bearing an apt expression for the occasion. A male nurse came in and as quickly left: the medical officer had already gone. His locum was ready to examine me but eve if his diagnosis were in my favour could not – since he had not the right to do so – give me a certificate exempting me from serve for a while, which was my last hope. At this news, I really did begin to feel unwell. It meant that the medical officer would not be back before ten the following morning whereas I was supposed to be in line with all my kit and in battledress ready to leave at 6 a.m. sharp. Officially, then, my fainting-fit would not be taken into account; that was the ruling. All I could do was go and get ready, making quite sure not a gaiter button was missing when the time came to depart. Once on the train, if my condition was such that the health officer responsible for the

convoy had to consult his pocket medical dictionary and, in the unlikely event of his not being able to diagnose that my condition was caused by my being sick of living, he might decide, once we had reached the Gates of Hell, to have me sent back. However, a musician's daydreaming has nothing to do with a soldier's duty. The locum knew his job and was sympathetic, explaining with a trace of irony that it was "a slight, temporary dizzy spell caused by the surprise announcement of my departure."

So off to the stores I went to get my new outfit: boots, helmet, machine gun, ammunition, bayonet and other such peace-bearing utensils indispensable to mutual understanding between the belligerent citizens of the world before they were sent off to war by their paternalistic armies.

The building was an endless succession of rooms. Apart from the first few, which distributed clothing, thus transforming the little soldier into a fiery warrior, the others overflowed with light arms of all kinds, original as well as attractive and intended to aid their owners in despatching the adversary into the next world with all possible speed.

The pile of equipment in my arms mounted as I moved mechanically from room to room. I overheard a storekeeper vaunting the merits of a new kind of close combat dagger to a group of young recruits, showing them yet again the ideal angle for penetrating an enemy's ribs. The climax of his explanation was: "and you'll see, lads, twist it just before pulling it out and that'll be the end of him." I was pretty disgusted and thought, "I give up. If I leave for the front tomorrow, it will show I'm not even capable of putting a spoke in the wheel of my own destiny." That was, incidentally, also the opinion of the locum.

"There we are; it's too late now," I thought, returning heavily-laden to the barrack room. Then things took an unexpected turn. At the end of the afternoon someone came from the Infirmary to say that the medical officer had had to return for an emergency and would examine me – straight away. This new turn of events had me worried: it would not be easy to re-enact to order the role in which I had invested so much. If

this man, who was reportedly hard-hearted, were to think he had been troubled for nothing it would mean a one-way trip to the courtroom. I could already see myself advancing handcuffed towards the execution post between two armed soldiers.

I was obliged, despite my apprehension, to answer his summons, which I had so fervently wished for not so long ago. According to instructions, I was in the Infirmary waiting room at 6 p.m. sharp. The walls were plastered with consulting room doors behind one of which was a man I did not know and on whom my destiny, so merciful with me so far, was to depend once again.

JEALOUSY IS DEAD

In a semi-stupor, I was about to play my last card. The waiting room door opened and in came a young, slender subaltern. I leapt to my feet and stood to attention as he languidly returned my salute.

As he came closer, his features seemed familiar. Wherever could I have seen him before? I was about to ask when the consulting-room door half opened and the major-doctor stuck his head out, apparently expecting him. “Hear you are at last, dear fellow! Delighted to see you!” The major, clearly moved, came up to his visitor, shook his hand warmly and courteously stood aside to let him go in first.

I was intrigued by the medical officer’s affability, which bordered on the obsequious. I had never before seen a senior officer treat a subordinate, who did not even appear to be a friend, in this way. As the door was shutting behind them I thought, “That man has already taken my place some time in the past.” The feeling brought back childhood memories. Memories of a boy who had taken my place at the top. Every time I crossed his path at the Liszt Academy the feeling of jealousy returned. His playing had about it a halo of superiority which was reflected in his behaviour, and his exasperating dominance in every domain had plagued much of my childhood.

Sitting in the Infirmary waiting room, I thought back to those times at the Academy and saw again the huge classroom where a great concert grand had pride of place. I met this particular boy shortly after being admitted on special dispensation. (I am not using the word ‘special’ just to show off but because I passed into the top class almost at once without any preliminary study in other music schools.) I was nearly twelve while he, one of the youngest in the class, was almost twice my age. The confidence of his playing, a result of his adult strength and maturity, was incomparably superior to the performances of a budding eaglet like myself. If only I could have played like him! From a young boy’s point of view, it was just not acceptable that our age difference

should be my greatest handicap. If I could not be the best in the class of adults soon to take their final exams at least I should not be dragging behind and had at all costs to play like them. Instead of admiring his talent, I saw him purely as a rival. His virtuosity and the way he made child's play of the sort of technical difficulties the rest of us had such problems with made me sick with admiration. I was so fascinated by his technique that I did not even pay attention to the finesse of his interpretations. I am pretty certain the others in the class were just as fascinated by the aristocratic grace of his playing. While we banged away at our pieces for the teacher as best we could, he, on the very piano which had just received such a battering at our hands, was at one with the music and on occasion moved us deeply. Fortune smiled on him: being the only son of a very rich and influential family assured him of every success and consideration in society as it was then. He came to classes at the wheel of a splendid sports car, dressed in the latest fashion. The others were impeccably dressed too but I do not think I ever saw him in the same suit twice running. A feeling of shame and inferiority arose in me each time I saw him, all the more as my only pair of trousers – which my mother had to keep adding pieces to – was barely fit to be seen. The same went for my one shirt, which could not be enlarged and was not far off bursting at the seams.

Shortly after winning his diploma with flying colours, he left the Academy to start on what promised to be an outstanding career. He was engaged straight away in towns in Hungary as well as abroad. He came on a farewell visit to the Academy before leaving on his first tour. Our teacher asked us to play something from his programme, which he did willingly, as always, playing us Chopin's *Polonaise-Fantaisie*. There was something visionary, even frightening, about his sublime interpretation. The piano sang, sighed and begged beneath his fingers as Chopin's wonderful *morbidezza* surged forth. To play this piece one needs all the emotions displayed by other composers and more, and this poses insurmountable problems to the musician who cannot fully enter Chopin's nirvana. By the end I was close to tears. Forgetting my shyness

and the people round me, I approached the piano as the last sounds died away. He sat quite still, his arms hanging limply like those of an exhausted puppet. I asked in an unexpectedly deep voice for a child, “How do you manage to convey every tremor of your soul so perfectly?”

He did not seem inclined to reply so I insisted, “What do you see and feel when you play this piece? The understanding between you and it is like that of an engaged couple. (Whatever came into my head to say that?) How do you do it?” He turned to me wearily, replying in an expressionless voice, “To write such music you have to be dying, as Chopin was. Either one has to be in the same situation to bring the work alive or perhaps some artists have souls older than their years.” An embarrassed silence hung over the room while, with all the wisdom of my twelve years, I puzzled over the meaning of his words. It was the only time we ever spoke, though we were to see each other again.

When hard times came I heard that my childhood rival had had to cut short a tour abroad and return at once to Budapest for military service.

As for my medical, I was not as fortunate as my friend from the Academy. Indeed, I think he was partly responsible, if not consciously so. The doctor did not even examine me but threatened me with the military tribunal if ever I refused to get into the train with the other volunteers without a maximum of regulation patriotism. Whereas my pianist colleague had been accompanied to the door by the doctor, more obsequious than ever. From what I gathered from their conversation, he had been exempted from all military duties. As they went out, they were both laughing and chatting about the benefits of convalescence on the shores of the Adriatic.

I was once again consumed with jealousy: “To think that while he’s sitting under the palm trees with his family I’ll be crouching to avoid Stalin’s missiles!” Truth to tell, I did not believe at the time that he was ill. Quite the contrary: I was certain that life did nothing but shower its blessings on him and that his indecent good luck had obtained his exemption. The enchantment of Montenegro for him, the Polish tundra

for me. A mere slip of paper had saved him from the German whip, the Russian knout and even the Hungarian truncheon, which was much favoured by the police now that they were fully won over to the German cause.

A few months later I found myself on the front somewhere in Poland. One evening I was returning with a friend, who acted as the camp's radio. We were crawling through the mud in the direction of our lines after attempting to drive off a few soldiers and peasants trying, poor chaps, to defend their country with a machine gun left behind as scrap metal. Between bursts of firing, my companion came to a halt, sat down in the mud, rolled and lit a cigarette, then said, "I hear you're a pianist."

"Why do you say that? If you want to place an order for your funeral march tomorrow, I can't do it. I've got to mine the railway track," I muttered darkly. "No," he said pensively, "though I'll make a note of your offer – you never know. I asked because I had a pal in Budapest. He had a doctorate as well as being a fine enough pianist to turn all the top ones at the Academy green with envy. His name was György Faragó [3]."

"Why do you say 'was'?" A very close shave awoke us to the fact that the glow of our cigarettes had betrayed us. "Because he's dead," said my pal, flattening himself in an even deeper puddle. A grenade exploded nearby and caused us to shift positions. I could not believe what I had just heard. "What did he die of?" My pal kept crawling all the harder and whistled between his teeth, "Cancer."

I felt myself grow pale beneath the layer of mud on my face. The news was like an electric shock. I thought back to the rivalry which had kept us apart. The wretched, insurmountable class barrier that had prevented us from becoming friends. As I lay on the sodden ground that night, I vowed to myself never again to have any feelings other than forthright, humble admiration for anyone of artistic merit and ability, even if he did outstrip me.

[3] (1913-1944). 1st Prize, Fauré Competition, 1939, then teacher at the Liszt Academy until 1941, when he was dismissed due to anti-Jewish legislation.

It was an ideal spot to atone for that final childhood sin with the first signs of adult perceptiveness. For the first and last time in my life, I had been jealous of someone else being the object of admiration. Just then, and for some time to come, I had had to ward off a flood of misfortunes while everything he undertook went right. In exchange, there was a special clause in his *curriculum vitae* that he was obliged to accept. I would not be so bold or presumptuous as to say to what extent he had realized he was doomed yet there must be some form of premonition by which certain people realize their lifespan is rapidly running out so that they have no illusions about the future. (No-one can tell what the morrow holds in store, and so much the better: if everyone knew what was going to happen the next day, there are not many among us who would not change their previous day's plans.) Only those who have this innate gift are able – thanks to what I would called an 'adapted' subconscious – to sense how much time is remaining to them to fulfil their mission. Like faith it is a gift from God. Those to whom it is given make use of it, while others merely claim to have it. The greatest gift a musician can have is the possibility of lifting just a corner of the veil covering that mystery.

During that outstanding young pianist's existence, he was granted permission from on high to cross the impassable line separating virtually all musicians from the true genius of the composer, and very few of those called are chosen to do so. The last time I saw him, his only wish was to live yet he was already Death's chosen one. That invisible, pitiless shadow passed over us both that day. Most perturbing of all is the fact that I, in good health, had appealed to Him as a means of escape, were it in the form of a grave illness, from the constant ill-luck which had dogged my footsteps and was to go on doing so.

Death had kept the appointment but had chosen someone else. It had come to take one of the chosen few who had been no more than a rival who could, better than anyone, have helped me discover those secret paths I was going to have to seek out alone. I still cannot help thinking how such a brief friendship might have developed. I will always regret it.

A STEAM ENGINE FOR A PIANO

1943 was drawing to a close. We were beginning to suffer from the harsh winter, not yet having received the required equipment to confront the snow-covered landscape. As expected, our division was sent off towards the Ukraine by the German-Hungarian Command (which had, in the last resort, decided to collaborate). Unfortunately, our corps did not have a single motorized vehicle and the cavalry to which I belonged was supposed to delay the incessant advance of the Red Army towards that part of the front under our responsibility, where the German divisions had been decimated and could no longer put up a worthy resistance to the landslide. We had to ride to their assistance and reinforce their ranks, confronting huge armoured tanks, long-range cannon and, worst of all, the latest flower of Soviet technology: Stalin organs.

Horses against tanks! A hand-held machine gun and grenades against artillery bombarding us from several miles away. A few Hungarian light aircraft, each with its small machine gun, trying to silence artillery which spat out as many as one hundred and twenty rockets a minute! It needed no great scholar to realize that for Higher Command we were cannon fodder rather than a combat unit. Though the order “conquer or die on the spot” applied to the Germans as much as to us, our Commander, thank God, wanted to limit losses and as far as possible, on his own initiative, used us as decoys or for sabotage work rather than large-scale attacks. He knew the enemy front line was getting nearer by the hour from the rumble of tank regiments preceded by the apocalyptic wail of fire from artillery and other heavy weaponry.

At each encounter, we expected the final confrontation to occur. Our ranks were gradually thinning out. Not only were men lost in each routine skirmish but every bush or tree was a potential hiding place for a partisan or sniper. With an angelic patience equalled only by their fanatical determination, they would spend days and nights on end

crouched in a hollow tree, putting a bullet between the eyes of a reconnoitrer whenever possible. Such had been our lives for several months now.

Every time the enemy made a foray some ten per cent of us were wiped out by their long-range weapons before we had even had time to spot them. After a time it was all too obvious that we cavalrymen were fighting the wrong war. When our captain asked for volunteers to train for the tank corps, I had no hesitation in accepting. After three months' training I became a tank driver. It was evident that my life was less at risk than on a horse as I did at least have an efficient means of self-defence at my disposal. Naturally, a direct hit by a shell, a tank trap or a cunningly concealed mine would put an end to me. Our model was a recent one but was already showing signs of wear. Spare parts were so scarce as to oblige us to patch up anything badly worn, praying the repair would last a while. In that respect, I was very lucky. However, it was all too evident that the enemy tanks were far more shell-proof and powerful than ours, which were lighter and more mobile but had to get close up to the T-34s if they were to attempt to dent, let alone pierce, their thick armour. With the bore and length of their carefully focussed barrels they could flatten a Hungarian tank as soon as it appeared on the horizon. Their only weak point was their lack of speed. Thirty-four tons of metal on the move has as much grace as a brontosaurus. Once battery fire supported by long-range cannon had cleared a passage, the T-34s started off in their hundreds towards their target and all we could do was to make ourselves scarce.

One December day shortly before Christmas, we had beaten a hasty retreat and found ourselves in a completely deserted village. We were to await reinforcements of men and equipment before returning – probably for the last time – to the front. It was, as it so happened, my turn for guard duty on the outskirts of the village that night. I was cleaning my rifle without much enthusiasm before turning in for a few hours' sleep. In general, one soldier in five was reported missing after a night out of doors. As I tried to calculate my chances of survival, I

vaguely watched the others talking loudly, happy to have a few days off guard duty. Suddenly the door opened and a lieutenant came in. He signalled to us not to stand to attention and asked at random, “Can any of you play an instrument well?” “No!” they all answered in unison.

“What about you?” he said, turning to me, having noticed that I had not answered. I propped my gun against the wall and replied sulkily, “I was a pianist. Once.” “Why ‘was’?” he said, coming up to me. “Because I haven’t touched a keyboard for two years.” “If that’s the only reason,” he said brightly, “then you can make up for lost time this evening. Some high-ranking *Wehrmacht* officers have just turned up unexpectedly at HQ. They probably want to discuss what they’ve got to offer our friends over the border. These gentlemen have sensitive ears,” he continued mockingly, “and would like a little background music while they knock back their *schnaps* and count their chickens. Since you’re on guard duty tonight, I’d advise you to accept. It’ll be better for your health than hanging about in the snow. The Germans will provide a piano and allow you a little time to warm up.”

I longed to play again but my immediate reaction was to refuse. He insisted, “Think it over carefully. You’re the only one who can do it. What’s more, it will let you off duty until midday tomorrow. You’ll escape six hours’ guard duty in the snow, so how about it?” “OK,” I said, more worn down than convinced by the logic of his arguments. “Splendid. I’ll tell the Germans and they’ll come and fetch you to show you the piano. Just before nine this evening it’ll be taken into the mess. You must be there sharp on nine.” He went towards the door. On reaching it he turned round, “Forget your tank now and smarten yourself up. Be sure to make a good job of the concert!” “Lucky beggar!” said one of the others. “Try and eat enough for us tonight,” he added in a low voice, “and if you can get a little bottle of something from the Kommandant’s cellar we won’t hold it against you.”

I promised to do my best. A Mercedes came to take me to the German camp, where I had a good look at the instrument. To my surprise, it was not the battered upright I was expecting but a very

acceptable baby grand. The hour of truth was about to sound. After a two-year break, I had by the irony of Fate two hours to make my hands as supple and accurate as they had once been. I did an hour of double-note scales, scales in fourths, fifths and sixths, etc. Then I decided to take the plunge and began to improvise on a number of themes from Liszt's *Les Préludes* and, as things got better and better, went on to a medley of extracts from Wagner: *Tristan, Walküre, Meistersinger*. The idea was to liven up the atmosphere which, in the presence of our 'benevolent protectors' was likely to be pretty chilly. I intended to end with a medley of themes by Johann Strauss with as a finale military marches and folk tunes from my own country as a tribute to the Hungarian Command. It was eight o'clock when I stopped and I went back to clean myself up.

As soon as I was ready I went into the building indicated by the lieutenant (the village school cum town hall) where a large room served the officers as a place for meetings and receptions. There were about twenty small tables on which stood bottles of wine, beer and cognac, with five or six people seated at each. In the midst was my piano for the night, shiny as a new penny and open ready. A few yellow uniforms stood out against the greyish outfits of the Hungarian officers. Monocles flashed in the eyes of certain Germans weighed down with medals. Each wore an immaculate white cravat loosely tied round his neck and raised his glass to his lips with a gloved hand. One of these 'supermen', without deigning to look in my direction, languidly made a sign to me to take my place at the piano. I complied and began to play, ignoring the chatter. As I started on my first piece I vowed to do everything I could to silence the audience and so chose to improvise on Khatchaturian's *Sabre Dance*[4]. An embarrassed silence settled over the room at once. I sensed a feeling of disapproval behind me. The spectacular nature of my interpretation turned the atmosphere in my favour. I took advantage of the silence to extemporize on a number of themes from *The Ring* and then superimposed several. When I had finished I looked up and noted with

[4] It is possible that Cziffra's memory is at fault here. 'Gayenah' was not premiered until 1942 and it is unlikely, though not impossible, that he would have heard 'The Sabre Dance' yet.

satisfaction that all conversation had ceased and that every chair was turned towards the piano.

After a few variations on the inevitable *Lili Marlene* and some acrobatics based on *The Blue Danube*, the illustrious audience had even stopped pouring itself drinks. I almost felt as if I was taking an exam as there was no applause between items. They stared at my hands as if I were some kind of freak. After Berlioz's *Hungarian March* in the arrangement by Liszt, I arose to my feet amidst a stunned silence as a sign that I needed a short rest. There was a sudden outburst of thunderous applause and officers crowded round to congratulate me. They stood aside almost at once to let a man in full regalia through. Looking up at his adam's apple I saw the iron Swastika in the open neck of his shirt with two intertwined oak leaves shining on either side. A Major General. He was holding two glasses of champagne and handed one to me, saying, "I'm the General of this unit. May I congratulate you on your playing? I enjoyed it all the more as I am myself a pianist. I studied at the Berlin Academy." "The Devil looks after his own," I thought as I politely thanked him.

"What I mean is," he went on, "Busoni was probably the greatest virtuoso of his generation yet not even he could have played like that. Whatever is someone like you doing here?" he asked with a perplexed look. I gave a bitter smile: "There's a war on, General." "Of course," he said, looking at me. "I'm sorry. I didn't explain myself properly. What I'd like to know is who is the fool who is letting such talent go to waste here and endangering your life quite needlessly on the front." "General," I said, "that is rather an awkward question." "Why's that?" "Because," I went on, weighing my words with care, "you are a high-ranking officer in the army I happen to be serving in."

He burst out laughing. "That's very true," he said jovially, "And that is why I'm going to do something for you. Come into the next room." He shut the door behind us and invited me to take a seat while he stood reflecting. He began to pace up and down before finally coming to a halt before me. "Now," he said, "in less than a week I've to be back at Chief

HQ in Berlin to report on the general situation and receive further instructions. If you come with me I will present you to Dr Richard Strauss and once he has heard your playing he's bound to talk to the Führer about it. The war is probably going to last longer than the Führer originally believed but we shall win. I advise you to accept because in the next few days the whole division will be taking part in a large-scale operation intended to halt the advance of the Red hordes. It really would be a pity if you were to be involved in it. What is more, Germany will acknowledge your exceptional talent to the full. So, what do you say?"

The offer was too good to be true. Comfort in exchange for Hell; Richard Strauss's protection for the sharpshooters across the border. I started to daydream. He went on, trying to put me at ease, "Look, I'll give you twenty-four hours to think it over. Now, get along back to camp and have a rest." He took a flat leather-covered bottle from his pocket and held it out to me: "French brandy, as a souvenir of our meeting. You more than deserve it."

I got to my feet, said goodbye and left. The cold night air did me good. Dazed by all that had happened, I did not feel like sleeping just then and decided to take a stroll. As I walked, I thought over the General's words.

Firstly, the possibility of going to Germany. I was fairly certain my playing would attract the interest of the great Strauss. With his help I would able to practice in peace and quiet and later, perhaps, even arrange for my family to join me. Suddenly, I realized that was impossible. Why? Because my wife, though born in Rome, was of Egyptian origin. Our son's dark complexion and a strong dose of gypsy blood in my own veins meant we could not, with the best will in the world, be considered typical Aryans and permitted to live among Germans undisturbed.

Secondly, the General had announced a decisive offensive in the next few days. More decisive for us than for the Red Army, that was a sure thing. I did not mind fighting but had no wish to die for a lost cause since at that very moment we future conquerors were virtually encircled

by heaven knows how many Soviet troops and thousands of flame-throwing weapons were aimed at us some sixty miles off. Conclusion: if I wanted to see my beautiful motherland again it was advisable not to linger within range of either.

By this stage in my musings I had reached the station, our only source of supplies and our sole link with the outside world. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness and could make out a great black mass quite close to. A jerky puffing and blowing alternated with showers of cinders and sparks. An engine under steam!

I went nearer. A tender, full to the brim with cheap-looking coal – probably a sort of lignite – was hitched to it. There was a single ancient restaurant car, dating from the 1900s, to complete the convoy. I realized it must have been the train which had brought the General and his retinue. Two sentries stood on guard. I walked swiftly up to them, knowing they were bound to have received orders to shoot on sight at anything suspicious. Luckily, they belonged to my unit and recognized me at once.

"Ah! It's the musician! What are you doing here at this hour? Have you finished entertaining the gents?" "Yes," I replied, "but I need to unwind a little so I decided to go for a stroll before going to bed." "Yeah," said the other, "he must have enjoyed himself more than us. We can't even light up, though this heap of iron is making enough din to attract any deaf partisan in the area." "No need to get angry," I said, showing him the flask I had just been given. "Look what I got from the General 'for services rendered'. Here you are: it's yours. I've had enough for one day. Go and drink my health. There's a great pile of wood about a hundred yards off. You can hide behind it so nobody will see you." Their faces lit up when they saw the flask.

"Can I have a look over the engine while you're away?" I asked casually. "We aren't even allowed on it ourselves," came the reply. "But," I went on slyly, "the offence you'll be committing is even more serious under military law so you can hardly stop me looking over this

masterpiece of technology." "Very true," said the thirstier of the two. "Get an eyeful while we're wetting our whistles," he giggled.

Off they went into the night, leaving me a torch. I switched it on and climbed up into the driver's cab. The dials, wheels and copper levers glowed in the half-light. As luck would have it, there was a little enamel plaque under each indicating what it was for. I looked at the pressure dial: just right! To be sure of making a swift getaway, I fed all the coal I could into the boiler then waited about four minutes. The pressure was beginning to cause the engine to judder: I spun the wheel which, according to the plaque, released the brakes. There was an enormous, broomstick-like handle, glinting and shining from the wear of countless hands which had manipulated it over the years. I tugged on it with all my strength. Nothing happened, or at least not what I had hoped for: from the innards of the still immobile engine rose an apocalyptic roar. As a last resort, I pressed the button marked 'steam'. I must have been psychic: the old locomotive started up so suddenly that it almost skidded on the rails. Before I could touch another control – I did not have time to, thank goodness – we were off at a smart twenty-five miles per hour, gradually gathering speed, in the direction of the enemy lines. It must all have happened very quickly or the sentries would have caught up with me. Probably they were not too steady on their legs after so much brandy. As a precaution, I had crouched down in the cabin but no-one fired in my direction.

With one eye on the speedometer, I started thinking frantically. The Russians were about fifty miles away, which at 40 mph meant roughly an hour and a quarter journey. It was too late to expect to be welcomed at the next station with streamers and the town band, especially as the track had probably been sabotaged or even mined. I was sure I was right on both counts: the Red Army dismantled and removed sections of track in case we should decide to advance, while my ex-Commander mined it to prevent them advancing. In the meantime I had found the button controlling the headlamps and anxiously surveyed the

track, imagining at every instant that I saw a barricade or some other even more dangerous object on the line.

The engine was now forging ahead at a steady 40 mph over a plain dotted with corpses and doubtless swarming with Partisans. I did not have a watch and so had no idea of the time but the little counter just under the speedometer (which I must have re-set at zero without realizing it) showed I had done fifty miles. My conversation about music with the General two hours earlier seemed years off, as in a dream. I worked out that by now I must be on Red Army territory and started manipulating the controls of the old engine again (almost certainly in just as orthodox a manner as the first time) in an attempt to bring it to a halt. But the boiler, which I had kept on re-stoking, was crammed full of coal. I did not know that the very first thing one should do was to reduce excess pressure and that inertia would act on the engine almost as much as the brakes and eventually bring it to a stop. Another three miles passed as I tried all the levers on the control-panel. Finally, I decided to jump from the moving train. I did manage to reduce speed a little. By now, we were doing barely 25 mph but the boiler was giving out worrying noises. Another idea occurred to me: I released the brakes and put the engine into reverse. All at once, it skidded backwards and with a groan started off in the opposite direction, rapidly gathering speed. Meanwhile, I had taken advantage of a brief moment when it was almost at a standstill to jump out, covering my head with my hands and curling up to cushion the blow. It was as well I did: on the other side of the embankment there was a steep, stony slope covered in brambles, which tore my clothes and ripped my uniform so that I reached the foot of the twenty-five-yard mound with my face covered in dust and blood, my body half-naked and my clothes in shreds. The General would have needed every scrap of his imagination to bring himself to believe that the lively little pianist and the half-stunned human wreck sitting in a muddy puddle somewhere in the Ukraine at three in the morning were one and the same person. So would I.

I gradually got over my bewilderment and was beginning to think there had been enough events over the last twenty-four hours. There was nothing for it but to surrender to the first soldier to brandish a gun in my face. I got up out of the puddle and started searching in the dark for shelter from the cold. I had had nothing to eat (I had not been offered anything) and my stomach was protesting vehemently as I thought back to the little pies and cold chicken they were all stuffing themselves with at that very moment - unless they were trying to hitch a lift back home. I was beginning to feel sleepy. “At least you’re free now,” I thought before dropping off to sleep on a bed of twigs I had made for myself to keep off the frozen ground as far as possible. Free – but not for long.

At dawn, I half-opened my eyes and thought I was having a nightmare: four men were standing round me, each brandishing a machine gun not a foot from my head. “My God!” I thought, “This is the limit. Four fellows with the Red Star on their fur hats ready to shoot at the least provocation.”

I shut my eyes again for a second, hoping that what I had just seen was all a bad dream. Alas! When I opened them again they were still very much there. “They didn’t take long to find me out,” I sighed to myself. True, my arrival in enemy territory was hardly as discreet as that of someone on the run and hoping to save his skin might have wished. So, accepting the situation stoically, I waited in a state of blissful torpor for the merciful bullet to despatch me into the next world, where I could continue my philosophizing. This was not to be: one of the men raised the barrel of his gun slightly as a sign that I was to stand up. I tried to do so quickly but my previous night’s wounds caused me to fall down again. I got up as best I could. I cannot have looked all that dangerous since they then all lowered their weapons while one of them carried out a search on me. Thank heavens I was not carrying so much as a pistol for Partisans would shoot a deserter on the spot. The man found nothing and signalled to me to get moving. One of them led the way with a torch (it was winter and still dark). Two others walked one on either side of me, each carrying a machine gun but they were far less wary than they had

been. The fourth brought up the rear and so we walked along for at least two hours.

At daybreak we suddenly came to a halt on a hillside. Two of them undertook the task of clearing some brushwood placed at the spot as camouflage, after which a third joined them to remove a few boulders. By now they no longer cared about me. In no time at all they had cleared the opening of a small tunnel which could only be entered on all fours. Amazed at their efficiency, I just stood there watching. In any case, the fourth character had just stuck his gun in my back. Although I could not see him, I was quite certain he was all set to shoot. Meanwhile, the three others finished clearing the secret entrance to their hideout. One of them crawled in while the others beckoned to me to follow. After a time, the tunnel grew larger and soon it was possible to stand upright.

Ahead of us I could make out a faint light shed by little oil lamps hanging on the walls. I realized we were in an abandoned mine. My eyes had by now adjusted to the sepulchral lighting and I was able to make out a whole network of galleries leading into the occasional natural grotto. An incredible number of people, all lying on the ground, were crowded into one of them. We groped our way forward, taking care not to step on anyone. Another armed man came towards us, spoke softly to the Partisans in what I supposed to be a Russia-Slovak dialect and waved me on ahead. I trod carefully among the sleepers, the more fortunate of whom were lying on heaps of clothing or straw. On we went, until the barrel of my companion's weapon pressed into my back a little harder and I stopped immediately. He pointed to some scraps of rotting straw on which I was to lie. With the help of sign language he indicated that I must get some sleep and that he would be back shortly. I tried to show him I was a deserter by ripping off the remains of my epaulette bearing my unit's initials, throwing it on the ground and stamping on it. A smile lit up his face for the first time. He shook my hand, pointed to me once again to lie down and went off. I sat on the ground staring blankly ahead. Close by, a man like a grotesque character out of Bosch was looking at me. His face had been horribly disfigured by a war wound. The pale,

wavering light accentuated the monstrousness of that face. He whispered to me in German, “Deserter?” I nodded. He patted my shoulder in approval, curled up again and fell asleep. I lay down in my turn and, as I wondered what was likely to happen to me, heard the distant sound of a harmonica playing a tune I seemed to recognize. It was *Holy Night*. Christmas Eve, 1943 was coming to an end. I fell into a dreamless sleep.

Days passed, then weeks. Twenty-four hours a day we lived crowded together in the abandoned mine deep in the earth. Unlike some refugees, I was not allowed out. The caves were immense and the galleries stretched for miles. Even so, I was beginning to feel like a soul condemned to Purgatory for its sins – indeed that is what the place might easily have been taken for. The oil lamps burnt night and day, though the flame was lowered for reasons of economy. There was something supernatural about the dim lighting which lent an oddly timeless atmosphere to the interminable galleries and the people in them. The same muted, unchanging monotony began each day as ended it. Difficult to define but ever-present, it turned people little by little into objects, objects without hope or a future. The main symbol of life, in the sense of existence, was our awakening each morning. After a few seemingly interminable hours came the high point of the day: the serving of lunch. After that, all we thought about was going to bed for the night. Although we were so crammed, there was no form of social life: everyone killed time according to his particular mood. Most had nothing to do or say and spend the major part of their time lying or sitting on the very spot where they had passed the night. The people all ended up with the same expression, their faces like blank masks due to such an aimless, meaningless way of life. Whether lying or sitting, they gazed blankly ahead, hardly moving all day, like unplugged robots waiting for the end of time. I did not take part in any form of activity either. All I wanted was to be alone and sat in the shadows away from the crowd, my back against the wall. On special days I smoked a cigarette end made up of a pinch of nauseous, stinking tobacco which a few others shared with me out of pity.

Our gallery seemed to have been reserved for foreigners – soldiers on the retreat, deserters and some rather undesirable escaped convicts. In others, life was more fun. There were families from neighbouring villages seeking shelter from the German Occupation. They had taken refuge here in the hope of better days to come. During the day, men, women and children talked loudly in some incomprehensible dialect. As they chattered away the women did their laundry, their sleeves rolled up, their faces red with bustling about their work. Then, as their plump fingers wrung out the shirts, they talked even more. That is why their families were always cleanly dressed. They took absolutely no notice of us, even though they lived so close by.

After that, the youngest women got down to preparing the ingredients for lunch. They cooked for everyone in the mine, themselves as well as us – with one difference: we ate their leftovers. After the meal was over, they did the washing-up, polishing the few tin pots which did for saucepans. Very battered, they had been abandoned by some army or other. They filled in the short period of rest remaining after their exertions by seeing to the young children of the community. Once that was over they began preparing vegetables (mainly ageing potatoes) for the next day's meal, the only one allowed us. Even so, we considered this single course, however frugal and inadequate, a miracle in view of how scarce food was.

Like outcasts in an underground ghetto, we never came into contact with 'those lot up there'. In most of the villages in the area there lived a few peasants who adamantly refused to leave their humble dwellings despite the threat of imminent invasion by pro-German forces, preferring to risk death on their plot of land to losing their only reason for living. They would never have been able to help the Partisans feed the eight hundred odd people crowded into the mine. It must have been sufficient worry for them to get enough to eat for themselves as time went by. Even the feeding just once a day of so many destitute creatures squatting on their heaps of rags, perhaps for ever, was an exploit under the circumstances. Apart from patrols of the sort which had brought me

here, it was not in the interest of any of the refugees to go outside even if, unlike us deserters, they were not actually forbidden to do so. The freedom denied us was no good to them either. Where could they have gone?

STALIN ORGANS

All those outlawed soldiers were vaguely aware that events were soon to take a new turn and burst in upon their darkness. We lived in expectation of a visit without knowing whose hands we were going to fall into. Most probably it would be the Red Army's: rumour had it that it was pressing forward relentlessly. Deep down, we knew only too well that the Front was only a few dozen miles off. A complete reversal of the situation was still possible in the sector since the allied forces under German High Command had been ordered to die on the spot rather than retreat.

Certain battalions had regrouped and treated themselves to large scale punitive sorties, making lightning raids on territory they could no longer control, using the scorched earth policy, sabotaging, setting booby traps, burning, mining and worse – anything which might hinder the enemy in its steamroller-like advance. These units of political fanatics specialized in picking up all the deserters and runaways. More and more soldiers, seeing the turn events were taking, 'forgot' to return from their missions and wandered aimlessly in search of something to eat before surrendering to the Liberation Army. They were recaptured *manu militari* by their own forces. There was no time to waste on court marshals: they were brought back, arms securely bound, and shot in front of the troops by way of an example as traitors to the fatherland.

In short, we were at the mercy of Providence as we crouched in our hiding place. If just one Partisan were to be caught and tortured till he revealed the whereabouts of this underground hideout, an Extermination Squad would arrive and turn the place into a Golgotha. There would be no need to waste ammunition: if one charitable soul just dynamited the exits we would all be dead within a few hours. The more I thought about it the less attractive the prospect appeared. I had a mad idea: why not escape and go back home? It was worse

than foolhardy. I worked out that I was somewhere in the wilds near the Russian-Polish frontier, several miles on foot from home. Hang it all! I was dying to leave this place and see daylight again.

Getting out was not a problem. There was only a token sentinel who snored with the rest of us by night, so certain was he that no-one would be reckless enough to go out into the darkness and get a stray bullet in him, whether Russian, German, Partisan or Hungarian – not to mention the local guerrilla groups patrolling the forests and as eager to shoot soldiers on the run as were the latter to fire back. They did at least have one thing in common: both fired at anything that moved – local Partisans because it meant one less Superman to be fed, and deserters whose nerves were on edge for fear of being either captured or re-captured. It was a veritable free-for-all.

I could not help repressing a bitter smile at this pigeon shooting when I thought of the two chief instigators of the chaos taking a hard-earned rest in soft beds, one in the Chancellery in Berlin, the other in the Kremlin.

I was in luck that night. The sentry on duty was the harmonica player whose nostalgic tunes I had heard when I arrived on Christmas morn. The instrument echoed faintly in one of the upper galleries. We had got to know each other through his instrument, which was a fine large chromatic one made in Germany. He had probably stolen it somewhere. Outside, it must have been pitch-dark because all those around me had been sleeping for some time. Whenever he was on guard, I used to go closer and listen. In theory this was forbidden but, having become his official teacher, I was allowed as a supreme reward to spend a little time outside at my own risk. It had been a boyhood dream of mine to have such an instrument but it was not to be and, strange to say, without ever learning to play I have always been able to, even winning a cup once in some competition.

Leaning against a wall with his belt full of grenades, a machine gun in one hand and his harmonica in the other, my pupil was already waiting for me. Two very appropriate masterpieces were on

the day's programme: *Kalinka* and *Lili Marlene*. So the lesson began. He launched into an extract from the first piece then passed the instrument to me, smiling apologetically. It was not exactly difficult to play better: he was hopeless. I took up the piece, adding such a frenzied accompaniment and such rich harmonies that the poor man in despair took out a large bottle of *eau de cologne* from his pocket, smelling so strongly of *patchouli* that it evoked the Casino de Paris backstage, and took a huge swig to give himself courage. After the demonstration I handed him back his instrument and we repeated this little game four or five times in succession as usual. I waited till his eyes turned a little glassy before getting down to the more romantic part of the session. That particular evening, my friend did not want anything to do with *Lili Marlene*, while I for my part wanted to be out of this hospitable place before dawn. So, after playing him *Viens, Poupoule!*[5], I went straight into my favourite bravura number, *Nuit de Chine, nuit câline*[6], and, as he turned his back on me to light a cigarette beneath the tiny oil lamp on the wall opposite, I struck him on the back of the neck with his harmonica, which was as hefty as a cudgel. Silently, he crumpled into a heap like a wet rag. I felt sorry about it but if he had alerted his toadies, who knew the forest far better than I, they would have caught up with me in no time.

The way was clear and I had at least four hours until dawn, when the search could begin. It was a good thing they no longer had any dogs – they must have eaten them long ago. I snatched up his gun (so as to be able to shoot something to eat), took a few grenades from his belt (in case of any trouble with armoured vehicles – whether invading or liberating), his matches (to light a fire if need be) and, most important of all, his cap with its Red Star to make me look like a soldier. It was obvious from such a get-up I was from the enemy camp but I hoped the assortment would act as a pass key in the course of the long journey to come. True, got up like this, I was liable to be

[5] Come on, my chick !
[6] Sultry China nights.

court martialled by any of the opposing armies but quite frankly I was past caring. All wanted was to see my family again and the rest was of little consequence.

I silently slipped away. Outside, even a solitary star, like a dark, melancholy sun, was more heartening than the sinister atmosphere in the mine, where we wallowed in a nauseating stench of decay. I was in the heart of a great pine forest somewhere on the frontier between the Ukraine and Poland, but where exactly? A distant rumble to the East gave a clue: it could only be the Russian Army's heavy artillery moving inexorably towards Hungary, for we did not have any such toys and the sound of the great Krupp cannons of our beloved protectors were quite different. As I plunged among the trees to go in the opposite direction, I reflected that a musical ear was of some use after all. I could not see a thing and was reduced to feeling my way along, making as little noise as possible and stopping whenever I heard anything suspicious – the slightest crack of a branch or the crunch of dead leaves. The forest of lofty trees grew denser and more impenetrable. I took care to avoid clearings and pathways. The moon shone on coppice-covered slopes and woods of giant pines. The tree tops were hazy in the pearl-grey light. There were bound to be swarms of snipers about and now that I was obliged to play 'piggy-in-the-middle' with the Partisans as well as regular soldiers from both sides I did not feel I had much chance of getting out alive. The endless, threatening roar like a mountain storm acted as a compass. So it was that I walked till dawn when, spotting the very forked tree I needed, I hoisted myself up to try and get a little sleep.

A few hours later I awoke and continued walking south-west, slowly chewing as I went on the first of four slices of stale bread I had managed to put to one side. On the way, I threw away the gun, cursing the previous owner: the magazine was empty. I still had the grenades, which were not exactly ideal for shooting rabbits. Still, they came in useful the following night when I ran into half-a-dozen wolves fighting over the carcass of a young wild boar, a piece of which would

have been most welcome. I had to do something, and quickly too, for the creatures were all set to leap on me and kill two birds with one stone. I just had time to pull out the pins of two grenades and throw them into the fray, with devastating results: no more wolves…and no more wild boar. I continued on my way on my jockey's diet, using Dr Coué's precept to persuade myself I was not hungry.

The following day I had my first bit of luck since starting out: there was a brief shower and I was at last able to drink a few drops of water and was also overjoyed to see the forest thinning out at last to give way to an apparently boundless steppe scattered with stunted bushes. At last I was able to make more rapid progress but I had to be twice as vigilant on such open terrain. Far away on the horizon stood burnt out tanks and lorries, not far from a small hamlet. I decided to have a closer look. As I approached, an old peasant wielding an ancient magazine-rifle came out of a shed and, on seeing my uniform, said in a guttural Hungarian accent: "Where are you going?" "To Budapest," I replied, in a quite matter of fact tone. "You're either mad or a deserter," he said resignedly. I had to agree – he was not entirely wrong.

"What's your job normally?" "I'm a pianist?" "That's no sort of job," he said, looking pityingly at my unshaven face. "I bet you're more dangerous at a piano than with a gun. Now, listen, if you want to find your compatriots, keep straight on and go through the wood ahead. Watch out: it's marshland and that maquis lot have put mines along the only footpath. When you come out you'll find a chapel full of wounded Hungarians and Germans waiting to be evacuated. Try and get a place on one of their lorries. After that, you'll just have to hope for the best. Anyway, come in to have a wash and a bite to eat."

I hesitated: the sudden, unexpected kindness of the old man seemed a little suspicious so I preferred to get going. It was nearly dusk by the time I reached the chapel, without a hitch but exhausted. There was nobody about, just a few Hungarian lorries, each with a large red cross on it, parked before the entrance. It was a large,

Orthodox church with an onion-shaped belfry atop an impressive tower eaten away by verdigris. It was a good half hour's walk from any other building and was probably a place of pilgrimage. The walls had been pitted by bullets of every possible calibre and much of the stained glass in the high, narrow windows had been shattered. One part of the ancient roof over the Baroque nave had been hit by a pretty hefty mortar and a cannon shot had left a gaping hole in the belfry. By the time I crossed the threshold it was nearly dark. The foundations, the thick walls and even the arches inside the place of worship echoed and re-echoed with distant artillery fire. The extraordinary echo outside as well as in had probably been intended originally to swell the liturgical chant. It took my eyes a little while to adjust to the dim light inside and when they did I saw some hundred bodies lying motionless on stretchers as a dozen doctors in overalls saw to them. By the light of a few candles, using a single makeshift first aid kit, they tried to extract various sorts of ammunition and shrapnel from their wounds. They operated and even amputated entirely without anaesthetics. There was not even any ether left and, in desperation, they gave certain patients pure alcohol, slightly diluted, to drink until they lost consciousness – their only way of lessening the agony of an operation.

The surgeons had been working in these dreadful conditions for thirty-six hours on end. One of them came up to me. I gave the regulation salute out of habit. "It's odd to see someone who can still walk on his own two legs," he said by way of a greeting. I told him briefly about my escape from the mine, passing discreetly over how I had managed it.

"Your misfortune brought you luck," he said. "Your battalion was wiped out in a surprise attack by the Russians. When the Partisans captured you, this makeshift hospital was twenty miles behind our lines. Now it's twelve miles in front. The Red Army is on our heels and there isn't even enough petrol in the lorries out there to evacuate anyone. Heaven knows what will become of us!" I asked him what I

could do to help. “Nothing, my poor chap,” he replied wearily. “What did you use to do for a living?” I told him and his face lit up. “In that case there is something you can do for us. Go up there to the organ. It’s the only thing more or less intact in the place. Go on! Sit at the keyboard and play something for us. Anything. We could do with it.”

I silently obeyed. I glanced over the centuries-old instrument and asked for someone to work the forge-like bellows, which were essential to keep the air pressure in the pipes constant, and began to improvise on some old Hungarian hymns and then on the National Anthem. My fingers attacked the melodies in a kind of fury, transforming them little by little into a flood of grief whose resonance and power were redoubled by the resounding noise outside. As they mingled with the constant roar of explosions, they seemed to be appealing to the heavens to witness the inner and outer suffering of us all. Above the choir stalls, through a breach in the roof, blue flashes seemed to spatter the frescoes and faded icons whenever there was a blast. The long, final, dissonant chord spun between the arches of the nave before fading away outside.

It was heartbreaking to think of what would happen to all the injured if they were not fetched by the next day. I came down from the organ loft, passed between the surgeons, still rooted to the spot, and silently left the chapel.

I walked towards the woods a few hundred yards off, hoping to get through to the new Hungarian HQ. I had barely taken ten steps when I felt the cold touch of a barrel in my back. Two freedom fighters were standing one on either side of me. It was like a reunion: I recognized the greasy fur hats with the tiny star twinkling on the front. Luckily for me, I had not shaved for four days so they did not recognize me. Just as one of them was going through the routine search, an almighty bang laid us all out flat and blasted us with hot air. As I lay full-length on the ground, I glanced over the plain and saw the rafters of the chapel outlined in raging flames. All that remained of the nave was a heap of rubble and we could hear the

crackle of all those silent, motionless bodies. The tower with its wooden belfry was like a firebrand. It gradually leaned backwards and toppled slowly and majestically down into the inferno. Apparently, the building had been struck by a long-range missile. But why just then? The tarpaulins of the lorries flared up one by one, then the lorries themselves blew up, setting off the blaze inside the chapel once more until nothing was left save a blinding ball of fire.

I looked away, full of remorse. Had the organ resounding down the valley like a huge bell brought about the horrific tragedy? Seen in that light, the idea was not very plausible. The enemy's heavy artillery must have been dozens of miles away on the other slope of the mountain which I had glimpsed in the falling dusk. Stunned by the very thought of such a possibility, I got up on a sign from the two ruffians and walked on ahead as if in a trance. Unlikely as it was that the music could have set off the bombardment, there had been one shot, just one.

A few weeks after my attempted escape I was back in the burrow like a rat, in the same state of degeneration as the other prisoners. I had become incapable of attempting or even considering running away again. My chief aim in life had become to get to the cooking pot at midday. One or other of the peasant women, her face reddened by the steam from the boiling soup, served us a portion of a hot but lamentably watery substance which ensured our survival, however precarious, till the next day.

Day after day, sitting up or lying down, we gazed blankly at the little flame of the old lamp and waited only for the broth prepared by the Partisans' wives'. There were not enough bowls to go round so that some drank their portion from their helmets. The soup was boiled in huge cast-iron cauldrons, which could each have held several people. I realized that our 'hosts' must after all have had a considerable stock of food. Though we were wracked with hunger, it never occurred to anyone to try and find where it was. They were happy enough in the knowledge that it was inexhaustible.

In an attempt to fight off boredom I sometimes took a stroll along the neighbouring galleries, strolling as slowly as possible. There was no reason to hurry. Sometimes I stopped when I came to family or a man sitting by himself on the ground. We exchanged a few banalities before I went to the other gallery, whose dimly-lit entrance looked from a distance like the gaping jaws of some weird beast. I went in and was soon able to make out other lights. By the light of the flickering flames first the forms then the features of the people sitting or squatting there gradually became visible. Other people, other faces, more questions, followed by more vague answers, in an attempt to keep up a semblance of optimism, as was expected of the others – usually in vain. I seemed to have been wandering for all eternity when I finally found my way back through the maze of grottos and galleries to my heap of straw. Time passed inexorably yet seemed motionless.

I now realize, with hindsight, that I had reached the depths of despair at this period in my life. Such a feeling is difficult to shake off for it only takes a hold on someone once he is past caring. During my stay, or rather captivity, I was foolish enough to leave my mind and will to hibernate, believing that a vegetable-like existence would increase my chances of survival. In any case, I was not there to think but to suffer, endure and – who knows? – do penitence. Unconsciously, I must have imagined – and the environment certainly contributed – that in plunging to the depths without the possibility of resurfacing for air, I could for the time being leave my brain, which was more of a hindrance than a help, in storage. I had suffered deprivation for so long that it did not seem too high a price to pay for some kind of hope. Unfortunately, I did not take into account the physical deterioration provoked by such living conditions, soon to be followed by a dulling of the mind. After several months without once leaving the depths of the mountain, I thought I had attained an ideal state of equilibrium? How wrong I was: I had reached zero, the point of no return. I had not yet sunk, as I thought, to the depths of insensitivity and indifference. In fact my downward decline was only

just beginning. Until then I had not understood, though it diminished day by day, the primary importance of the subconscious energy that feeds one's actions and still more one's thoughts. Will-power, which might be thought to be fundamental, is no more than the visible part of the life force, like an iceberg floating in the consciousness of each one of us, whereas four fifths of it lie deep in our subconscious and are subject to its laws. There is little joy to be had in observing one's mental decline when one is lucid but helpless to do anything about it. For me, the worst catastrophe which can strike a human being is to witness hour by hour the inexorable destruction of his spiritual vitality. I would rather have been struck down by a physical disease which I could have come to grips with and used my will-power to overcome. A bodily disease would have numbed my mind and set it at rest, but waiting helplessly while nothingness gradually invaded, submerged and paralysed all one's resilience, that I could not accept. It was worse than death: one's innermost self was destroyed. The victim was transformed into a living corpse and yet, paradoxically, though its inner substance was no more, the body was spared. I had grown to accept the idea of physical death but the finality of spiritual annihilation is something that still makes me shudder with horror.

Looking back from afar over that period of my life, I can take a more balanced view of the ravages of that hideous cancer of the mind which grew perniciously until it transformed me almost into a living corpse. Thank God, my physical resistance was once again a match for all my sufferings or else I would have fallen victim to the same sad fate as the others. Again, I do not mean death: physical death in such cases is a merciful release. I mean a particular form of existence in which a person's organism merely vegetates. Many people die like this, their will-power eaten away by the void within. In the case of the least resistant, even the desire to survive rotted away. One merely needs a body to go through the motions of living, but experiences like this mercilessly sweep away any lack the inner force to surmount them.

What point was there in wandering about the mine, that labyrinth of nothingness from which time had been banished? First I cut down on the number of daily walks then stopped them altogether and lay most of the time on my heap of rags. This gradual withdrawal was a matter of complete indifference to me. All notion of day and night had gone and I fell asleep at any time. Disordered fragments of my past would come back to me in my dreams. I even on occasion dropped off while the one and only meal of the day was being served. Hunger and thirst tormented me less than when I had first arrived and my state of torpor became more or less permanent. A curious numbing feeling was the sign that outside night was falling – it replaced the notion of time. However, this instinct was not to be trusted since I was sometimes aware of it more than once a day. In any case we were some fifty yards below ground level, which made any real judgement impossible. The difference of atmospheric pressure, hygrometry, etc., between the inside and outside worlds, further accentuated by the surreal effect of the constantly pale, flickering light, threw out even the most assured in their calculations. Our watches had been taken away from us on arrival so that time was no longer something tangible.

And so I lived from then on, an exact replica of all the others, until I lost even the longing even to see daylight again. Sprawled out full-length, reluctant so much as to get up, I suffered the pangs of hunger yet left half my portion uneaten, whereas it was no so long ago that I had thought we never got enough. As I stood in the queue, it dawned on me that I had not seen a number of familiar faces for quite a time. “They’ve escaped?” I whispered rather enviously in the ear of the man next to me, in the rough and ready German everyone was obliged to use. He shook his head: “No, they’ve gone.” I nodded knowingly, thinking, “He’s even madder than me. I mustn’t upset him.” He guessed my thoughts and continued, “It’s quite true. The furthest gallery is fifteen miles long and ends in a precipice about sixty yards below where we’re standing now. There’s nothing to stop

those who are tired of life going there." He looked me straight in the eye and repeated, "All those who prefer death to a life spent waiting for the supposed arrival of the Russians. The Partisans turn a blind eye to such disappearances – it means a few less mouths to feed. I can't take much more," he said slowly, getting to his feet slowly, "I'm Czech. One half of my family was massacred by the Germans, the other half by the Reds. I've nothing left to live for. I've got two last cigarettes. We can smoke them on the way to the pit. Coming? Not yet? Well, we may meet again soon," he whispered as he moved off.

I never saw him again. I fell asleep. When I woke up a few hours later, I was no longer sure whether the conversation had actually taken place or whether it had all been a dream. To be frank, I had been living as if buried alive for so long that it was difficult to know which were the cataleptic waking hours and which the periods of sleep haunted by strange apparitions. However, the very thought of vanishing quite unnoticed was enough to discourage me for quite some time from yielding to the temptation to go anywhere near the notorious precipice.

I did everything possible to this end. I started going for walks again and forced myself to eat regularly, thinking that each bowl of soup might be the last before our liberation. Then came a change of events, though not in the way I had hoped for. We were informed that food stocks were getting low so that from then on we would get only a little 'light' soup every forty- eight hours. Before that our rations had comprised, besides the broth, a few potatoes, old carrots and dried beans with, on special days, a tiny piece of salt-bacon rind, which had to be chewed patiently to make it edible. After tasting their 'new recipe' soup, a revolting liquid with potato peelings and beetroot skin floating on the surface, I realized the worst was yet to come. 'Keep going' replaced 'survive' as my password. Time fed us drip by drip as if we were voracious stalactites and our experience of it was like that of a foetus, a cosmonaut lost in space or a prehistoric animal living in light years. The worst hours were not the waking ones now: the

sleepless nights with their periods of dreams and hallucinations were what I feared most.

During one of those endless nights, I had the unpleasant feeling someone was observing me closely as I lay there. I was at once on the alert. On looking up, I was astounded by the sight which my brain, accustomed as it was to the most improbable happenings, registered before my eyes could. A slant-eyed Russian soldier with high cheekbones and wearing a fur hat with a little star was staring at me so fixedly as to accentuate the trace of distaste in his expression. His face, bent over mine, was like an ogre's – the perfect identikit portrait as drummed into us valiant warriors by the former pro-German command which it had once been my honour to serve. I had solved the enigma before I could even shake off my torpor: if he was there it could only be due to the Partisans. If so, he could not be alone, which meant the whole sector was under Red Army control. Conclusion: I was free!

The flash of understanding in my eyes must have surprised my visitor: he suddenly got up and walked jerkily off to continue his round of inspection, with one of the men who had brought me here going servilely ahead. God alone knows how much I had been longing for that encounter and that look. Still lying there half asleep, I thought of that face looking into mine as though examining some freakish specimen of ox in a zoo which did not quite fit the description in the guide book. But now, what with one thing and another, I was not even pleased to see this member of the Liberation Army. To tell the truth, I was past caring. My stay underground had left me completely indifferent to my past or future. This was the moment I had been waiting for so long as to have given up all hope. I was going to be able to leave this tomb at last. I could not have known that the arrival of the Russians so far from meaning freedom was to lead to another succession of tribulations, another tunnel to get through.

The Partisans in the burrow, wishing to impress the Red Army, had quite simply turned us over to them as prisoners exactly as if

they had fought and captured us fully armed. This was far from being the case. Nearly all the ragged soldiers in the mine were deserters. Some knew the area and had come of their own accord to hide until the Soviets arrived. Others like me sometimes wandered for weeks in the surrounding forest, hoping to come across the Partisans and put themselves at their mercy and were brought here without the least resistance after being found half-dead with exhaustion and hunger. The lies of the Partisans were to have a radical effect on our destiny. Everything has its price, as they say. What many of us had believed to be a stay of our own choosing was in fact nothing less than internment, a mere foretaste of things to come. Our freedom had been the high price paid for our board and lodging.

The rest of my captivity followed its usual pattern: we were ordered up to the entrance, where we were made to line up. A few Russians sorted out the grain from the chaff, so to speak. On one side, the armed men who had been our guards up till then, together with their wives and children, all shabby but clean. On the other, the 'enemy', in rags and stinking with the accumulated filth of many weeks. Watched over by dozens of warmly-dressed soldiers, we set off across the endless, virgin snow of the steppe towards Slovakia, i.e. the Czech-Hungarian frontier. At the end of the first day's march we came to a village, under Russian control of course. We were herded into a shed after being given a hunk of black bread and an onion each. The well we had been given permission to drink from was frozen over so we ate snow. I thought with regret of the vile soup, which had at least been hot and seemed a luxury compared with this fare. Still, no-one left a crumb of his rations, knowing we had a long march the next day and that the Russian – and German – cure for fainting was a bullet in the back of the neck: tit for tat. As I chewed on my bread, tough as mule, I felt there lay a glimmer of hope in the fact that our new masters obviously had not paid too much attention to the Partisans' lies or they would have shot us as potential enemies in the first coppice they came to, just as the Germans would have done if ever, by

some misfortune, they had arrived first at the mine. Amidst such turmoil, it was better to be serving under a flag, whatever its colours, than to be walking across open country without belonging to an army.

Early next morning, we set out again, stopped for a few minutes at midday and by evening reached another village, where we collapsed at the spot designated. Our march continued for at least a week. The quantity of miles covered put the finishing touches to our clothes, not least our shoes, which had been in a sorry state from the outset. Despite all our sufferings in the mine, I was among those who resisted best. For one thing, I took care to keep my evening rations for the next day's journey, eating a little something from time to time so as to give my body the illusion it was getting a few extra calories as a reward for the extra work required of it. Secondly, I had learnt from my previous military experience that inwardly to reject an order one was obliged to obey made things twice as hard for the body because it put up a resistance which it was then forced to repress, besides having to make the effort demanded anyway. So I plodded mechanically on with the others like a robot, making sure not even a passing thought of giving up slowed down the pace set by the soldiers. My body advanced as though weightless and detached from my will. I only became aware of my physical exhaustion once we reached our stopping place for the night. For the soldiers leading us from point to point it was mere military routine: if we were worn out by the previous day's marching and advanced less quickly they only had to accompany us part of the way. Every morning as we set off, insults were hurled at us: in Georgian dialect one day, Ukrainian the next, then Caucasian and heaven knows what else. We did not care. We had no idea where we were going, though hoping deep down in our suffering bodies that we would get there as soon as possible. Heaven was good enough to lend an ear to the ardent hope which rose from our exhausted carcases.

After a good week's march, we arrived at a village which had obviously been fortified quite recently. It was surrounded by a high

hedge of barbed-wire with here and there a wooden watchtower. We were herded inside and the iron gates banged to behind us. In short, we were in a newly-built concentration camp. We were divided into sections and allotted wooden huts. The blocks were numbered but not laid out in lines. Together with one of my fellow-sufferers, I went into one. As soon as everybody was inside, the door was slammed shut. The way in which the sentinel on duty had kicked it showed all too clearly what he thought of us and presaged a stay full of unpleasant surprises and as yet unknown ordeals. Discipline was strict but, contrary to my expectations, this was not a penal camp: no-one was deliberately ill-treated as in the notorious German camps. It was in fact a sort of open prison.

The days passed slowly and monotonously by. The first few were spent seeing to the wounds and fissures the forced march had inflicted on our feet. It was a long time before they more or less healed since we had been underfed for so long and, in particular, were lacking in vitamins. We took advantage of the free time granted us each day to leave our huts and hobble off on visits to each other. To tell the truth, we tended to seek out those we supposed had a few shreds of tobacco left. Nobody in the camp attempted to count the passing days. Our jailors aside, I am not sure any of us could have given the exact date or even said what day of the week it was. At least we now lived above ground, but the effects of the deep-seated indifference and apathy contracted in the mine were still apparent in the dullness of our minds. Under such conditions, why should I have cared more about one day than another? Nothing changed with the passing weeks, least of all the menu: a little black bread and a few pieces of sugar of dubious taste each morning. At midday and in the evening there was the habitual queue for a bowl of soup, a blackish beverage thickened with some fatty, rancid substance more like lard than anything else. Though prepared in the Russian manner, this gruel was a far cry from the delicious, creamy soups which were the

delight of Parisian gourmets in the renowned Russian cabarets and restaurants of the capital.

At the beginning of my period of detention, I spent most of the time trying to think up a way of attracting the attention of the *nachalnik* [commander of a prison camp] to the injustice most of us were victims of. Several times I thought, without much conviction, of asking to see him in order to explain my case. Somehow or other the right moment never presented itself. In the end I lost courage and then, shortly afterwards, began to hope again. It was easy to understand why I should have hesitated. Such a powerful overlord as a *nachalnik* was not going to waste his time giving credence to the muddled stories of an insignificant individual already listed by the Partisans as a sworn enemy of the Russians. What is more, I did not know their language and only spoke German very badly. It would have been too much to hope for to find a Hungarian interpreter able to speak at least one of these languages. Even so, one day the opportunity I had given up all thought of presented itself in oddly unexpected fashion.

On the day in question, I was going for my daily walk on my own, as I mostly did, lost in thought, my eyes fixed on the ground and walking straight ahead, passing between two rows of huts bordering on the barbed wire hedge round the camp. In general, only I came to this spot at all regularly. Today, things were different. Head still bowed, I was preparing to cross a small junction when I suddenly bumped into someone coming from my left and nearly fell over backwards. Like me, the man had been walking with his hands behind his back ruminating so that we saw each other too late. The collision threw him off balance and he landed on his backside, looking at me crossly as he groped for his officer's cap, which had fallen to the ground. From the insignia on his jacket I realized I had had the misfortune to knock over the Commanding Officer in person.

The incident was unintentional on both sides but such was not the opinion of the two officers walking a few paces behind him. They

each grabbed me by an arm, shook me furiously and yelled in my ears in Russian. Though not knowing the language and despite my astonishment, I understood perfectly well what they meant. Meanwhile, the Commanding Officer had recovered his cap and, while his guards pushed me about until they had recovered their breath sufficiently to give me a real going-over, he got to his feet and, dusting himself down, made a sign to them to let me go. I made a gesture of apology, mumbling in what to him must have sounded like Esperanto. He had calmed down somewhat and muttered a few equally incomprehensible words, looking rather put out, and then asked me in German what I was doing there. Taken aback by his own idiotic and inept question, he instead asked my name, nationality, etc., as a way of demonstrating to his subalterns how magnanimous he was. From his unusually calm, clear manner of speaking, I could tell the incident was forgotten. I seized my chance and tried to make the most of it. I did not give him a direct answer but began to explain how I came to be in the camp. I tried calmly to describe my escape. There was no need to worry about talking too much: my very basic German saw to that. Since I wanted to be as clear as possible, I gave a real one-man show, miming – as far as possible – various events I could not express in words. The *nachalnik's* attendants were uneasy at the proportions the St. Vitus's Dance I was performing before their Commanding Officer were taking - unless they feared I was unbalanced and might make an attempt on his life - and grabbed hold of me again. Their zeal annoyed him as he was evidently interested in my story, so he told them to release me, pushed his cap pensively back on his forehead and nodded to me to continue. When he finally realized I was just one poor deserter among many who had surrendered of their own accord, contrary to what the Partisans had said, his eyelids, hooded up till then, opened wide and there seemed to be a glimmer of compassion, almost of kindness, in his gaze.

My story finished, I looked him straight in the eye as if to say, "It's up to you now." He stood deep in thought, apparently unaware of

the sound of my voice, and asked my hut number. Then, to my surprise, he gave a salute, which I returned automatically, before walking swiftly away, flanked by his officers. I went slowly after them on my way back to the hut, feeling there was a glimmer of hope for the first time in ages.

Sadly, for a long time to come, nothing much changed in our daily routine. Quite the contrary, as the weather grew colder and colder with the advance of winter and with clothes so worn that even a tramp would have refused them we felt it all the more. To make matters worse, quite a lot of us had torn our shirts or sweaters into strips to make temporary bandages for our injured feet, since it was preferable to keep on the march in the cold than get a bullet in the back of the neck, the punishment for any show of weakness, as I have said.

My wardrobe was in no better state than the others' since we had all been living in the camp for at least three months, at a guess. One biting cold morning, I was on the point of making my usual round of the yard to warm up before the midday soup. Suddenly an officer yelled out in an arrogant voice, reducing everyone to a deadly silence. We were ordered to return to our huts at once and remain there until further notice. This unexpected order dismayed us. Nobody knew what to make of it and we feared the worst. Some whispered that we were to be deported to Siberia that very day because of the Partisan's false evidence. Everyone's spirits were at their lowest ebb. For once, I envied the pessimists who, long since resigned to their loss of liberty, envisaged the future with mournful indifference. Some went as far as to give a doleful description of life in the salt mines, in comparison with which our stay underground had been sheer bliss. Our agonizing was, thank heavens, short lived.

At lunchtime we were allowed out and made to fall into rank. The Commanding Officer himself was there between a double line of soldiers, who towered over him. A shudder ran down my spine at the sight of so much ceremony: previous experience had taught me that

this kind of pomp was a means of announcing something important and, in general, disagreeable (especially in wartime). As soon as everyone was in line and silent, the Soviets saluted their Commandant, who then began reading a speech – in Russian, of course – which was then translated into several languages for the benefit of our Babylonian community. The essence of the declaration was that the war against Nazi Germany was in its decisive final stages. Virtually the whole Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary had either been liberated or was about to be, thanks to the efforts of the glorious Red Army, now on the point of freeing Vienna from Hitler's clutches. To celebrate these unprecedented exploits in a duly dignified manner, the High Command responsible for the Eastern Front had decided to amnesty all those whose military activities had not exceeded certain bounds determined by a number of committees likewise responsible for vetting the political past of each detainee. All prisoners thus freed would be fully re-equipped and transported to various assembly points where, after a short period of further training, they would be able to participate in the final grand slam which would destroy the German hydra once and for all.

"All reinstated prisoners," the German interpreter continued, "will fight in the newly formed democratic armies of their countries of origin, under the guidance and benevolent protection of the great Red Army. The selection of prisoners to be liberated has just been decided on. Those whose names are called will break ranks and line up at the far end of the yard."

The final pronouncement fell like a condemnation. Hearts pounded and butterflies entered many a stomach. Yet for the first time in ages there was a spark of hope in every eye. All trace of apathy had gone form their faces and they looked alive and human once more. I was filled with happiness before even knowing whether my name was among those chosen. Anyway, it was called and I went off at once to join one of the groups at the end of the yard. We all went into a building, one of the few solidly built ones in the camp. It was

the stores. I was straightway issued with a brand-new uniform, boots, a machine gun, made in Russia with a magazine shaped like a Camembert cheese, spare ammunition and a combat helmet adorned with a large red star. I was so relieved at no longer being a pariah that I did not even feel the biting cold as I changed in a corner of the yard.

After a journey of some hundred miles, the convoy of massive lorries dropped us off in the yard of a camp on Hungarian territory under the command of officers of the recently formed Hungarian Democratic Army. The soldiers billeted there not long before greeted our arrival with shouts of joy. The order to fall in rang out once again as the lorries left shortly afterwards. The Colonel, flanked by his Hungarian staff, spoke a few words of welcome with unexpected warmth, more or less repeating what the Soviet Commander had already said. The officers then moved along the ranks, stopping before each of us for a few moments to ask for a few details about our service record and rank in the former Fascist army. I gave a brief account of my adventures and said that previously I had served in the cavalry. Our regiment had been decimated by the Russians almost as soon as fighting broke out and I had been transferred to a tank unit after a short period of training, during which I had graduated to bigger tanks. I had fought on the Front until my unit was almost totally wiped out. Seeing no other solution, I had seized the opportunity to leave the pro-Germans. I told my story in a completely neutral manner, using a telegraphic style to avoid giving away the least hint of my horror of war and my disgust with army life. The officer listened with a combination of attentiveness and curiosity and asked me to continue. I ended by insisting that desertion had seemed the only solution seeing as our territory and army were being exploited by the Nazis. The former Hungarian Command was by then completely subservient to the German High Command and had lost all right to make decisions, thus forcing us to fight for a lost cause, one for which I had not the least wish to die. I was at the end of a line and while I was talking a few other officers, their tour of inspection over, came to

join their friend, who was still listening attentively. One of them came up to me, placed a hand on my shoulder in a friendly manner and said, “Nothing of what you said surprises me in the least. All the officers here are charged with organizing a new democratic Hungarian army after deciding, while on the Front, to get in touch with the Red Army at the earliest opportunity. After a short period of military and political training, we returned to fight beside the Red Army to liberate Hungary once and for all. But training for our new army will be more tricky,” he smiled, “because the Cavalry Corps wasn’t adapted to this kind of warfare and has been disbanded. What is more, we can’t transfer you to the Tank Corps for the moment as it isn’t yet in operation. To be frank, one might almost say it has been disbanded,” he went on, trying to repress a mischievous smile, “as the big new T-34s still haven’t arrived. But don’t worry,” he concluded blithely, “you’ll have plenty to do in the meantime. We’ll find you something.”

He then gave the troops the rest of the day off so that they could get some rest and moved slowly away again, passing between the ranks of soldiers standing to attention. Early next morning, along with several warrant officers, I reported to the sub-lieutenant’s office to receive the day’s orders for the unit I had been in charge of during my somewhat hectic period in the Tank Corps. It would be truer to say I was a survivor of the unit.

I was given the same rank in the new army. Keeping the men in tip-top physical condition was the order of the day – I could not help smiling at the graciousness of the expression – until the Infantry received its required quota of heavy armoury, when we would return to the Front to fight alongside Red Army in a final large scale offensive which would finish off the Nazis, by then on their last legs. It was early in March, 1945 and the Germans put up such a dogged resistance that it was quite impossible to imagine the war could end soon. Quite the contrary: the latest offensive in the Ardennes, though a failure, may have lead those who were not actually there to believe that Hitler’s troops still had plenty in reserve. This was the moment

when the Red Army joined up with the American troops, thus splitting Germany in two. The Russians did everything in their power to take Berlin for they did not wish to share such a glorious, historic victory with the Allies. The Hungarian battalions which flew to their aid knew this and our unit was transferred to an abandoned school, not far from the barracks, reserved for the purpose. There was, of course, no longer any question of our being demobilized. On the other hand, we were all very happy with the turn of events when we found ourselves back in our own country after so many tribulations.

My home and family were not all that far off. Please excuse me if my life story has been more redolent of gunpowder than the sweet smell of success one expects in a famous artist's memoirs but this unfortunate hitch was, I can assure you, entirely beyond my control.

HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY: A FAILURE

Early one morning, a warm, caressing breeze swept away the cold which had been biting into us for so long. Spring sunshine! The morale of the whole unit was high. It warmed our hearts and bodies, which wanted nothing better than to forget the bitter cold winter.

Full instructions as to our new duties had been received some time before. Everyone did his best to respect them, following them blindly, and soon we were all working as one, with the reflexes of a professional army.

While waiting for the promised new tanks, I was put in charge of the physical training of a unit of young recruits. The Company was installed in a school which did not have a playground large enough for our frolics so to trot six miles, there and back, to a meadow large enough for a biggish herd of cattle, which had already been scythed by the old peasants from the nearby village. The terrain was just right for us and we went there daily, except on Sundays. I could have taken things easy but the young chaps were not any more enthusiastic about training than I had been, so that I had to give the lead throughout the sessions and, taking my duties to heart, returned to the garrison most evenings far wearier than those who knew exactly how to appear more exhausted than they really were. A lance corporal and a sergeant were in charge of disciplining the reluctant crew but they were relieved that I pretended not to see the skivers and did as much themselves. The daily return journey alone would have been sufficient to keep us physically fit, nor was there any risk of becoming overweight on army diet. To prepare youngsters for a war they had no wish to fight, I sometimes made them do endurance trials, explaining to the lazier among them that Adolf's little party was not over yet and that it was better to have me on their backs than the Germans. We did obstacle courses in full battledress. We broke into a run then suddenly threw ourselves to the ground (still fully kitted out)

and crossed imaginary rivers by crawling along a rope, after which we took a sort, well-earned break.

I always took part in manoeuvres, though there was nothing that obliged me to. I did it of my own accord – in other words, I was by now little more than a cog in the wheel of war, a product of the brain-washing process. In fact it was a mere game compared with the unbearable rhythm I had had to put up with as a soldier under the orders of that drill sergeant with his SS methods. It was a good life, made to measure, with days well-filled and about as varied as the revolving wheels of a steam engine.

The very sight of our encampment each evening was enough to make me feel sick, more out of anger than fatigue. I think it must have been a sign that the situation was getting me down: I was fed up to the back teeth with it. Yet more often than not, strange creature that I was, a good night's sleep put everything right again and I watched my unit falling smartly into line not in the least perturbed by the previous evening's feelings.

The inhabitants of the nearby village were always ready for a chat. Once the day's duties were over, we instructors were allowed out for the evening. We had a sort of late-night pass, in short. So, we soon got to know the local civilians, farm-workers for the most part. Some of us were even lucky enough to be asked in. The kindly, spontaneous way in which they invited us to share their simple evening meal was most touching. Generally, we did not hesitate to accept, not so much for the food as for an evening of peace and quiet with families whose loneliness was relieved by these evening gatherings. Our hosts' humble, discreet desire that we should feel at home was all the more touching as they had only recently been liberated and had known hard time under the Occupation. Besides which, most families were deeply affected by the absence of news from the Front of a son, husband or father. They must have found it difficult not to give way to despair. They spoke in a flat, laconic manner in what sounded like a foreign language, punctuated by long moments of silence. This was especially so with the elderly.

Before the war, this little place had been a flourishing rural community. There were fertile expanses of meadow and field, whose products were sold at markets in the surrounding towns. Now they did not even have the seed to produce enough corn to survive on. Only a few half-starved cows, spared by the grace of God, remained of the once prosperous herd. They wandered over the fields in search of food along with a few mangy, famished pigs. The cattle had been slaughtered by the pitilessly bloodthirsty soldiers, friendly or hostile by turns, who were advancing or on the retreat according to the hazards of war.

We used to go for an evening stroll to try and shake off the spectre of hunger. Quite frequently, someone would come up to us cautiously and hand over a small package containing an assortment of smoked or fresh ham and sausage with a piece of home-made white bread. Despite their great kindness, these people barely spoke – indeed they were almost cool in their manner. Their faces were set in an enigmatic, unsmiling expression which seemed to reflect their inner emotions.

This attitude was typical of the middle-aged; their daughters behaved quite differently. Most of them had that mischievous sparkle in their eyes which is a country girl's most attractive feature, handed down as it is from generation to generation. Late in the afternoon, these girls would appear walking arm in arm. Dressed in all their finery, they tried to give the impression that they had a particular destination in mind as they walked up and down on both sides of the village street more often than was proper. We chose the spot for our stroll because it was the most animated. Eyes modestly lowered, they pretended to ignore the insistent stares of the young soldiers they passed before retracing their steps to pass them again. Each longingly admired the figure of the man whose arms she would willingly have fallen into had he dared declare his love. After a day's physical training, this evening stroll was our only form of entertainment. There was not a cinema open in the area. The one in the village had been hit by a missile and reduced to a heap of rubble.

As for music, there was not the least sign of any. Even the main café where poverty-stricken gypsies used to play, transforming the noble peasant's single drink into an orgy of drunkenness, even that, the regional cultural centre, had shut down. Nor did the odd ribald song, whistled by some of my companions on the way to our daily high jinks, contain enough music to reawaken any trace of the fascination it had once held for me. What is more, on the rare occasions when I thought of the piano, it was as something purely abstract. I had become a perfect example of the good soldier Schweik, ready to execute orders at all times. My entire outlook on life had changed. The day's menu, the promising glance of a young blond who had passed us the evening before and the height of the obstacle we would have to leap over the following day, these were my sole preoccupations. By contrast, the piano as an artistic ideal or even a breadwinner had become no more than a distant memory, classified once and for all under 'errors of my youth'. Yet again, something unexpected and beyond my control occurred to rescue it from my subconscious.

Since I did not want to go to the piano, Destiny intervened and the piano came to me. That particular day I had been teaching my brood to dig a tank trap. We came back about midday for lunch in the canteen, known to some as 'the nursery' because the new arrivals were lodged on the upper floors. We lined up to be served then sat at a table and chewed hungrily at the dish of the day – 'fried veal' as the chef called it. He was only a couple of letters out: it was more a question of flying than frying, as anyone who put a knife to it quickly found out. It was all the same to us. After a morning digging, we would have eaten a plateful of nails if need be. Once we had got the meal over with, I went for a smoke in the yard until it was time to return to our adventure playground. Propped against a wall, I half-listened to my stomach protesting discreetly (to my relief) against being used as a dustbin. Just as we were about to move off, a high-ranking officer came up. Taking me to one side with a conspiratorial air, he peered into my face as if wondering whether I was intelligent enough to realize the importance of what he, the Angel of the

Lord, was about to announce. With all due solemnity he began: "In conjunction with the intrinsic needs of the masses, the splitting of whose psych-motricity consequent on the present state of events, is undergoing a kinetic transference, High Command esteems it opportune to concede a fraction of its cultural reserves, subsequent to a bilateral agreement with urban social advisers, to accord maximum importance to the implementing of a project in which, as a study of your previous achievements has permitted us to localise, your participation at professional level would be primordial."

"Would you care to sit down?" murmured in the sort of melodious, other-worldly voice used by nurses to calm a patient in a paranoiac fit. "No? Well, just listen to me. Even if we didn't go to the same university, I'm afraid I may well have understood what you're getting at despite all the flowery language. Apparently, you and he local bigwigs – the priest, the beadle, the grave-digger and the mayor (the doctor and the teacher must have been conscripted) – fornicated together to think up this cultural junketing for the rustics. Now the knife is at your throats you're longing for some fellow to transform your dreary whist-drive into a Roman carnival. You'd gain yourself an extra stripe when you're demobilized without doing a thing for the morale of the local clods. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a tank trap to finish?"

"W-What did you say? He stammered in astonishment. "*Cogito ergo sum*, with all due respect," and I gave the regulation salute. "Just a minute," he said, reaching out to me with a crestfallen look. "I got what I deserved. You put me in my place. Please listen." "Certainly not," I persisted, trying hard to control my growing anger. "You are, of course, my superior and I shall continue to obey all orders from on high and do my best to fulfil such obligations as are expected of one of my rank. I'll drive your tanks, drill your raw recruits, swallow your vile food but, my dear sir, my obligations end there. My previous achievements, as you put it, were part of my civilian life, which is no concern of yours so kindly keep your hands off. You seem to think your problem is solved just because you've come across some intellectual's file. I was indeed once a

pianist and you think an order form you is enough to make me take my hands from out a grease-covered engine, rinse them and be ready to give a recital. When I tell you, my dear sir, that I ceased all playing 'at a professional level', as you so learnedly put it, long ago you will realize what an absurd mistake you've made. Not only would I be incapable of transforming myself into a virtuoso at a moment's notice but I can't even bear the sight of a piano now. I've drawn a line under that part of my life once and for all."

I had let myself get carried away and gave a deep sigh of relief, which calmed me so that I could look him in the face again. I hadn't yet recovered from the effects of my heated speech and was astounded that it was the first time I had actually said I was giving it all up for good, which I had never had the courage to do before. Had I sunk so low as to have to put on a mask to be able to look myself in the face? Almost.

Visibly taken aback and put out by my attitude, the officer silently observed the struggle between my will and my lost illusions. He was to be, though I did not realize it then, the catalyst of my long-forgotten dreams. My benefactor remained silent as long as his rule book permitted in such cases and solemnly assured me that he fully understood. Then he got back on his cultural hobbyhorse and asked me a most pertinent question. It was the way he phrased it that amazed me.

"How long do you think you will need to restore the explosive power of your hands and burst asunder the hearts of we prisoners?" he asked, adopting a noble, artistic expression in line with what he hoped was my train of thought. I stood there daydreaming, oblivious of his presence and absurd pomposity. He was determined to do his utmost to get me to change my mind and was pleased to note he had touched on a sensitive spot. "What about having another try, even after so long?" I had never thought of it. I had a vague feeling the unease provoked by the idea restored me to life. I told him I needed time to consider the question. He agreed with a condescending smile, certain he had already won. That night as I lay on my bunk I tried over and over again to find the words to refuse to play ever again, which would mean a definitive break with the

music I loved so much. The same devil who acts on the mind of the politician starting out on a career with the best of intentions and who likewise keeps watch over the canonical knowledge of the irreproachable critic succeeded in keeping me awake all night, tempting me with all the golden opportunities that would be mine if only I would yield to temptation. Firstly, the creature said, you will be able to look yourself in the face again. Secondly, you will be helping your fellow soldiers no end. Thirdly, you might be offered a job and get out of being sent back to the Front. Fourthly, it is high time you started to think of your ambition and only your playing can help you achieve it. Fifthly, your life is at stake- as you are completely out of your element here and cannot hold out much longer. Sixthly, what have you got to lose?

Quite true, I thought in my somnolent state, what have I got to lose? The gents' gala evening is not for another ten days. Since they need me, I will only have to ask and they will relieve me of my duties and give me access to a piano in a quiet part of the barracks during that time. Or will they? As things stand, my hands are so hardened with manipulating shovels and pickaxes that they are better suited to driving a tank than playing a piano. Yet, despite all that has been imposed on them, there is nothing they would enjoy more. Ten days would perhaps be sufficient to loosen them up so as to be able to put together a few pieces buried deep in my memory. Liszt's *Second* or *Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody*, for instance – though as far as the latter is concerned, "You're letting yourself in for it," my conscience whispered. "To start with we must be more modest, Cziffra, my friend. You can't get through the final pages of the *Sixth Rhapsody* with fingers and wrists in that condition. It is just not possible to play multiple octaves with finger joints more used to repairing military equipment than to high precision virtuosity. You'd need ten months' practice, not twelve, and even then…"

I had reached a point where I was sick of the whole idea and lay in the dark on my awful camp bed brooding. I came to the conclusion that I was exaggerating the difficulties. "It's my grief at losing such a priceless treasure that's making me feel like this. Come on, I'll go and see

the Camp Commander," I said to myself, still half asleep, "and if he really needs me he's bound to give me a permit letting me off training for ten days before his great cultural evening. If he can find me some sort of piano as far away as possible form the noise of the barracks, I will have at least eight hours a day to get back at least some of my former suppleness and a fraction of my skill and prepare the *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* and perhaps even work out a few improvisations on a local folksong."

Full of good resolutions, I slept until dawn, at which point and to its great delight my sense of smell was alerted to the presence of a bowl of bacon soup, piping hot and full of pieces of excellent meat, which the Camp Commander had had especially made and brought me by his orderly. A nice thought. The fellow certainly knew what he was about. He knew that the way to a soldier's mind was via his stomach. This was yet another of many such experiences and I delightedly got down to my Gargantuan breakfast more convinced than ever of the truth of the old adage that any form of happiness beyond one's grasp is but a lure. The prospect of other meals like this increased my determination to transform myself into a concert pianist, at least for a while. That particular evening, the piano, the butt of my resentment if ever there was one, was more a means of filling my stomach than of helping men to understand the language of the gods. My mental equilibrium was restored, which was what mattered most considering the extent to which my sensibility had deteriorated over the past three years.

So no 'non-aggressive close combat training with use of blanks' for today. At crack of dawn I asked for and was granted an interview with the Major General, the highest-ranking officer in the camp. He was an educated man, a music lover and an amateur pianist (yet another!). I told him I had decided to take part in the great 'socio-cultural event', as he liked to call it. With a broad smile, he handed me a paper exempting me from all duties for a fortnight, which could be prolonged if necessary. He confirmed that some time during the day a piano would 'appear' for my exclusive use. "I don't know where we'll find one but we will," he said,

scratching his head pensively. “I’ll set my best scouts on the job. It shouldn’t pose any major problems; we’re near a fairly large town after all, aren’t we?” he asked, obviously trying to convince himself rather than reassure me. I nodded approvingly and said it was not for me to doubt his word. He burst out laughing, shook me by the hand and dismissed me. I returned to the yard, certain there would be no sign of a piano for at least three days. But the Major General was a very efficient man. In the course of the morning he had the houses in the nearby village searched and, after much discussion, managed to take possession of (sorry, ‘borrow’) a piano almost as old and dilapidated as its owner, a retired schoolmistress. So it was that shortly before midday a young soldier ran up to me, his face glowing with pride and pleasure at being the first to bring me the good news:

“The M-Major wants you to know that he’s found it,” he stammered, standing rigidly to attention. “Found what?” I replied gruffly. “Why, the little chest, that’s to say… cupboard,” he said hesitantly. “What’s that?” I asked in astonishment. “Yes, a little cupboard that you tap to make music. Sorry, I don’t know the word for it. It’s the first time I’ve seen one.” I chased him off, red with anger, shouting, “Get out of here, you stupid clod!”

“My God!” I thought, astounded, “to think that in a country which produced Liszt and Bartók there are still people who’ve never seen a piano in their lives! There’ll be a fine lot at the Major General’s social-cultural evening! Even after his military service that poor fellow is as oafish as the day he was born. Fancy confusing an upright piano with a chest! How daft can you get? I’ll really have to set to if I’m to restore the reputation of my cupboard in the eyes of that twit and others of his ilk,” I said to myself resignedly as I went off to take a look at the amazing chest which makes music – when you bang on it.

I did not have to look far. In one corner of the yard, six hefty soldiers looked as if they were scrimmaging for a ball. They sweated like oxen as they heaved the poor old upright in all directions. The instrument would have looked well in a brothel. It was smothered in

gilded bronze Muses, their languid arms and thighs wrapped around it, and looked as if it had been got up for a carnival parade.

The six privates saw to it that the removal was suitably staged, grunting like beasts of burden and swearing at the lascivious dream maidens enfolding the absurd coffer. They tottered under their burden as far as the ex-gymnasium where we were billeted. Just for a laugh, a few conscripts with nothing better to do followed closely behind. I thanked the perspiring privates and chucked the skivers out, having no wish to hear their army-style jokes. I wanted to be alone at this moment which I had looked forward to – and feared – for so long. During all those endless years of war, whether on manoeuvres or capering on horseback, crouching behind the porthole of a tank, stagnating down a mine or in a concentration camp, I had often felt an almost sensual desire to touch, caress or simply place my hands on a keyboard, no matter what its condition. At last I had achieved my ambition. There in front of me like a mirage the angelic vision of the chest-which-plays-when-you-bang-it stared at me defiantly. My hands trembled like those of an addict in need of a fix as I raised the varnished lid, which had been cunningly tempting me like Pandora's Box. One glance at the keys was enough to bring me down to earth again. A good third were depressed and it was quite impossible to restore them to the position intended by the maker of this daft allegory on wheels. This was worrying and I hurried to unbolt some of the Muses and take a look inside. What I found made me think of the young booby I had dared, in my anger, to call an ignorant peasant. He had been all too right. Though the piano looked seductive enough from the outside, it really was no more than a chest containing the story of my life.

I looked on the rubble of my career, the ruins of my former ambitions, through a mess of hammers and tangled, broken strings beneath a sounding board which was split down the middle.

"Perhaps it's all for the best," I thought, looking at my hands as calloused as any old soldier's, all blistered and cracked, not to speak of the scar across one palm, the result of a knife stroke during close combat

training. Miraculously, the deep gash had not had any serious consequences. There was a striking similarity between the state of my hands and that of the piano. Horses for courses. I cussedly turned up my nose at the obstacle ahead. Sick and tired of all the disappointments in my life, I remained glued to my chair for a while and then, rising to my feet, stood there motionless.

And that was the historic meeting with the object on which all my resentment was focussed. Like a robot, I fitted the cream-coloured Muses back on their stands and, thoroughly dejected, left the scene of my shattered illusions like a sleepwalker and took refuge in my hut. I sat on the edge of my camp bed not knowing where to hide my callous-covered paws and took a perverse pleasure in analysing my conflicting feelings. The cave-dwelling Tommy with his knotty fingers and ape-like habits was beginning to weary of sharing his body with the hyper-sensitive one-man band. Though cordially detesting one another from the depths of the same heart, each a projection of the other's *alter ego,* they were both past masters in the art of humiliating me. I was tired of the tyranny of two old blimps who could only follow orders and took turns at greedily lapping up the other's venom. The bumbling monologues addressed to the musician with his head in the clouds by the randy soldier, and vice versa, left me giddy. I decided I had had enough of agonizing and prepared to go and tell the Commandant that the old honky-tonk he had requisitioned would make excellent fuel for a barbecue or would, if he preferred, make a silk farm.

There was no other solution to the problem of the artistic doldrums in which I and the troops were becalmed. The incident was a sign from above that my activities as a dream-maker were over. The Major was of a very different opinion. His lynx-like eye had already spotted that his toadies were somewhat lacking in common sense. He took the view that culture was what remained when all else had been forgotten. For a start, the unfortunate crew which had dared bring back the 'canteen-on-wheels crawling with women in filthy postures' was confined to barracks for a week. He then selected twelve worthy warriors

who, judging from their CVs, were not the sort to confuse a cottage organ with a German concert grand. I went back downstairs feeling quite sprightly at regaining my freedom and was halted in my tracks by the stentorian voice of the Camp Commander bellowing in the yard: “This time, try not to come back with a kneading trough encrusted with bronze tarts before checking it’s a proper grand piano in working order! I want you back dead or alive with the squeeze-box by curfew! On your way!”

Once more, some vindictive shark had decided on my fate before I had had so much as time to ready myself. Because of a nonsensical piece of bravado on my part, I was obliged to keep my promise to transform my carter’s paws into a musician’s hands within ten days. There was no putting a spoke in the wheels of the diabolical machine I had set in motion.

That evening, at the agreed time, the lorry rolled up and a squadron of temporary Salvationists heaved out a stylish grand piano of manageable proportions. They seized hold of it and bore it triumphantly into the room, setting it beside the antiquated, mortally wounded instrument the Muses were still ostentatiously embracing. This time I simply looked the instrument over casually as if it had been an ox cart. To my amazement there was not a gaiter button missing, to quote the group wit.

They all slipped away, leaving me agonizing. By now it was late. Even so, I wanted to get down to work straight away. But how to avoid disturbing all my fellow soldiers sleeping the sleep of the just, dreaming of those bronze beauties? I knew plenty of makeshift tricks for muffling the sound of a tank engine going flat out, but to do that to a piano there and then without any tools right in the middle of a barracks full of men peacefully sleeping… The shifts of the nonchalant goddesses gave me an idea. I knew the Captain often used to take a tumble with the Colonel’s chambermaid. I crept into his room and commandeered a long, dainty shawl and a pair of chamois leather gloves: he must have caught the habit from the Germans as there were an incredible quantity: lambskin, suede, pigskin. The gent certainly looked after his mitts.

Bearing my booty, I went back to the piano, dismounted the keyboard and slipped the shawl beneath the strings in line with the hammers then put everything back into place. In this way, I had at my disposal a muting device, rough and ready to be sure but effective for all the keys as it did not prevent the hammers striking them. In this way I could play at any time of the day or night without being heard or disturbing anyone. The ultimate refinement was that I could just hear sufficiently to know what I was doing. Since then I have often used this rather primitive method, always with success.

Once that chore was over, I put on the chamois gloves and began playing cascades of scales. I hoped to be able to dispense with them by the end of the week so that my hands would have full control of the keyboard. I spent some time sizing up the extent of the damage to them and their weak points. I virtually had to start all over again from the beginning.

A distant church clock sounding four brought me back down to earth. So sleepy I could barely stand, I shut the piano lid and groped my way back to the 'isba' to get an hour or two's sleep before first bugle call. I slept fitfully until dawn, pursued by a nightmare in which I was battling against a sea monster, a sort of gluey, transparent octopus that I attempted to wrestle with. I was in such a sweat that my batman had to massage me with his well-practised slaps. In accordance with a prior agreement between the Camp Commander, who understood all us heroes who had lost touch with their libidos, and myself, I was exempted from all duties and training from then on. Knowing what I was in for over the coming ten days, I wished I could have invited him to dinner like Don Giovanni inviting the statue of the Commendatore he had killed. Meanwhile, to get over the restless night which had nearly cost me my food and drink, I went off to the kitchen to restore myself with a large bowl of hot stew full of bacon and runner beans. After this I returned to the gym to continue, or rather re-start, my crash course.

Apart from half-hour breaks for meals, I did nothing else. Not even eight to ten hours of daily practice could satisfy me. Often, once

dinner was over, I put my muting device in position and continued to mortify my fingers. At first, I always wore gloves. I worked exclusively on 'technique': every type of scale, thirds, octaves and leaps. It seemed wiser not to start on complex pieces until speed and accuracy had been fully mastered. It was not that I felt no urge to press ahead: like anyone else, I inwardly wished I knew it all already, but I was also apprehensive.

Thus the first five days accorded me went by. Whether discouraged by a blunder or encouraged by success, I made my hands labour like convicts. Some times a few pals, intrigued by my fanatical zeal, came quietly into the room, leaned against the wall and dreamily watched the harsh training of my ten slaves. A few lads, full of common sense, and aghast that anyone should drive himself so hard, profited from the odd short pause to make me the timid offer of a drink from a flask concealed in a uniform pocket: "Chief, you'd do better to take a swig than make yourself ill," they whispered. "Just a drop and you'll have wings on your fingers!"

That was precisely what I did not want. I know they thought I was like the madman banging his head with a hammer just to see how much better he felt when he stopped. Perhaps there was something of that about it. I never worked in gloves when they were there or they would have thought me unfit for service. I drove away the temptations of the bottle (far from unattractive under normal circumstances), shaking my head and getting on with my practice for the grand Battalion celebrations, while the bacchic revellers crept outside to slake their thirst wit a draught strong enough to have fuelled an Air Force plane. Aside from such occasional visits, I was able to work undisturbed.

My barfly pals spread the news of the David versus Goliath combat round the village. As for the inhabitants, "They watched new stars arise from the ocean depths to an unknown sky," to quote Heredia. They really did think of my deeds as a *tour de force* worthy of respect if only for the effort involved. I was getting along nicely. My hands were in good condition once more. They were subjected to hours of disciplinary torture – like telling the beads of an endless rosary – and this had almost

entirely restored that sixth sense which increases an interpreter's sensitivity, as it does the receptiveness of an audience. Mastery of the instrument was mine once again – something only those who have never experienced it can look upon with hypocritical incredulity. To give an example, I invented a very good exercise to test the autonomy of my hands: I superimposed the American and Russian national anthems, each in its own key. As one is in triple time and the other in quadruple, harmonisation was rather complicated with each hand playing a different melody. Perhaps that is why the two countries have never been able to fall into step.

The main part of the programme I had in mind was based on patriotic songs intermingled with folksongs and dances, all played as if by a mob of volunteers disguised as innocent maidens. There were also a few sketches richly seasoned with rustic wit, full of very obvious misunderstandings, relating in a very corny style the endless misfortunes of a soldier surrounded by enemy troops searching for his battalion.

The great day was approaching. Our barracks were beginning to look like a fairy tale garrison run by operetta soldiers doing their best to transform their quarters into a casino. Some of them helped things along by working from dawn till dusk cutting out fancy paper garlands which the dummies, hastily retrained as lace-makers, transformed into paper lanterns. As a final touch, they set their dainty fingers to painting them, with an expression of beatitude like monks engaged in illuminating manuscripts.

Another squadron, reputed for its initiative, was 'delegated to outdoor work with a view to conveyance' – in the broadest sense of the term. It was better not to ask too many questions about the articles 'under conveyance', whether they had been obtained by the might of the sword or, as was more likely, looted, appropriated, pilfered or, to put it bluntly, swiped. Once the invading forces had passed, the Liberation army, according to the principle of the biter bit, became more or less tacitly tolerated by the authorities, who had other things to do than spend their time checking up on the morality of soldiers a little over-

zealous in their 'requisitioning'. The piano I was using had probably belonged to one of those families which had been deported and sent to the gas chambers as soon as Hungary was forced into the position of ally of her former benevolent protector. There was, alas, no lack of abandoned homes full of easily removable objects. In short, our battalion, a close ally of the Red Army's and as popular as it was independent, quivered to the cultural cry of, "Halt! Who goes there?" However, no-one had as yet been authorized to take over the physical training room where, protected by special orders, I barricaded myself to put the final touches to my Herculean labours. Forty-eight hours before the Great Day, the valiant task force invaded the place jubilantly, cleaning and polishing everything in their path until the last bar of soap was used up, at which moment the exhausted saurians scuttled away from the battlefield, by now transformed into a recreation hall. The results were amazing: the rotting boards shone like a ballroom floor and were, in the opinion of the Commandant, decidedly cleaner than the canteen cutlery. The little windows shone so brightly that the intertwined rays of the spring sunshine caused young flies in search of a cool spot to shelter to fly smack into them. The more experienced knew where the missing panes were.

As I put the finishing touches to my transformation from a beggarly François Villon to an Omar Kayam, a new choir of angels arrived with orders to sandpaper a freshly cleaned section of wall over which spread the tentacles of a huge Swastika. They set to with all the perseverance of the Danaides. A square-shaped patch in the centre of the hated emblem was all that remained of the spot where the once obligatory official portrait had hung. It had no doubt depicted Admiral Horthy, the ruler of Hungary, congratulating a certain Austrian colonel with the wind in his sails after signing their notorious agreement.

Our celebrations were due to take place the next day. After two hours' hard work, the gravediggers of outmoded ideologies had come to the conclusion they would need three days to make the place presentable. Desperate ills call for desperate remedies. After consorting

with his mates, one off them went off, returning with a roll of blood-red tinfoil. He unrolled it on the floor and cut out a star slightly larger than the faint traces of the Swastika. His accomplices carefully stapled the new emblem over the now-despised old one. The brains behind the operation went off yet again, returning proudly with a portrait of the new arbiter of peace who, with his benevolent smile, was to dictate at Yalta a whole new distribution of power. I gazed perplexedly at the allegory of the joint rule of the new era. By force of circumstance, I had borne both emblems on my tank turrets and my lapels and my enthusiasm for the new decoration was muted almost to the point of indifference. What significance could this new emblem have for my life? The naturalist Buffon has written that the warbler symbolizes fickleness just as the turtledove symbolizes fidelity. Did this signal the dawn of a new life or was it no more than a trademark, merely bringing a change of shape and colour to my Witches' Sabbath of an existence?

The preparatory stage of my training was nearly over. To the greater joy of my at long last free hands, I had stopped mortifying them with Dervish-like exercises two days before. For the moment, I was restricting myself to Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* and the outline of improvisations on a popular tune which, I hoped, would provide a firework display at the appropriate moment. While the lads, good tummies that they were, put the final touches to their decorations, I slowly and resignedly shut the piano lid and watched them. The situation was urgent. Yet another team of strongmen, with a trace of alcohol-induced squint in their eyes, was waiting to carry the instrument off to its makeshift platform. The podium was a good example of Darwin's theory that nothing is lost or created, only transformed – even in politics. Despite the weight of the piano, the resourceful fellows who had constructed this masterpiece had found nothing better to support it than the metal pieces of the proud Swastika adorning the hall not long before and which had been recuperated form the dump. There stood the platform, on the ruins of the former household god and beneath the

enigmatic gaze of his successor, and from it I was to try and make the village folk forget that they had already had more than enough of both.

The fateful hour of my gala concert was fixed for ten o'clock the following morning. I was off duty so I decided to walk round the town as a reward for my ten days' solitary confinement. I had to get out of my head the absurd idea that having served under the banner of Charybdis I was now under Scylla's. It was a lovely day. The inhabitants were solemnly taking their daily stroll along the main street. I stared in amazement: it was like a vast floral float with the people dressed all in their finery, including many in multicoloured costumes.

As in all truly rural villages where the people live off the land, no-one paid any attention to city fashions. For the elderly they were too modernistic, for the young too costly. So everyone dressed according to what suited their age or situation. The girls had put on their organdie dresses and wore wooden clogs or even went bare-footed. They wore a few wild flowers in their hair rather than *patchouli*. The more mischievous made the young regimental priest blush scarlet by heaving deep sighs of longing every time they passed him. Men of the older generation proudly wore the old Hussars' uniform. It was an extraordinary one: despite its distant Turkish origins, it was still very popular and carried considerable prestige. It consisted of a brightly coloured frogged jacket, richly decorated with gold trimmings, with trousers and sometimes even silver-spurred boots to match. Compared with these splendid uniforms, real collector's items worn by toy soldiers, we looked as though we were dressed in second-rate mercenaries' rags. The women had eyes only for them. Even when it came to pleasing the eye, we were fighting the wrong war.

After ten days of enforced isolation, I drank in this multi-coloured procession bathed in the spring air. To complete the illusion of being transported back in time, there were even a few implacable old ladies who, disdaining all this fancy, were ostentatiously decked out in traditional folk dress with its innumerable petticoats, while on their white chignons they wore a variety of local coifs of heavily starched lace. Seated

on the stone benches along the street or near the thatched-roofed washhouse, they chatted quietly to the old men with their great handlebar or pointed moustaches, preened specially fir the occasion.

How good it was just to be able to stroll along with nothing in particular on one's mind. I breathed in the scents of spring, wafted on the playful breeze from the woods and fields round about. All of a sudden, I found myself surrounded by a gaggle of beauties: "Here's the drill sergeant who's killing off our boyfriends!" laughed one. "No, it isn't," said another nymph, He's a musician. He's the one-man-band. I know him – he's all right." "People say you know just how to handle it," added another lily-of-the-fields, a tow-haired blond. "Is it true you're going to give us a little something tomorrow?" "Give you what, sweetie?" I quipped, sensing she was a bit of a tease. "A piano with only three legs," the pretty girl replied, adding sympathetically, "The battalion could have found something a bit less shaky, couldn't it?" "Even the greatest beauty in the world can only give what she's got," I replied learnedly, trying hard to remain serious, as became my new role as 'man of the moment'. "I'm looking forward to it just the same," replied the pert charmer, looking me over admiringly as if I had been a prize bull at an agricultural show. "You don't often see an instructor in close-combat fighting change into an ivory-tickling dandy in his spare time, do you girls?"

They shrieked with laughter. I found the voices of these flighty huntresses soothing and, with all the wisdom of my twenty-odd years, declared that, deep down, the heart of this bloodthirsty mercenary was brimming over with noble feelings reserved for lovely washer-girls and shepherdesses. Darkness was falling. Regretfully, I was going to have to leave this pretty bunch of primroses with their forget-me-not-blue and sea-green eyes, and bodices more enticing than any service medal.

As I left, I realized that the village people were virtually all interrelated since, from great-great-grandfather down to the tiniest baby, they referred to each other as cousin, uncle, etc., etc.. In short, this great rural family had dressed up to the nines for the sole pleasure of holding a dress rehearsal for the next day's festivities. I said goodnight to my by

now unconditional admirers and went very grandly back to barracks, where a great plate of oat flakes, which was supposed to be my dinner, was awaiting me. Bucephalus himself would have found it difficult to digest that lot. The orderly on duty – the one I used to instruct in crawling through puddles – clicked his heels at my approach with all the respect due to one returning from the hunt bearing Hitler's hide in the form of a bedside rug.

"So tomorrow's the great day, chief," he said, standing rigidly to attention. I nodded solemnly, looking up at the sky like all great generals.

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It was five o'clock. The day looked like being a sunny one. I should have gone back to sleep or at least taken advantage of my last day of VIP treatment to laze in bed but four years of patriotic wanderings had rid my system of such decadent bourgeois habits.

I got up, washed quickly and hurried down to the canteen, where my pal the cook, who had a degree in maths, was already waiting for me with a huge plateful of salt pork. All that was needed to help it down was a few lentils. This great admirer of Newton, as well as of units, had an unfortunate habit of pouring huge quantities of salt and pepper into our grub while his thoughts were engaged on quadratic equations. He had as much enthusiasm for his saucepans as I for the innards of my tank when it needed a repair. In the course of our morning chats, he discovered I was a musician and, since he was a little batty, claimed we were kindred spirits since the same laws governed sound and mathematics. On this day of days, what weighty arguments could I oppose to such reasoning?

Speaking with my mouth full, I reminded him that the Emperor Claudius had been transported in all haste to the Senate by litter so that its members could decree without delay that life would be pointless if salt bacon did not exist. Stimulated by our discussion, I went off for a walk simply for the pleasure of not hearing that wretched bugle braying.

I walked on over hill and meadow for a good two hours. It was a glorious day. The countryside was so beautiful: the blue forget-me-nots were opening, the rising sun tinted the primroses mauve and a whole mass of wild flowers with long graceful stems were overflowing with heady sap so that it was hard to believe that just a few weeks previously whole divisions had been trampling this ground, fighting for it inch by inch. I felt relaxed and carefree.

I was lost in thought as though praying at some great pagan altar. When after some time I remembered the concert, the sun was high in the sky. I had to get back if I was not to be late. Far off in the distance, people all in their best were beginning to leave their houses. Young and old alike seemed very excited. I was soon to find out why.

I pushed my way through the crowd, slipped into the hall and went behind a curtain made out of tattered sacks which had contained the regiment's potato stocks. They now served as wings where the artists tried to control their stage fright by going over their lines and feeble jokes. The local bright spark was the worst affected of all. Normally a loudmouth, he was slumped in a corner, teeth chattering at the idea of having to welcome the locals in dialect on behalf of the regiment.

Suddenly all talk ceased. The Commanding Officer entered in full regalia with half a pound of sparkling medals hastily pinned on his chest. "He really must be in the soup to have got himself up like a Christmas tree so quickly," the man next to me whispered. Our dear, crestfallen chief must have felt like the Pope would have done had he learned that god was arriving in ten minutes to dine with him.

"Friends! Dear friends!" he said, trying to control his tremulous voice, "The Generalissimo of the Hungarian Army together with a Marshal of the Soviet General Staff and their retinue, on a tour of inspection, have just telegraphed a message announcing their wish to honour our cultural event with their presence. I'm counting on you," he concluded, more dead than alive, standing to attention with corpse-like rigidity.

The news spread like wildfire and made the artists even more nervous. Indeed, they would sooner have flirted with some jungle beauty than gone onstage. Other soldiers and officers, eager to be in the know, crowded backstage where we were already packed tight and could have done without their presence. There was no longer any question of starting on time: we had to wait for our illustrious guests. To fill in the time, certain kindly souls went round jollying up those among the artists who looked as if they might faint at the sight of so many glittering decorations.

As for me, a young officer (blast him!) felt it his duty to 'keep my morale up', as he put it. I could not remember ever meeting him before whereas he claimed to have known me for years from reading all about the incredible story of my entry into the Franz Liszt Academy, which had made headlines at the time. In typical officer's jargon, he made a long speech about excessive nervous tension draining an artist's concentration, plus other similar queer ideas, until the tense atmosphere started to affect me. He punctuated his Ciceronian oratory with double swigs from a largish bottle kept in his pocket and went on chatting blithely about paralysing stage fright. After I had refused his offer several times, this devil's disciple started to expatiate on the worst thing that could happen to a pianist: a memory lapse. After half an hour of this, I realized to my dismay that I had been drained of every drop of self-confidence. When this dratted lieutenant held out his bottle to me for the umpteenth time, his hand ever-shakier, I gave in and with my own trembling hand took a couple of reluctant sips. It was a mature walnut brandy at least ten years old and of exceptional quality. He asked me what I thought of it and reverently concurred, confessing with tears in his eyes that the delicate 'bouquet' of this essence was nothing less than the distillation of his dear mother's soul. It would profane her memory to refuse this nectar. He took back the object of his worship, held it up like the holy sacrament and made a further loving sacrifice to his mother's soul. I did not wish to appear boorish and offend such filial devotion and so took yet another dram. This time my paralysing anxiety evaporated

and a soothing warmth spread over me. From time to time I looked impassively through a hole in the curtain: the hall was full. We were only waiting for the High Priests so that the junketings could begin. Meanwhile, my lieutenant friend kept urging more of the anti-stage fright potion on me: “Nothing better to help you face a crowd,” he said with a rumble and a burp.

Soon, blissfully unaware, I was knocking back walnut liqueur like mother’s milk. By the time a speech welcoming our guests and singing the praises of our victory was over, my apparent Olympian calm was more a case of comatose sleep than loss of faculties. If only I had drunk just that much less, a last-minute return to consciousness, aided by fear, might have burnt up the excess alcohol in my system and restored some of my vitality. I was not drunk but my body was rigid and my eyelids were drooping. To crown it all, I was aware that though I could still walk straight the will to go onstage had evaporated. I stood staring ahead, sluggish and complacent. By then, both my back-slapping benefactor and I were downing, rather more often than just praising, the quintessence of his mother’s soul. Luckily, this did not continue too long. My benefactor, who had been paying homage since daybreak, suddenly dashed out at a speed I would have believed him capable of. Knocking over chairs and plunging through scenery, he staggered to the exit, sounding like a boiler on the point of exploding. That is where filial piety gets you, I thought, nodding sagely.

The euphoric lieutenant’s hassle with the props was perfectly visible to the audience, which reacted with a mixture of hilarity and indignation. A few zealous corporals blasted them with ‘shhs’ which I must have been alone in thinking it sounded like a distant murmur. My thoughts were becoming more and more muddled. I was on the point of going into hibernation once and for all when I became vaguely aware that someone was pulling me along and forcing me onstage before a vague mass whose indistinct murmur barely attained my nirvana.

Some impetus or other carried my rigid legs along. I looked out over the stalls, managing somehow or other to conceal my somnolence. I

stood quite still in the middle of the little platform staring blankly at the packed audience. Just below, in the first row, shone a line of glittering epaulettes while an assortment of jutting chests sparkled with myriad medals. I felt as welcome as a dog on a putting green. A shout would have gone unnoticed, yet I felt the rustle of silence round me like a shroud. Then my mind went quite blank, apart fro the odd hallucination. Quite despite myself, I found I was sitting on the stool. Before me was a huge black piano with an immaculately white keyboard dotted with little patches of shiny black shadow grinning at me.

My arms hung inert like a disjointed puppet's and seemed to weigh a ton. Besides which my fingers had grown so numb that they barely seemed to belong to me. At that precise moment an electric shock ran through my clouded brain. As I looked down, I realized that those generals with their distinguished phizzes and those peasant girls all dressed up in their operetta flounced skirts were my audience waiting for me to play something for them. I was quite incapable of concentrating on my hands to coordinate the complex movements and tried desperately to recall a mere fraction of the countless warhorses my brain and fingers had struggled so hard to master. I was obliged to concede that all that remained of those hours of self-communing and painstaking preparation was a pile of rubble. All I could do was finish off my recital – and I mean finish off. I did manage to disinter Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* from my memory. How I did it remains a mystery to this day.

After this odd performance, I left the podium in a daze. True, I did not stagger off, rather I moved like a sleepwalker. I do not even remember taking the customary bow. As soon as I had started, I had had the uneasy feeling that my playing was unspeakably awful. I could not say, though, to what extent such a mixed audience was aware of the desperate struggle being fought against my inner void. What exactly is 'quality'? For me, being qualified means being apt. On that dread day I failed lamentably on both counts at one and the same time. Even the little circle of rustic dilettantes had realized it. Of all the performances that morning, mine was received with, or rather penalized by, the feeblest

applause. I was not sufficiently intoxicated for it to be evident why my hands had lost the power to convey the magic which is normally one of the most notable features of my playing. I had taken such pains to restore it to its former level and now it had sunk lower than ever, if that was possible, and for such a ludicrous reason, depriving the audience of the spell that coherent playing might have cast over them. My last public concert had been at least five years ago and was no more than a faint memory. Most of what had happened in the meantime had put my original goal even further from my grasp. And this was the result of my first attempt to rise from the ashes!

As far as I can remember, the festivities ended round one o'clock in the afternoon. The audience dispersed and we were free till evening. As for me, as soon as my tribulations were over I hurried away from the jolly clique of celebrated nonentities and went straight to bed. I slept deeply, unperturbed by dreams, right through to the following morning. When I awoke, the events of the previous day came back to me with astonishing vividness. I was overcome with shame. I ruminated over my dishonour and humiliation with a feeling of opprobrium under which good lost its lustre and evil its ugliness. I broke down and wept unashamedly. For having put up with too much abuse, as well as for all my errors. Then there was the loneliness, my loneliness, the ghost of solitude that I had stoically been pretending to ignore over the past four years. So far I had managed to a greater or lesser extent to beware of underhand attacks on my only companion during this barren period of my life. From now on, this elemental power could dispose of me as it thought fit: I was throwing in the towel.

During all this time, the patrol was searching for me everywhere. I was discovered in my room lying in a faint on the floor with my arms outstretched. Later, when I had recovered somewhat, I began to worry about the sentiments of my superiors towards their drill sergeant. It turned out that no-one had noticed anything abnormal about my conduct.

The Camp Commander asked to see me but not even he, with his considerably broader intellectual horizons, made the slightest insinuation about my buffoonery. Perfectly straight-faced, he handed me a new list of warmongering exercises to be tried out on the trainees. In short, no disciplinary action was taken over my blunder. I got away with it, as they say. Time passed and the festivities were soon a distant memory – for everyone except me.

Memories of the fiasco gnawed at me inwardly like an agonizing wound and for years to come haunted my days and, worse, my nights. In fact, it took me a good twenty years of irreproachable professional life to forget it. No other ointment could have healed the wound and effaced the deep inner scar.

Meanwhile, for want of a better scapegoat, I took my bitter feelings out on those around me. I gave free rein to my baser instincts and soon became a regular slave driver. On the pretext of training the recruits, I took great pleasure in exhausting, breaking and martyrising them and even physically abusing the unfortunate recruits Fate threw in my path. I treated them arrogantly and harshly. Such an attitude was not healthy: I hated everything and everybody – and it goes without saying that the feeling was reciprocated. As my despotic cruelty worsened, my friends melted away. Cursing me under their breath, my subordinates gritted their teeth and crawled, ran and jumped without let-up and at dizzying speed. It was all the same to me. Their antipathy was, if anything, a relief. My superiors were not in the least bothered about my sadistic methods so long as the rebellious shirkers were transformed into disciplined cannon fodder without a hitch and, believe you me, there was never a word of protest.

During the time spent drilling a love of the fatherland into my brothers, I spent my nights walking till dawn, trying to rid myself of ‘that’ obsession. Those sleepless nights spent out of doors redoubled my severity, which had long lost its ability to surprise, the following day.

A succession of events enabled me to rid myself of the shadow haunting me. The war was nearing its end. Hungary was free of Nazi

Germany's unwelcome friendship. Certain economic deals had been imposed on us in addition to political protection, by no means to our advantage. The Great Reich was to have lasted a thousand years, so that when it collapsed, a new period of inflation set in. Certain cabarets in the neighbouring village opened up again as far as possible, in view of the curfew still in force, only to be invaded by local tipplers, who engaged in a little barter while waiting for the currency to become more stable so as to be able to quench their endless thirst. I longed to join them to avoid being alone with myself and organized my rake's progress accordingly. I did shift work, as they say.

Each day from dawn till dusk I yelled myself hoarse and reduced the joints and cartilages of my underlings to jelly. Once dinner was over, I went off to a bar to drink my fill. It was the sort of place where, during the week, the distinguished clientele enjoyed a hearty punch-up at closing time. On the whole, they were a pious lot: they rarely broke the rule of not using knives, except after High Mass on Sunday night. I sometimes joined in their jousting in honour of the knife, the secret emblem of 'Angel Court'. It was as good a way as any of passing the time. Once the circus games were over, it was rare if some kind soul did not invite me in to join him in a final drink, though I hardly needed one. "We can't just part like this," my host for the evening would say. I accepted gratefully, for although the bars closed at ten I did not have to be back until midnight and nothing in the world would have made me go back to quarters before I was certain I could at least knock back a liqueur. True, I only slept from midnight till four o'clock: quite enough for me to recuperate. After which I got up and went and did a few menial tasks for one or other of the early risers in the village, such as the blacksmith, until first bugle call. That was how I earned a little money to help me see my existence through rose-coloured spectacles each evening.

Weeks turned into months and I sank deeper and deeper into a life of drunkenness and violence. I was, not for the first time, wading through a swamp and losing touch with myself. My new acquaintances had a strong influence on me: I fought, swore and got drunk with all and

sundry. I found the company of these knights of decadence soothing. Just as I was about to sink without trace in a fury of self-destruction, the postal system started up again by fits and starts. Little by little, all my fellow soldiers got news of their families. I was staggering back one night, stinking of wine, after getting into a scrap with a braggart of a farmer I had had to chuck into a slurry pit to stop him altering my features with the aid of a broken bottle, when I found an envelope on my camp bed. I sobered up immediately on recognizing my wife's handwriting. Even so, when about to pick it up, my hands hesitated for some time as though it was no concern of theirs before eagerly grabbing the letter.

It was addressed to a certain "György Cziffra, pianist".

WHITE NIGHTS

The war had been over for more than a year yet my demobilization order, supposedly on its way, still had not arrived. So I went on with my tasks, fully absorbed in the 'sideral sublimation of a ludic concept, transcended by the visualization of daily virtuality.' This splendid euphemism designating military service fell from the lips of a witty colleague whose dream it was to become a psychiatrist.

For my part, not having attained such heights, I resolved to convince my superiors that I was not worthy of their paradise and should be demobbed. Things were not so simple. After all, does a soldier not exist in order to be killed, as Diderot said? I began half-heartedly filling in an incredible number of forms, which were returned several weeks later duly stamped, signed and countersigned by the whole hierarchy of a multitude of boards responsible for administering a country in utter political chaos, with a new manifesto ready and waiting.

It took three months of this little game until I at last won the day. In September 1946 my dear Camp Commander, in the presence of his entourage, solemnly handed me the official document attesting in Russian and Hungarian that I was demobilized. "Your duties to your fatherland are at an end," he boomed pompously, "until such time as we begin our crusade against the imperialist vermin of capitalism alongside the invincible Red Army."

I trembled somewhat at the thought of shortly being required for overtime but, warming to his subject, he was off again: "Thanks to the new proletarian army, the holy cause of the people will triumph in the firmament of equality." "If there are any proletariats left," I said to myself, thinking of the siege of Leningrad and the Hiroshima bomb. I wondered as I listened to his farewell *spiel* with all the outward signs of utter bliss whether his Sermon on the Mount was the quintessence of his new doctrine, destined for his underlings, or whether it was provoked by the fear of finding himself out of a job.

Before handing me the precious document, he tried one more time to convince me of the enormity of my error in quitting the army just as it had been restructured, thus losing the chance of a fine future with the almost certain promise of promotion. I listened in respectful silence and thanked him deeply for the board and lodging, assuring him of the great sorrow I felt at having to live henceforth without his benevolent protection, whereupon I was allowed to take my leave. I could not afford any civilian gear and the old trunk containing my things must have gone astray somewhere between Russia and Czechoslovakia. I decided to return home in uniform.

I daydreamed as the old train jolted along the rickety track towards Budapest. “Half-price for children and soldiers,” mumbled a ticket-collector as venerable as the rolling-stock, pocketing my last banknote. “The only way of getting a free train ride is to help yourself to one,” I thought, remembering my escapade two years earlier. “It’s half fare today but from now on it’ll be full price everywhere. How am I going to pay?”

We arrived at the terminus. I went out into the street and stood there leaning against a lamppost. I watched in amazement the flow of traffic, the excited crowd, the mass of people flooding the tree-lined avenues and boulevards. The dense, cheeky foliage seemed to be mocking the warm sun on that mild autumn day. The whole city was coming alive again as its buildings and monuments, mutilated by missiles, were restored. Though still bandaging its wounds, Budapest exhaled a gentle welcome. The pavements were littered as far as the eye could see with scattered heaps of rubble so that the dense, motley crowd wove its way along the roadways among every type of vehicle imaginable, from ox carts to trams. Cafés and restaurants swarmed with customers, despite their dilapidated state. Inflation had been halted. There was no doubt about it: despite the devastation left behind by various armies, here the war was no more than an unpleasant memory.

It was lunchtime.

A series of imprudent draughts wafted down the station corridors the smell of sausages being fried for hungry passengers at stalls on the platforms. I was starving after the six-hour journey and, my nostrils a-quiver at the smell of black pudding and chitterlings cooking, searched my uniform pockets. I did not even have the price of a bus ticket for the fifteen-mile journey home.

Putting a brave face on things, I started off on my final march. My legs bore me along faster and faster, as though drawn by a strong magnet, like a boat pitching and tossing on its way back to harbour. I had written to tell my family of my arrival some time before. Had they got my letter? It was unlikely. How I would have loved to be welcomed by the tender touch of arms expressing their joy at our reunion and to have felt the looks of love and affection on my face. It was not to be.

I came down to earth when, to my disappointment, a neighbour told me that my wife and her mother (with whom she was lodging) were employed in a steelworks loading wagons with railway sleepers and roof frame parts. They left home early each morning and came home in the late evening, leaving my son in the care of a distant cousin – in exchange for payment. “That’s how it is now. Everyone scrapes a living as best he can,” concluded the neighbour. I would soon be learning that to my cost.

I did not know where my son was being kept so in the meantime went off and picked a huge bunch of wildflowers for my wife in a meadow by the roadside before coming back to our neglected little garden, where I walked up and down the paths. Time passed desperately slowly. I was tired out and my stomach complained more and more bitterly at having been laid off for nearly two days. I stretched out in the long grass, watching the great clouds dozing up above. Soon I was doing as much myself.

A warm liquid flowing over my face awoke me: my wife was kneeling beside me, softly weeping for joy as she watched me sleep. She had waited, prayed, hoped for this moment for so long that she gave free rein to her emotion for herself alone before waking me gently from my unending nightmare.

Our first days at home were spent discovering each other again. Even the dear old upright piano, a reminder and eternal companion of my childhood, seemed pleased at being touched once more. I did not recognize my boy: he was already a young gentleman, getting on for four. The first time he saw me, he ran and hid behind his granny. He had a horror of uniforms, not without reason. For at least ten days, we did not leave each other for a second. Our joy at being together was inexpressible. Our admirable granny spent days on end in the kitchen, scraping the barrel in order to make royal dishes imbued with her generosity and affection. The peaceful, happy days we had waited for so long flowed by.

After a fortnight of this life of luxury, I decided to go back on the warpath and try to find some sort of job amongst the many more or less attractive ones available and 'earn a living by pacifying the sovereign people'. There was no opening for me in classical music. I did not know anyone who could help and anyway the country was far from being in a position to afford the luxury of a regular, independent musical life. This was the period when Stalin was reported to have said in a committee meeting that concerts of great music were a way of passing the time while the ink on newly signed treaties was drying. While he was waiting to sign the Warsaw pact the radio broadcast popular music. Luckily, this so-called light music was not sectarian. A good musician, inventive and knowledgeable, was a godsend to a night club. With this in mind, and following in my father's footsteps, I walked across Budapest, making for the notorious secret place known as 'Moonlighters' Market' which, from time immemorial, had been a meeting point for every kind of unemployed musician. I knew the place well, having spent some time there after leaving the Academy, for reasons very similar to the present ones. It was in a little square dotted with clumps of stunted trees. Groups of unemployed musicians stood about chatting. Night and day there were enough of them to form a whole symphony orchestra. The owners of fashionable cafés, procurers from bas of ill-repute and strong-arm types from dens of various kinds of vice came to bargain and pick up in all

possible haste a drummer, double-bass player, violinist or even on occasion a whole gypsy band. The most sought after species was, naturally, the pianist.

Thank goodness I had not taken up the tuba! I mingled with the groups standing in a great circle, chatting and waiting for some Prince Charming to turn up and make a miraculous offer. I strolled up and down, wondering if the luck which had enabled me to overcome all sorts of hazards during my childhood and had prevented me from returning from the Festival of Heroism with a missing arm, a wooden leg or a glass eye would also get me a job. Before I could finish imploring my protector, I saw moving in the middle of the circle a sort of well-dressed Ahasuerus with a pock-marked face. To my delight, he wanted a pianist. Five of us raised our hands at his appeal. Beginning at the other end of the circle, he whispered something in my first colleague's ear. He apparently thought it over, looked at his hands and shook his head. "That's bad luck," I thought, annoyed. "Of the remaining three, there's bound to be one who'll accept, whatever the conditions. I was wrong: the others raised their arms in a gesture of helplessness. There was hope yet: it would soon be my turn. I wondered what hitch had made the others refuse. There must have been one because it was unusual for a musician to turn down a job – indeed, they would normally have acted like the one who said he was quite prepared to sail across the Danube on his double bass to find work.

When he got to me, the strange fellow asked me in a sot, slightly sceptical voice: "Can you improvise on absolutely anything?" I nodded. "Even in the dark?" he went on, lowering his voice. "What dark?" I asked, astonished. "Pitch dark, my dear fellow," he whispered mysteriously. "A very intimate cabaret frequented by regulars and important persons who wish to remain anonymous. It has just re-opened in the city centre." As he observed my reactions, he started using jargon: "We need a pianist who can cope with anything. He must do psychedelic improvisations to create an…shall we say 'aphrodisiac' tension to provoke passion in hypersensitive people, not to speak of special types of friendship."

The odd creature recited his proposition like a small ad. I shook my head as I contemplated my worn shoes. So I would have to sit in the dark because the honourable customers wanted to redouble their pleasure by picking a partner of either sex in a darkness such as would have made it difficult for Oedipus to recognize his mum. In short, my colleagues had not turned down the work, which was almost certainly well-paid, for moral reasons but because none of them felt up to playing, much less improvising, without the slightest visibility. In such conditions, though the risk of wrong notes, not to speak of real blunders, was far greater, I felt I could overcome the handicap. What was more, this was not the moment for displays of temperament or being difficult. Taking my silence for indignation, the fellow imagined I was examining my conscience, somewhat shaken by talk of such morally reprehensible debauchery. Sensing that here was a rare bird ready to overlook his orgiastic black mass in return for a few coins, he said jokingly, “There’s no need to stand on ceremony. After all, Absolon slept with his father’s wives, Judah with his daughter-in-law Ammon with his sister and Lot with his daughters.” “Well done,” I muttered. “You seem to be well-informed about your ancestors.” “Splendid, then,” said the learned sodomite, holding out his hand, which I rather hesitantly shook. “I’m counting on you.”

Plunged in thought, I started to walk back home again since there was no public transport in our isolated area. I was still in uniform and wondered where I could borrow a dark suit to look respectable for the job. As I walked along with the crowd, I smiled at my needless concern about my apparel. After all, it was not of the slightest importance since the operative words were ‘total darkness’. I could in fact have fulfilled my task dressed in a monk’s habit or a kilt. The thought of the job hardly filled me with enthusiasm but I preferred that to my wife having to carry heavy railway sleepers. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I hadn’t yet learnt to control the reflexes of an underground fighter constantly on the alert and leapt to one side, spinning round ready to pounce on a possible aggressor. The distinguished pimp of a few

minutes earlier stared at my display in astonishment. “How nice to be young,” he murmured admiringly. Why had he come running after me?

“I forgot to tell you. Evening dress is obligatory.” “What use is that in the dark?” “Dark or not,” he insisted, “you must be correctly dressed. If you’ve only got a dinner jacket I’ll turn a blind eye.” “I’m very sorry. I’m just back from a short military expedition and have no change of clothes. Nor do I know anyone to borrow so much as a lounge suit from for this evening.” He gazed incredulously at my somewhat worn uniform. “Do you mean, young man, that those are your best clothes?” my employer smirked like a gluttonous she-cat. “Indeed they are,” I said gloomily. “Come back to my place. I’m sure we can reach an understanding with a little give-and-take on your part,” the old *beau* cooed in his syrupy voice.

I took a step backwards to escape the giddying scent of musk. “Listen here, my dear man,” I answered sharply, “I don’t like charity and especially not yours. I had a good tailor once until the Germans turned him into a lampshade. Naturally, if they had chosen you instead I’d be better dressed. Since you’re afraid my appearance might disturb your seminarists in their search for the Absolute, I suggest you look for a more suitable fop to liven up your saturnalia.” I left him standing rooted to the spot and went off home. And that was the end of my first attempt to return to the paramusical world.

The next day I wore out a bit more shoe leather on the road into town. Rather than return to ‘Moonlighters’ Market’, I wandered about the seedy districts where a bargain pianist’s apparel was the last thing to worry an innkeeper more mindful of the profits of his watering-trough than his wife’s First Communion certificate. After a week of constant refusals, I was at last engaged in an establishment known as ‘The Danaids’ Barrel’. Its name was well merited for certain customers were so assiduous that when they did finally leave it was to return home for their daily attack of *delirium tremens*. The shrewder among them made sure it coincided with the bar’s closing day. The owner, less interested in my uniform than in the smooth running of his bar, took me on as a pianist

on the express condition that if need be I would lend him a hand between tunes in throwing out such trouble-makers as were more mindful of their flick knives than their beer mugs. Thus I was enthroned as official bodyguard and minstrel.

Within a few days I knew most of the Balkan drinking songs by heart. From nine at night till five in the morning, the drink flowed ceaselessly. Enveloped in a cloud of smoke, cavernous voices called for their favourite songs until I joined in on the piano or outside, as stipulated in my contract. The job was pretty hard-going for they wanted me to drink with them at least once in the course of an evening. There were at least fifty of them and I tried to refuse but my employer did not see things in the same light and summoned me to put an end to my anti-drink campaign as it was rather out of place in 'The Danaids' Barrel'. The job was a good one and if I wanted to keep it I would have to drink, so I did. We all drank: we toasted those who had died on the Front, those who had got away alive, the immortal genius of Berlioz and his celebrated *Hungarian March* and then drank simply to forget the days were passing, each different from the last.

I had been working for about a month, earning a living in that hellish vapour and indifferent to what went on. This worried me all the more as I was getting accustomed to it. Things could not go on like this. The proprietor, his body shapeless with drinking, was the fortunate knight of a splendid creature whose company he much appreciated. He hardly ever saw her as the charmer lived in a flat nearby, locked in by her lover, who was not prepared to share this prize specimen with anyone else. Naturally, not even such close surveillance could stop the perfidious Messalina from having a well-filled love life. The inevitable occurred.

One night on the stroke of eleven, a brigade of police burst in, pushing aside the good honest drunks lining the bar, hiccupping contentedly as they savoured their umpteenth drink. My employer had been irritable and morose for some time. When he saw the armed police making for him he panicked, leapt over the bar, knocking over clusters of

unsteady customers, and made for the rear exit. He was caught in a trice and beaten and handcuffed before being pushed into the police van. As he was going out, the last policeman turned to me where I was standing by the piano and, noticing my uniform, spoke as if to all and sundry: "Get yourself another impresario to play for: that one will soon be smoking his last cigarette!"

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"He turned the gas tap on to send his mistress and her lover to sleep then hacked them to pieces with an axe." I said nothing. I silently shut the piano lid and slipped away from the joyous, bewildered dimwits. It had been no wish of mine to find myself back on the streets. I had been able to save enough money in a month to get myself some evening attire and so set off job hunting once more, as soon as I had my new outfit.

After ten days I finally came across a small tearoom which was ready to take me on trial. The place was undoubtedly more civilized and my duties were as light as the little cakes served there. The proprietress, a charming little old lady with a doll-like face topped by a bun entwined with silver threads, trotted back and forth with armfuls of cream cakes and *cafés liégeois*. In her long dress, of an indefinable colour which shimmered like watered silk, she resembled a fairy straight out of Hans Christian Andersen. She brought down from the attic a pile of ancient melodies tied together with blue and pink silk ribbon. These I sight-read, sipping the China tea which was my reward.

My transcendental improvisations made my name among the gourmets who came virtually every day to feast on chocolate éclairs or rum babas. They lingered delightedly over them to the accompaniment of a drop of Mozart, a spot of Chopin and a good dose of Cziffra-style Viennese music played, as was my habit, without the least preparation on my part.

One day as I left the tearoom (where I only had to put in an appearance from three to seven p.m.) I decided to do a little prospecting before going back home as a means of hearing the sort of music being played in the big cabaret dance halls where orchestras of up to forty

foreign musicians were all the rage in Budapest High Society. There was a real vogue for American jazz at that time, in Hungary as elsewhere, and the great stars in this field reigned over the nightclubs where they performed. I tiptoed in and found the orchestra rehearsing a real hell-for-leather arrangement full of sudden surprises and silences, filled in by a dazzling drummer and a double bass player, who had just the right flair to set off the solos which other groups of black instrumentalists of even more astounding virtuosity played. It was a truly top-level group which could, or so it seemed to me, rival the bands of Paul Whiteman or Duke Ellington, reputed even in Budapest. Standing a little back from the platform, on a level with the podium of the conductor (who was probably the composer of the stunning piece he was rehearsing) a superb grand piano stood shining in the shadows. Greatly intrigued, I crept up to it and sat down to listen and watch the players at work, which was quite as fascinating. They were blinded by spotlights so did not know I was there. I was thinking I would soon have to be leaving as discreetly as possible when the conductor suddenly stopped and a glaring light filled the room, illuminating the tiniest nook. I braced myself to be thrown out with all the honours due to a gatecrasher, instead of which the conductor turned to me smiling broadly and said in English, “Do you like this music?” I nodded.

“Are you a jazzman?” “Perhaps a little,” I replied, desperately trying to remember the fragments of English I had picked up from the Tarzan films I had seen as a child in their original versions, without subtitles, in suburban cinemas. “Do you want to join in a little jam session with my orchestra?” “I hope so. With pleasure,” I replied, my eyes shining with delight. “But if you want, before I play you something alone for you and your friends.” “Please do,” he said invitingly.

Although he was perfectly agreeable, there was something slightly condescending about his manner, which made me want to show him that the Yankees did not necessarily have the monopoly of good jazz. I wanted to show him a little of what I was capable of so that he would know that we descendants of Attila knew more than how to tenderize

steaks by putting them under our saddles. In fifteen minutes I whizzed through all the latest hits such as *Tiger Rag*, immortalized by Louis Armstrong, or the moving *Summertime* from *Porgy and Bess*, adapting them all to the spicy rhythms then in vogue – ragtime, bebop, boogie-woogie – all at the gallop and with foxtrots besides. Just as I was coming to the end of my display, the percussionist, who must have had a metronome for a heart, caught me in full flight and then the whole orchestra came in with a bang, like a firecracker going off, replaying the arrangement just rehearsed then giving way to let me do my improvisations as in a game of ping-pong. We had a great time for at least half an hour. Then we finished our schoolboy escapade once and for all, ending in a wild *stretto*. One by one the musicians stopped rather like in Haydn's *Farewell Symphony* and, on my own again, I ended our improvised *divertissement*, after a few pyrotechnics, on a querying tritone.

The conductor came up to me, his arms open wide in a gesture of friendship and admiration, followed by his beaming musicians. He spoke to me in American as he was not sure whether we spoke German or Russian in Hungary. As he covered the last few yards separating us, he made a sign to an ebony-black soloist, who understood me remarkably well since he had lived with a Hungarian family in Texas when he was a boy. He acted as interpreter and we were able to chat in a more relaxed manner. "It's only the second time in twenty-five years as a musician that I've heard anything so fantastic," he said. "I know of only one pianist in the States who can improvise like you: Art Tatum. And if his playing is prodigious, yours is miraculous. Wherever did you learn to play like that?"

I did not want to tell the same old story about my studies so just answered vaguely, "Oh, self-made man…" "How do you make out with those?" he said, looking at my hands with a trace of compassion, like someone who has just found the Golden Calf in a field in Outer Mongolia. "The best of a bad job," I answered with a bitter laugh. "OK," he said, obviously used to making rapid decisions. "We're in Budapest for another

two months. The proprietor certainly wouldn't hire you because we're already costing him more than he can afford. I'd rather employ you myself as co-star during our stay at, say, twenty-five dollars an evening as a start. If you can manage to get across the Demarkation Line," he went on, lowering his voice, "you'll get more wherever you go. Will that suit you?"

Would it suit me? I would be earning as much in a week as I had in a month up till then, thanks to this unhoped-for opportunity. Only the true jazz aficionado knows what it means to stretch himself to the limit, and thanks to this chance meeting I would be drinking at the same spring as my new friends at the people's university. The transcendental association of imagination and constrained reflexes would enrich my technique. From then on it would be possible for my fingers and inspiration to enter into communion at the drop of a hat. Such first-class training would stretch me to the full and broaden my horizons.

Those two months went by like a dream. Then the band had to leave for other engagements in Vienna, Paris and Milan. As a way of thanking them for admitting me to their group, we stayed together after their final concert and at their request I played classical works interspersed with paraphrases, reminiscences and improvisations until dawn. They were so enthralled that, like the German officers on the Front, they forgot to drink. They gave me an armful of cartons of American cigarettes and bars of chocolate, then the leader shook hands and said by way of a farewell: "Dear George, you're the leading pianist now and if you ever manage to escape to the West, others will say the same. You've nothing to fear from Horowitz or the likes of him. Good luck, old boy!"

The challenge was flattering but an impossible one to take up. The only and certainly greatest Hungarian pianist to become a legend in his own lifetime was Franz Liszt. To achieve that, he had given recitals till he was thirty-five and only then was he universally acclaimed in all the European capitals from London to Moscow via the Balkans. I knew my place was up there with the greatest of my generation but they were

travelling freely all over the world, striving to attain the fame of my great compatriot, which has remained unequalled. Everything was in their favour: talent, influential contacts, social graces and the freedom to go where they wished. I had nothing apart from my reputation as a circus performer and the meagre consolation that I might, with luck, have been born in Paris. True, for both my music hall and classical colleagues, who found the grapes a little sour, my playing had more to do with my social origins than with artistry. Only the rich can borrow. Even so, such nonsense worked in my favour in more ways than One. Everyone in Budapest knew of my staggering improvisations, which went from jazz, the fandango and the czardas to the passodoble. Small violin ensembles wanted me because the way I filled out a Strauss waltz gave the impression there were ten of them rather than two. So did jazz bands because my playing had such swing and punch, gypsy bands because of my uniquely exciting way with Hungarian dances and the most unlikely establishments because I only had to sit at the piano for the place to fill to overflowing. Audiences were ecstatic: they had a versatile jukebox to dance to, an acrobat and conjuror to mystify it and a soloist who was a whole band in himself. My keyboard mastery was the result of constant use of a whole range of techniques and systematic improvising increased this mastery tenfold. With time, the unorthodox schooling Fate had imposed on me radically affected my playing until it became unique. Professionals and amateurs spent whole evenings watching me, unable to fathom how I achieved such results as it was not possible to class me with such leading virtuosi as Busoni and Rachmaninov since I used three-quarters of the keyboard much of the time. The richness of the sound I produced reflected my inner vitality. Muscle and feeling worked in harmony without getting trapped in the minutiae of a highly developed technique.

I thus became the most sought-after pianist in the city: bars, nightclubs and cabarets all wanted me. People formed queues before the places where I was to play. Sometimes I began the day with some ‘cold meat’ – a term used by hastily recruited moonlighting musicians for

important funerals – then between midday and three o'clock I would do a high-class wedding or a restaurant of standing. I ended up dividing the nights between several lucrative places, spending two hours or so at each – running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, so to speak. One such, called 'The Quaver', was as its name implies just opposite the Liszt Academy, whose main entrance gave access to the large adjoining concert hall. A large proportion of the audience, with only the street to cross, slipped in for a quick drink and more than once forgot to go back for the rest of the concert. Most of them were budding pianists or on the point of finishing their studies. They began to wonder as they listened whether I did not have supernatural dealings with the founder of the establishment opposite. As always, music lovers of every kind were carried away by my transcriptions which, in their structure as much as in their style, gave the impression of several pianos in action at once. The proprietor, who had every reason to be pleased, put up a poster on the door which read (approximately) as follows: "Why be swindled elsewhere? Come to my place: the pianists over the road have only ten fingers like Cziffra, but he plays for three."

Because of the nightly tournaments I fought against myself, I was able to perfect my tricks constantly and they were far from arousing "respectful piety with no scholastic solecisms or mystic jargon", as Renan put it. Undoubtedly, I still had plenty to learn about the timeless, sacrosanct traditions governing the ideal interpretation of the great piano works. I often rushed through them blindly, feeling hampered by them. So as not to let my newly acquired mastery slip – and even my detractors called it panoramic – I was virtually obliged to make up arrangements to lubricate the mechanism properly, a mechanism of which it could be said that my brain was the engineer and my hands the test pilots. This extra power was only required for my own tailor-made improvisations and was based on my particular form of dexterity. For a long time, it was the surest means of making a living. Whereas the majority of other pianists wore their fingers to the bone on exercises, hoping to overcome the problems which prevented them playing the thornier pieces in the

repertory, my problem was that I had to oblige myself to play the very passages they were unable to. By playing the great virtuoso pieces of the Romantic repertory in my own manner, I divided the profession. I became its Antichrist due to my improvisations, which multiplied the difficulties ten times over.

At the same time, news of my outstanding skill had spread to all the nightspots in the capital, to such an extent that I could play whatever I wanted. My evenings became vast non-stop marathons, beginning with the classical-romantic repertory in a programme of Chopin's *Etudes* and Liszt's *Transcendental Studies*, while in the early hours of the morning I played my own improvisations. The places where I performed were packed out and those who knew my itinerary followed me form nightclub to bar not caring where they drank so long as they could sit dreamily round the piano, sighing to the surge of a Wagner paraphrase or the evocation of the flight of a bumble bee.

This strange life continued for weeks, then months, then years. My reputation for being everywhere at once confounded the experts. Famous musicians on tour in Budapest spent the night drinking champagne in the cabaret where I was playing, encouraging me to have a drink in the hope of squeezing a few secrets out of me. They left well and truly drunk, convinced the piano had been tampered with. Once these birds of passage had gone, I continued like a nightingale to encourage insomniac moths to enjoy their wine, women and song.

On the way to catch the early morning train back home, I sometimes stopped before a Morris column where the programmes of subscription concerts were displayed, appearances by rising foreign pianists, for instance. As I tried in the half light to make out the names of the soloists, now famous for the most part, I would just for a second shut my eyes, smarting from lack of sleep, and imagine my own name on the list. I had not yet given up all hope of playing on a concert platform some day. 'The sun shines on everyone', as the saying goes. There were at this time frequent exchanges of artists between the Soviet Union and Hungary in the name of their new friendship and they appeared in the

concert halls of various Socialist countries. Such artistic comings and goings were, needless to say, duly regulated and supervised by central government bureaucracy. It was better than sitting at home twiddling one's thumbs or having to resort to such expedients as I did. The carrot dangling on the end of the string was, of course, the same for all state-employed musicians: a concert in a Western capital one day – perhaps. Back home, I sat sipping my large bowl of strong coffee to clear my mind of the night's vapours, thinking of the remote possibility of my name appearing on the list of the chosen few if ever someone in high office should chance to remember it.

I always did four hours' practice before going to bed, learning new works and making plans in case some member of the State Council Bureau in a state of grace should phone to ask me to give a recital, even in the provinces. I really was so fed up with living like an outsider swimming against the tide that I would have been grateful for an engagement in a 'kolkhoz' village hall. Alas, I had every reason to believe I was not on that list which, for an artist living under the iron rule of the new regime, boiled down to being purely and simply banned. It was most unlikely that the new academic high-ups had heard of me. Aside from financiers and foreigners, no-one else could have afforded the sort of places I played in 'to sooth the savage breast'. It neither surprised nor made me jealous to learn that Soviet pianists had monopolized the major concert halls of Hungary. They were superior in numbers and often in quality. They could travel from Berlin to Moscow, whereas I could have been content with far less. Sad to say, I knew of only two instruments in those countries: the whip and the knout.

Obediently, I went back on night shift as my only hope of salvation and continued my wanderings from bar to nightclubs. I returned with great reluctance to liven up 'The Quaver'. Sometimes a celebrated artist from one of the Socialist countries would come along with some friends at the end of his concert to down a bottle of vodka in homage to music. One evening, at the request of one of their number, I improvised a sort of symphonic poem based on the most popular themes

of the Russian 'Mighty Handful'. He, like the others, was too staggered to drink. When it was over, he came over to me and said in very basic Hungarian: "Whatever are you doing in this out-of-the-way bazaar? Now, if you were in our country…"

"Don't worry," I replied, raising my glass to him. "To tell the truth, a Nazi general and an American capitalist have already asked the same rather awkward question and I must say I didn't know how to answer. It's no use looking under the piano: it hasn't been tampered with, though my horoscope probably has."

That encounter came as something of a shock and as I returned home somewhat the worse for drink I walked through the narrow streets in the old part of the town, their time-worn cobblestones shining in the dawn. It had taken my colleague less than two minutes to get from the concert hall to 'The Quaver', with only the street to cross, while I in twenty years had not once managed to make the journey in the opposite direction. What was the reason behind it all? As I searched among the confused mass of memories filling my mind, I wondered what law I had transgressed to be thus condemned to mark time. I remember that before leaving to face the disaster dear Adolf had been preparing for us, I had been to see my teacher who was lying in bed seriously ill. On his bedside table, next to a signed portrait of Franz Liszt, the radio happened to be playing an extract from *Les Préludes*, chosen by German HQ as its signature tune before each victory was announced. "They've even managed to defile that," he said, by way of a greeting. "I know you've stayed behind to be with your family but you shouldn't have. You shouldn't be playing in bars in this country," he added, quietly closing the volume of Corneille he kept beside him.

This was the first time anyone had actually advised me to leave the country. Others had done well to get out while the going was good. The second time was when an SS general said much the same thing somewhere out in the wilds of Russia. Then it was an imperialist businessman and finally, one great man driving out another, a high-up Russian statesman, who told me I had been born in the wrong place. It

was as if word had got round to the four men, entangled in their convictions and separated by the barriers of opposing ideologies, that they were to appear in my life with the regularity of railway signals just to remind me of this. They were right. All I got out of leaving 'Angel Court' for the Academy was a diploma for 'Moonlighters' Market', a qualification which, besides according me the right to be killed driving a tank and to receive a posthumous Military Cross, prepared me for strumming in the country's taverns to help the sovereign people forget it was the eve of New Socialism. That was the sum total of my artistic past. I was overcome with an immense, irrepressible feeling of lassitude. Lost on thought, I suddenly realized it was daylight and all that I was doing was marinating in a so-called temporary situation which had lasted from birth, aside from a few short-lived moments of hope.

Like a good-natured plough horse plodding blindly back to its stable, I had covered three quarters of the fifteen-odd miles between my place of work and home on foot. Faceless people were hurrying out of shabby dilapidated little houses decorated with patches of plaster. Most of them worked like my wife at the steelworks an hour's walk away. As I reached the alley leading to our house, I thought I recognized her light, almost dancing walk fading away in the distance. I ran after the silhouette and it was indeed her. With a bundle under one arm containing her meagre lunch and dressed in an old raincoat, she was off to load the wagons. As I drew level, I took her by the hand and we went part of the way together. Suddenly, she stopped and we stood looking at one another, reading each other's thoughts like a book. My throat tightened with emotion: there was so much I wanted to say I did not know where to begin. There was no need to: she had already understood. Taking my hand in hers, she simply said, "There's nothing for you here. Why don't we go *there*?"

At the beginning of 1950, we decided to flee the ceaseless flow of setbacks. As everyone knows, after the war the frontiers of numerous countries were altered by the vanquishers, especially in the East. Hungary had been part of the Socialist block for nearly five years and

was surrounded by friendly new People's Democracies, thanks to the USSR. In conformity with orders received, the frontier with Austria was closed since it had had the cheek to choose to remain independent. Though freed from Nazi tyranny by the Soviet forces, they had left soon after the Yalta conference, thus becoming the first bastion of the West in our part of Europe.

Regrettably, differences between Uncle Sam's view of life and the Father of the People's had by then reached stalemate. The builders of the New Socialism had to be protected from the mirages of Capitalism otherwise a great many might have been tempted to put into practice their newly acquired knowledge of *Das Kapital*. There was no question of trying to obtain a passport to leave the country legally. At that time, the simple fact of stating that one wished to visit one of those detested countries revealed the ordinary mortal as an enemy of the regime and the ever-vigilant authorities made it a point of honour to set such persons' brains back on the straight and narrow.

Well aware of this, we resolved to try and cross the frontier in the most anonymous manner possible. Our plans were utopian. The frontier had been closed long ago and control of the demarcation line was even tighter and more sophisticated.

The fact was that our chances of getting to the other side of no-man's-land alive were virtually nil. Apart from zombies and flying saucers, few could boast of having found their way through this labyrinth. The chosen one who had by some miracle managed to avoid the high tension wires hidden under the dead leaves could, at best, step on a sunken alarm plate, setting off sirens and bells, which were the signal for a horde of guard dogs to charge on their prey, which they had been specially trained to do without barking. He might also fall into a trap concealed by moss with some fifty steel spikes at the bottom or step on one of the mines skilfully set at random especially for any diehards. Most of no-man's-land had been cleared of trees so the guards, perched in towers hidden by such trees as remained, could shoot with maximum efficiency. From dusk till dawn, powerful spotlights surmounted by

machine guns swept the terrain ceaselessly even to the depths of the rabbit burrows, whose inhabitants, along with the birds, had fled long ago.

The demarcation line was our aim. We avoided being torn apart by one or other of the booby traps thanks to the sly neighbour of the peasants with whom we stayed the night before the three of us were to take the great plunge. He suddenly remembered after spotting us that the police paid a good price for denouncing a runaway. This was something we had not reckoned on.

The gentlemen were waiting for us as soon as we got up the next morning. It was useless trying to explain that we had come to place a wreath on the tomb of a distant cousin: we were caught like rats in a trap. We were not dealing with the city police but with the faithful servants of State Security. We were straightway accused of being spies in the pay of the Imperialists. Not even my son, not yet eight, was spared. We were separated and taken in handcuffs to an old building which with its numerous cellars and basements must have been used by the Gestapo, judging by the Gothic script of the still visible notices. To encourage us to speak freely under interrogation, we were all beaten up by several brutes while, in a nearby cell, a down-at-heel clerk typed out a full confession which it only remained for us to sign and add 'read and freely approved'.

They lost no time over our case. It is incredible how a few kicks and well-aimed rifle butt blows can tame even the most rebellious. The arrogant club-swingers were puffed up with a sense of impunity. There was nothing surprising about that: just like their predecessors within the same walls, they were invested with supreme power, the symbol of a state within the State. At the time, not even the first generation Communists were spared by this clique, despite their unswerving loyalty.

Still half-stunned, I did not realize that my wife and son had been taken away, each to a separate, unknown destination. After the torturers had gone I tried to stand up. Despite the pain I was in, I managed it by holding onto the edge of a desk by the wall at the other

end of the room. Standing up at last, handcuffed, my face swollen and covered in spit, I waited for events to take their course. Full of shame and remorse that my loved ones should have got caught up in all this, I knew my defiance of the guards would cost me dear so that I was ready for anything except the encounter which was to lead to my downfall.

The door opposite opened and an incredibly gaunt officer approached, devouring me with his squinting eyes as if trying to hypnotize me. He was accompanied by a sentinel, armed from head to foot, who took up position by the door, vaguely pointing his machine gun at me in case it should take my fancy to play at being Spartacus. The officer, very self-assured, came closer and, almost pressing his body against mine, stared hard at me, examining my features. After a short silence he said, smiling slyly, “You remember me, don’t you? It looks as though I’m going to have to refresh your feeble memory a little,” he went on, with a grimace that revealed the yellow fangs at the back of his almost lipless mouth, hissing out the final syllables. Still fixing his eyes on me, he gestured to his guardian angel. His flippancy increased as did his mocking questions. “Are you sure you haven’t seen me somewhere before, little György?” he insisted, delighting in his banter.

Suddenly, wearying of his game, he sat down casually on a corner of the desk and without warning began to whistle softly between his teeth – a strange, piercing tune which was vaguely familiar. Perhaps I had already seen that oddly sunken face somewhere before. All at once, to my astonishment, I recognized the wretched pedlar who had haunted my dreams at ‘Angel Court’ – the notorious deacon reeking of sulphur – the man who had brought about my admission to the Liszt Academy in such odd circumstances and who had predicted an extraordinary career for me. And now here I was standing hand-cuffed before my judge, overcome with shame and fatigue. He saw from my crestfallen look that I recognized him. He stopped whistling and stood up: “Do you recognize me now, ‘maître’? ” he asked again, this tie without the least trace of sarcasm. “I told you we’d meet again. Do you remember how I helped you because of your priceless gift? And now, look at you! You came from the

lowest depths, got everything you wanted and yet you preferred to betray and abandon our country. You wanted to desert and join the enemy so that others could profit from what is ours by right. You're no more than a deserter, a traitor, a turncoat."

His tone changed without warning and he became delirious, foaming at the mouth with rage. He yelled in my face: "You'll see! We'll break you till you crawl in the dust!" He was quite out of breath and pressed the bell button beside him on the desk. The guard was back in the doorway in a flash. The oracle of ill-omen blinked and with a small downward gesture of his thumb signalled to him to take me away.

I was led down an endless succession of spiral staircases to a huge cellar at least twenty yards below ground level, where water trickled down the walls. There in the dim light were pallid people of all ages hunched on a cracked concrete slab through which seeped water from an underground stream. They were all there for the same reason and in the same state. Bleeding, all hope gone, they stared vacantly ahead, brooding on the consequences of their rashness.

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After a year in jail, my wife went to slave in a saw mill – as a special favour since no-one else would employ her, knowing as they did the reason for her imprisonment. After two years of medical treatment, my son, who had been at death's door, was returned to his family. He needed every drop of their devotion to recover.

I was set free a year and a half after my wife. Probably it was considered I had had enough time to make amends. In my last year of detention I was admitted to a disciplinary camp where I worked transporting blocks of stone. For ten hours, day after day, I lugged ready-prepared sixty-kilo blocks between the ground floor and the sixth floor of a university under construction, of which those blocks were to become the staircase. This new task so strained the muscles of my wrists that I had to wear leather wristbands to prevent my overworked joints from

swelling. Despite these problems, I became such a worthy worker that on my release I was handed a certificate attesting to my qualities as a transporter of stone blocks and as a first-class builder. The building firm immediately offered to re-employ me as foreman with, as a bonus, a brand-new bicycle for Christmas and the opportunity to spend forty-eight hours at home each month – the ultimate reward. I turned it down.

As soon as I was freed I went back home. A new diploma and an eight-stone walking skeleton were all I took with me as an apology for our escapade.

1953 was drawing to a close. We had not seen each other for about three years and I had not so much as touched a piano for even longer.

ALL OR NOTHING

How could my character have remained unaffected by such an upheaval in my existence? I was like an animal at bay, its instincts deeply perturbed and living in fear of its life. My reactions were a disconcerting mixture of contradictions. I was at once tender and brutal, considerate and boorish, dreamy yet cold-hearted, the beloved child and the black sheep of musicians, a fervent advocate of brotherhood among men and a retiring misanthrope, an aggressive libertarian bowing to authority, a strict moralist staggering into seedy bars, affectionate and unsociable, a sensitive soul under the influence of his bear-like moods. The piano was, of course, the main cause of this personality split. No longer was it a lost love, a threatened ideal: I had given it up as a bad job and drawn the necessary conclusions. I had become more modest. The piano existed on a lower plane as a means of earning a living. Fate continued to dog me. Try as I might to consider the problem from all sides and put it in perspective, even taking up my nightly activities again was out of the question: after just a few hours, the joints of my fingers and wrists swelled.

While in prison, I had been accorded the privilege of transporting blocks of stone. My muscles, stretched to the limit and hardened, could no longer withstand hours of daily practice. Not even my will-power was what it had been. In order that my fingers, swollen by work of a very different nature, could gradually grow used to the piano again, I was obliged to continue wearing wristbands to hold my joints in place and lessen the pain. I was to wear these accessories for quite a time to come.

After leaving prison, my hands needed four months' physiotherapy before I could go into Budapest to start looking for work all over again. After about ten days, I managed to find a fairly stable job and relieved my wife of her stevedore's duties at the factory for the second time. Like a well-trained beast of burden, I was soon back in harness and my hands ran up and down all sorts of keyboards in

restaurants, taverns and bars. One evening, two men came in for a drink in the bar where I had just gone on duty. Their concentration, touched with disbelief, increased as they listened to my multiform fancies which, in their apparent complexity, must have contrasted strangely with the doleful indifference with which I trotted them out. They gradually drew closer to the piano and observed my playing as if wanting to be sure there were only ten fingers producing such an avalanche of notes. At the time, I thought they were drinking pals of the more distinguished variety or music lovers in search of strong emotions. As soon as I had finished, they congratulated me warmly.

These were no ordinary night birds in the swarming fauna of the city. One was a piano professor at the Liszt Academy[7]; his friend held a high position at the Ministry for Cultural Affairs.

"We've been following you around for some while," said the professor, "because we're most intrigued by your past record and even more by your playing. You seem to be the chosen one who can draw Ulysses' bow according to the rules, leaving other would-be pianists to attempt to stretch it." He went on, looking a trifle sceptical, "Your playing is amazing. More than any other musician, you deserve to be playing in the best concerts. You're on the right path so I've decided to help you straight away. Go and see my friend here at his office at the Ministry as soon as possible. You won't regret it."

A few days later, I took his advice. What could such high-ups have of importance to say to an obscure bar pianist just out of prison and – supreme affront – without a card stamped by the party Cultural Department, our benevolent Father?

The visiting card of the cultural attaché led to even more magical happenings. As soon as I entered the Ministry, I was treated like a guest of honour. In the ancient building, a proud, mummified reminder of the Baroque style, liveried ushers went silently before me, addressing me as 'comrade' in the third person, with deferential zeal. One gets used to it. We first went through a maze of lofty corridors and splendidly decorated

[7] This was György Ferenczy

rooms – ceilings with grimy frescoes from which hung magnificent crystal chandeliers whose iridescent light was reflected by the intricately decorated doors set in walls inlaid with exotic wood. The whole place was an immense piece of marquetry made up of an ingenious variety of mosaics. It was like visiting a museum of the *Ancien Régime.* Everything had remained in place: paintings by the great masters and carpets from the Orient. Its crowning glory was the office of my new protector, a huge ceremonial room full of ghosts of the past. I was shown into this great hall, redolent of the former greatness of the aristocracy.

Still under the antique charm of these reminders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, I greeted the group of stern-looking young men, who seemed to be expecting me, with a feeble, "Good morning, sirs…I mean, comrades." They at once made it clear that 'comrade' was a civilian honour which had to be merited and was not awarded to any outsider. "Yes, indeed, Mr Cziffra," said the top official I had already met, with a charming smile, "times have changed. We have asked you to come as a result of all the letters we've been getting about you for some time now from people from all levels of society who are regulars of the nightclubs where you play. I must say it is the first time I've ever seen public opinion – your public – expressing its feelings so strongly. I realized while listening to you the other evening that your talent could even transform a mass of people who had come with the sole object of drinking into a truly disciplined audience."

Suddenly, he started groping for his words: "As you know, no newly installed…regime is free from errors…I mean…" "That it so happens I'm the error in question," I said gently to encourage him to come to the point. But he was already continuing, pretending not to have heard: "What I mean is we wish to efface the wrongs done to you by… restoring the rights and privileges due to your outstanding talent. That is to say that from now on we would ask you to drop your present activities because we'd like you to have three months in which to prepare for the first series of recitals and then concerts, which will be commissioned by the State through us. You will, of course, receive a salary. If the first part

of your career goes as we wish, everything leads us to believe that the government will one day, encouraged by your success in democratic countries, accord you its trust by delegating you to play…officially…in the great cities of the West as one of the brightest jewels in the crown of our nation's artistic and musical life, rendered free and independent by Socialism."

How gallantly he summed up my life. The 'everything leads us to believe' was simply sublime. And yet hadn't I been waiting to hear those very words for years?

At last my life of ups and downs, with every peak plunging me into yet another blind valley, was over. After countless hesitations, I was going to be able to break with the ghetto laws of pleasure spots whether frequented by rich or poor, exclusive clubs, dives to which one is gradually lured by the promise of a cushy job. Without realizing it, one sinks so low as to lose any scruples about being mediocre.

Somehow or other, throughout this period of my life, nearly everything I did or neglected to do, my hesitations as much as irreparable acts, seemed to be imposed on me by some inescapable fatality. My existence was, for reasons beyond my control, presided over by the patron saint of beggars rather than Saint Cecilia. Much time was lost, to be sure, but I do not feel on looking back that I wasted any. I prefer to leave my friends and critics to decide whether some magic spell was the cause of my tribulations or whether I had undergone a trial by fire. Whatever the answer, I felt at last that life was beginning all over again, even if my artistic resurrection was still some way off. The members of the commission seemed moved to see me living like a *muezzin* condemned to silence behind the bars of a *moucharabiel*, my body afire, my mind in hibernation. They did not question me about my past, with the tacit implication that I had been a helpless victim. Being the plaything of destiny and nearly thirty years of having to teach myself had confirmed me in my Manichean fatalism. On the way to the Ministry, I had thought of the proverb 'Once bitten twice shy'. As I left, I remembered the Islamic saying 'God can see a black ant on a black

stone'. This was the first time I had been treated as a *persona grata* with a slight chance of finding my niche in Paradise, aided by my ten fingers. Even if it was only a seat in the gallery, it was one of the nicest gifts life had given me since I left 'Angel Court'.

In celebration of my redeployment, I decided once and for all to give up the 'flashy' playing which had got me out of many a tight spot. The toughest was yet to come. After sparring for nearly twenty-five years with every possible type of music, I had three months to make a fresh start, which was not long. Naturally, other such experiences had put me on my guard and endowed me with a mastery of my instrument which led quite a few dogmatic critics to consider it impossible to see the wood of my interpretations for the trees. My undertaking was doubly difficult. Not only did I have to reconvert, discipline and readapt everything I had learnt entirely for classical music – and all in ninety days – but I had to convince our friends the aesthetes and other intellectual 'gurus', disguised as knowledgeable critics, for whom respect for the score was more important than bringing a work to life, that my interpretations were valid. Personally, with very few exceptions, I have never come across a critic able to do other than condemn as a means of showing off his piranha-like erudition – unless the prey is too big for him, in which case he is quick to acclaim the victor. These carrion beetles of the mind, and they are legion, are easily recognized by their boundless pride and pathetic intellect.

I have nothing against criticism as such – indeed, it is indispensable. Far from being marginal, it could, and should, be for the public good, on two conditions: firstly, there should be only professional critics, that is to say performing artists who know what they are talking about, and secondly, whatever the judgement, it should be constructive both as regards the work and the performance.

Ideally, one would like to see the return of the buccaneering spirit which, to my mind, gave the artistic movements of the Romantic period their impetus. In those blissful times, accounts of the first concerts given in Paris by an unknown young musician by the name of

Frédéric Chopin were not signed by some dilettante 'monsieur Croche' but by Franz Liszt. When a very discouraged Ravel was sent back the manuscript of his *First Quartet* heavily cut by a certain Dubois, about whom the only thing great was his opinion of himself, Debussy at once despatched a note: "In the name of the gods of music and in mine, do not alter a note!" Such exceptional people, and many others, did not just withdraw into a comfortable cocoon and it is to them that Western music owes much of its cultural heritage. Above all, they were potential professionals capable not only of understanding but, in the case of musicians, playing or even conducting the works of their peers. They knew exactly what they were talking about and wrote well-informed criticism to guide public taste. In our troubled times, I trust that some day in the not so distant future, artists will work together to enlighten audiences saturated with nonsense.

Anyway, it is well known that each species of animal has its parasite: the crocodile never swallows the little bird which flutters in its half-open jaws; the fiercest shark tolerates the minute remora. Any form of artistic creation has its second-rate conscientious objectors operating on a part time basis. It is in the order of things. As Diderot wrote: "Rhetoric is to eloquence what theory is to practice or poetics to poetry."

This golden rule applies to all types of artistic expression, just as it does to any coherent interpretation. The figures and flowers of rhetoric governing the particular form, content, style and syntax of each composer were precisely what I had to disinter from my memory after so many years. My fingers had to be retrained until they adapted automatically to Chopin's *rubato*, which is not always ideally suited to Schumann. Debussy's piano works must be played as if the fingers are barely touching the keys. The same goes for Ravel, except that the sound must always be crystalline whereas his moods require a subtle mixture of both as well as requiring a pinch of gold dust and a touch of slightly *fin-de-siècle* perfume to add to the charm of a music as refined as it is volatile. One must know too that the controlled or feverish energy of most great Romantic composers has nothing to do wild the wild pulse

underlying the benign exterior of certain of Liszt's works. It is a power which has to be carefully controlled. There are just as many traps to avoid and taboos to respect in Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Bartók if one's playing is not to run the risk of sounding monotonous and lacking in substance, relegated from the rank of the language of the Gods to that of music therapy, with its emotional power limited to putting the audience in a good mood as they commune in the boredom distilled by a false idol.

All these thoughts filled my mind as I left the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, hurrying home to tell everyone the great news. When it came down to it, my wandering beggar's existence, during which I had had to put up with misunderstandings and jibes as I was chased from pillar to post, had taught me the basics of the supremely complex profession of being an artist: how to maintain one's distance and separate mind from feeling. And how to reason using formal logic while being capable of reasoning in a more flexible manner? My new idea was to superpose the two forms of thought, according to the principle that harmonious reasoning is like a straight line decorated with spirals, rather like the inside of the barrel of a cannon. Not so long before, when I had been cleaning the one on my tank, Schumann's celebrated saying had come to mind. After hearing Liszt's playing, he defined the ideal interpreter as being like 'cannons beneath a bed of flowers'.[8] This was perhaps the most difficult challenge I had ever had to meet: to convey through my playing, with so little time to go, a radical transformation of myself, becoming once more what I should never have ceased to be. Pianistically speaking, I was probably at the height of my powers but as a human being I was physically and morally exhausted.

It was for this reason that despite my job I had felt like proclaiming to the people on the board as they speechified and pontificated on my account, blithely crossing out any past 'errors' to keep me in their debt for life, the equivalent of the profession of faith painted by the demonstrators of May 468 on the pedestal of Richelieu's statue in

[8] This was in fact said about Chopin's 'Polonaises'.

front of the Sorbonne: “Que la crasse des masses lasses masse sur vos faces des potasses!” (‘May the filth of the weary masses cover your sonofabitch faces!’). Luckily for my family, being the type who never finds a retort at the right moment, I said nothing. At that time one did not attempt to be witty in those circles and such truths were not to be spoken out loud, even with the ‘-asse’ rhyme.

It was no use deluding myself or hoping that time would be on my side. Having made an appointment with myself in extreme old age, when minor faults are caricatured and great virtues become sublime, the hour of truth could not be delayed any longer. I was in a tight corner: new rivals, surprised by my unusual technique, stared at my hands with a look of concupiscence, as the priests say. I had to show them in record time that I could do more than merely upset the hierarchy of values in music halls. In trying not to lose sight of the fact that the aims of music can and must be more than just a synthesis of certain skills, I had returned to the study of ‘this world of sights and dreams upon which passion feeds’ – as Michelet so nicely put it. In this domain, where music has a certain evocative power, reality is transcended and emits rays of which the public is aware. In order to become the master of such power without which, as far as I am concerned, the interpreter can be dispensed with, I had to search within myself for some indefinable tremor to show I still had a boy’s sensitivity. Only this, channelled by solid common sense, would gain me access to and enable me to transmit emotions with all the atavistic force of self-love, a passion of which all others are but derivatives. The undertaking was as difficult as the quest for the Holy Grail. Music is a demanding mistress and becoming her servant is like taking orders.

I had a vague feeling that this first chance to redeem myself might also be my last, for Destiny offers the opportunity to everyone at some time or another, whether he be an optimist or a pessimist. All those who try to live life to the full and who, by force of circumstance, know what it means to be catapulted from the crest of a wave to the trough realize that in order to achieve one’s ambitions it is better to side with the

optimists, for whom a calamity is an opportunity, as opposed to the pessimists, who suffer from its backlash. This sort of blind assumption is not a solution but it helps.

Again, like the sea surging into cavities, music, my Promised Land, came to my rescue on life's swell, full of reefs and breakers on which I had been putting my life at stake. This lucky combination of circumstances would permit me to chance my all, for I was to set about achieving my childhood dream with a man's experience, awakening in my audience an intense receptiveness and physical and mental exaltation which we call, for want of a better term, emotion. Certainly, I must have been naïve to attempt in three months to climb even a few of the rungs of a Jacob's ladder of such dimensions. But those were the rules of the game. From the mass of problems already evoked, I had ninety days in which to extract the essence, that is to say an alchemist's instinct and knowledge, which alone can miraculously transform a coded message into a living language. To do this I needed clear, precise information.

Far from helping me in my task, the ambiguity of some of my guides perturbed me considerably. Bach probably considered the meaning of his works so evident that he left no indications of nuance or even tempo. Chopin was far more painstaking: his least intention is made clear in his manuscripts, though he still told his pupils and admirers, including at least one supreme virtuoso, that the essence of emotion is to be found 'behind the notes'. Stravinsky, another master of strong emotions, who put an end to Impressionism with *The Rite of Spring*, said not so long ago that music by definition cannot and should not express anything. I had to rid myself of these contradictory opinions and restore to each of these giants his own particular aesthetics. According to the experts, the only monument built by human hand visible from the moon is the Great Wall of China. The comparison may seem exaggerated, nevertheless after two months of non-stop work my aims were of the same order as they had been in the past. I will not go any further into those days and nights of constant practice. Even Dante, the great expert on Hell, forgot to sing of the souls of doubting interpreters languishing in

the Purgatory of a Witches' Sabbath, longing to hear beautiful music again. Incertitude leads to a lack of self-confidence, as I know all too well. I tried to rid myself of the disease but the more I struggled to put my ideas in order, the less sure of myself I became. My fingers were activated by the spirits of Nostradamus and Pythagorus, but if clairvoyance and logic do not work together harmoniously, how can the subconscious select and co-ordinate the various creative stages? Deprived of this artistic seismograph, my conceptions and interpretations were afflicted by doubt, and nothing is sadder than an artist seeking to do too much or too little. To conclude, during this short period I discovered I was unable to follow the sacrosanct rules of harmonious interpretation until I sometimes wondered whether my hands might not be better employed punching railway tickets. I had doubts about the limpidity of my feelings as much as about my manner of communicating them.

How I envied my peers who, under highly qualified teachers, had acquired such assurance! They were way ahead of me but then hadn't I had an exceptionally early training in improvisation? Indeed, I had quite simply come up against an obstacle which may bring out the talents in some whereas others come to grief on it: stage fright. *A priori* it is absurd: what is there to fear from an audience which has taken the trouble to come along and has paid good money to be enraptured? It is certain that for an artist with something to say, unveiling every tremor of his sensitivity to what he may hope will be a large audience is both a blessing and an agonizing situation. That is unless he is swept along, not to say transfigured, by the power of his vision, glowing with passion until he embodies it. Stage fright is a sign of self-doubt and of technical or spiritual deficiencies. It has nothing to do with the nervous tension caused by a sense of responsibility and a desire not to disappoint. For artists in the grip of this age-old fear, the simple act of going onstage is an undoubted feat of courage. Therein lies the paradox of the interpreter's role as well as his fragility. Any attempt, however brief, to suspend time for an expectant audience is in itself a challenge. If he is paralysed by stage fright, how can he convey all the light and shade of

his soul? At this stage, devotion is not enough. Besides a rock-solid technique, the artist must surpass himself to obtain the extra concentration needed to inspire connoisseurs and uneducated alike, and this is something few players can do. All this is a form of suffering. In the world of music, the means of moving others at will are virtually unlimited.

It is one thing to be in possession of an affidavit from the Muses and quite another to be their poet. It has always been my desire to belong to the chosen few more concerned by the brightness of the flame they bear than by the astonishment it provokes. Am I on the right track? Only the future will tell. There is nothing of the dreamer about me. In every society, the *status quo* of a musician is akin to a politician's. If some of them have not sold their souls it is because nobody wanted to buy them. I should like to have followed the path of enlightenment in a different manner. Alas, my whole life up until that moment had been placed under the sign of 'If you want peace, prepare for war.'

In 1954, I was no longer the brilliant pupil. I slaved away fanatically at my upright. My daily task consisted of searching, finding, rejecting, starting again from zero – not to speak of catching up with my colleagues – which meant recovering a lot of ground. Only much later did I have the idea of scraping together enough money to see if it was possible to follow in the footsteps of Liszt, Abbé Liszt, scolded and mitred by the gods, so aggressively and deplorably mauled by later generations of prize fighters set on breaking records rather than seeking true understanding. According to the rulers of the great country which so wanted to protect mine, five-year plans and healthiness were the key to success. There was still so far to go.

My sudden disappearance from the night life of the city was much talked about. A number of distinguished philistines were waiting foe me in their artistic circles, assuring me of their 'assiduous benevolence', inwardly removing the last three syllables from the adjective. It was only now that I realized how great my shortcomings were.

I decided to get advice on how to prevent all the assiduous practice sounding too obvious – to no avail. The teachers I saw did not really understand my questions. As for me, I failed to understand the cultural jargon they used as a form of miracle tonic, smacking more of Romantic languor than practical advice. Our conversations took on epic proportions: when I came away, my mind was as confused as a marshalling yard. Here's an example:

Q: How should one go about finding a definite message in X's works?

A: By analysing his contradictions on a structural level.

Q: I see. But how do I actually achieve this?

A: Find yourself a niche.

Q: Of course. And how about conveying it to the audience?

A: Obvious. You just have to structure your emotions. Anyone can see that for himself.

There have always been music teachers who enjoy chatting in this way. Nowadays, every advocate of the leisure civilisation, from plumber to computer engineer, manipulates this sort of language with ease and I still cannot understand it. True aristocrats have become a rarity. The local upper-crust proliferates and divides art up among itself. Laughter is said to be the domination of a feeling of revolt. I was so bold as to laugh in the austere faces of my advisers and cast aside the loneliness felt by the long-distance runner, his head full of tunes. I went back to working on my own and read widely. Since I had not followed the primrose path, I was by turns showered with flattery and reviled. I remain convinced that as regards art, the difference between the noble and the villain is neither a question of ethnics or even ethics. So how was one to attain the heights?

Because I looked tough and spoke my mind, my talent –third-rate according to some – was gone through with a toothcomb by the custodians of truth until it really did seem as if it was lacking in substance. And to think I had nearly been born in France, the eternal crossroads of the arts, where even the cannons are a source of wit.

Wasn't it Louis XIV who had had engraved on his: 'The final argument of kings'?

I had decided to work on my hands. I began by moderating, refining and perfecting the essential relationship in my playing between intuition and technique: a long, deliberate disordering of all the senses – the two-edged weapon the Parnassians wisely put aside, while Rimbaud used it for *Le Bateau Ivre*[9] For musicians, such work is as reckless as defusing a bomb, for in tampering with what may be called my desire to communicate I risked devitalizing and even destroying the relationship between cause and effect which subjects power, discovery, rhythm and dazzling colours to inspiration. This prevented me confusing the repression of anything subversive with unbridled, destructive energy. The discovery led me from the well-worn paths whilst opening up new horizons.

It wasn't until then that I realized just how much of an outsider I was. If I wasn't to miss the boat, I would have to work on my own from now on. Going to a teacher would have been hypocritical. I knew my technique inside out. At the heart of the matter lay the problem of integrating my own particular sensibility and technical mastery. Doubtless any teacher or famous player would have been delighted to meet a kindred spirit, like the 'master' who knows his teaching will live on in the spiritual son he had given up looking for. Despite the faithfulness of my imitation, I would never have had the heart to tell him that it was more a desire for accuracy than conviction which permitted me to fit into the mould of his thought and so become his *alter ego,* rather like a mirror of which the silvering is worn so that it reconstitutes an images rather than reflects it.

What is music? By definition it is the art of combining sounds in accordance with certain rules. One advantage of this axiom is that beyond its platitude lies a basic truth. It omits the invisible cause which leads to sacrifice, adoration and the need for a sixth sense, the subconscious, which transmits inspiration. If religion is absent, any

[9] 'The Drunken Boat'.

philosophy of music becomes arid atheism close to nihilism. The millennium has already arrived for those artists who know the way; only those who have gone astray think the world is adrift. The paradox is that fundamentally there is no such thing as subject matter or objective facts in music, which is why musicians are tightrope walkers daydreaming in a sleeping world.

They have a special place in society. Why? Because even if they live in the heart of a community in which there is a place for everything, they are supposed to possess some form of esoteric intuition, the only thing on this earth which has no fixed market value. This faculty is the inalienable sceptre of every great artist. The heart of an instrumentalist – not he who has been called but he who has been chosen – must beat in time to the composer's and the listener's. To eliminate any gratuitous effects, or even coasting on automatic pilot, any musician tries to make use of the power of mind over matter.

The miracle is like a magnificent hi-fi system which performs only on a human scale. The composer is the source, the audience a highly sensitive speaker membrane and the artist amplifies the whole magnetic field. Music draws its substance and powers of communication from all these before fusing into unending sound whose radiance ennobles and reveals the hidden meaning of every note. When all is said and done, as regards music, the desire to be Caesar or nothing is far less dangerous than might be thought. The choice of euphony as a source of pleasure or emotion ensures that any artist is bound to become one or the other. The hardest thing is trying not to make the wrong choice: if you please but fail to move you will end up at 'The Danaids' Barrel' and, for my part, I had no wish to return there.

By dint of analysis, I rediscovered my childhood instincts. I had understood early on that transforming musical speech into the language of emotion and initiation was an important step.

The fateful day of my first State Command Performance was approaching and I still could not get used to the idea that from then on I would be a fully fledged professional. My newly-won freedom still seemed

like a dream and what use was I going to make of it? I was torn between the dreadful desire and incertitude of a paralytic who has been told, “Arise and walk.” And of course, just when I most needed all my aesthetic sense, I realized that these ill-exploited gifts were being reabsorbed and were gradually disintegrating. Did that mean the death sentence for my budding career? This obsessive self-awareness left me no respite. Obviously, I went on working away and put all I could into making my fingers as nimble as possible – and there was no lack of enthusiasm.

In despair, I went for long country walks, comparing the elegant shapes of the fauna and flora all round me with the coarse, dull manner in which I attempted to interpret them at the piano. I tried to console myself, wondering whether any artist could really imitate such harmony and perfection. Delicacy of feeling is a gift of nature and not something acquired through skill. It was then that I became fully aware of the tremendous importance of what was at stake and of what honour demanded of me. Going beyond the conventions of musical expression is not in itself a crime. It is even one of the great privileges of art to be able to transform ugliness into beauty. Yet a sense of style is necessary to achieve it, and not just any style but one which, as I fully realized, was the result of a particular sensitivity to language. Though it cannot be acquired, it can be developed. It was this that I dreamed of down by the river as having the beauty and rhythm of a poem in a language precise enough to go straight to the heart like a stiletto. The only way to attain this, unfortunately, is by endless toil. Flaubert knew all about that. Much later, I had the opportunity of asking Malraux the great question, “How would you define Art?” Without hesitation, he replied, “The means by which form becomes style.”

This came as a revelation. I was only half convinced by his definition, splendid though it was. He was quite right – and so was I. Style is something one senses and it must show no signs of having been studied. For him as much as for me it was a Golden Rule which, once known, makes everything else plain sailing. However, the only blessing I

had at that time was an excessive, incoherent, over-decorative style which was a reflection of my own character.

Back home, I desperately took up the combat again. I was making progress: in my interpretations as they were then, about one third of the emotions were aesthetically plausible. The other two thirds were nebulous and over-refined. I had to face the truth: my vice was there before me, glaringly evident. I had too little time to rid myself of it while attending to what was most urgent. I hollowed it out like an elder twig, as children do to make blowpipes, decorating it with the motifs and mouldings of the *nouveaux riches*. No-one was less taken in than I was.

In renouncing my intensive search for natural harmony, I abandoned substance and shadow. There was no doubt that ten years of being under sentence of death, interspersed with unhoped-for reprieves, had covered my discernment with a thick cataract putting the subtleties of harmony quite beyond my grasp.

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The first concerts after my release from prison were so dull as to verge on the incompetent. It was paradoxical that they should be so mediocre: my technique was equal to that of all my colleagues put together, but this considerable advantage only multiplied the drawbacks. Whereas some players distilled boredom for want of self-assurance and imagination, I sinned in the opposite direction. Shored up as I was by excessive technical facility, I poured out boredom by the bucketful. Try as I might, my interpretations lacked clarity, restraint and concision.

Fortunately, the transcriptions and paraphrases I played as encores at the end of each recital compensated for the rest and shook my audiences out of their apathy. These intense moments were like the ecstasy of love. My defective aesthetic sense, capable of feigning an emotion but not of dissimulating it, vibrated in unison with my feelings and set the keyboard ablaze, leaving everyone flabbergasted by such incandescence. One critic went so far as to say that this was the mastery

not of a pianist but of the pianist of one's dreams. The gift I took for granted seemed as strange to my colleagues as an illuminated version of the Koran suspended in mid-air and helped me to forget that certain boors still found my excellent grapes too sour.

I still think with gratitude of the continuing, spontaneous devotion of my audiences at that time. They knew all about me and my dreadful past, to the extent that I felt the warmth of their support even on stage. The halls where I played were full to the rafters and my concerts ended in triumph. Yet every time I returned to my dressing room I felt demoralized when I thought of all the flaws and all the ground I still had to cover to catch up, more certain than ever that no artist worthy of the name mistakes a vision of the truth for revelation. The support of thousands of people was like an immense movement of sympathy. Their confidence was like a loan which helped me in my battle with myself, a battle of which I was still unworthy of the trophies. The ovations and near-consecrations gradually restored some of my self-confidence, though I never forgot the Ancient Roman custom of having a slave repeat to an acclaimed conqueror: "Remember you're only a man!"

Onstage, temerity was second nature to me, as with so many shy people, and being with a crowd was beneficial in that it redoubled my enthusiasm for practice. I observed myself with quiet confidence, paying attention to detail until it became an obsession. What exactly was needed to turn my keyboard, smooth as an Alpine lake, into a dazzling mirror which could ignite a religion which was beyond the bounds of mere theology or theosophy: discipline, a law, a yoke, an enduring promise? Nothing less than perseverance and the certitude faith brings. The assurance of being right is a prodigious source of strength to which others incline. With time, both muscles and desire lose their strength: only faith in the future is eternal and unchanging, for it is the key to equilibrium and the actions controlled by it. All depends on faith, even one's conception, whether sectarian or eclectic, of the mysterious, occult forces of the universe. For me it is fundamental to art, for constant pleasure only undermines our happiness. This unique power is as fragile

as a baby's skull and only ossifies, except in the case of outstanding people, very gradually. Its power in the field of music is infinite and alone can smooth out the turbulence caused by uncertain or imperfect aesthetic feelings. In my own music making, it was a form of existentialism leading in an exaggerated manner to what I believed to be a well-conceived anti-conformism which drew attention to my intentions and deformed them, making my style seem diffuse, slack and listless.

Without faith, any form of creation seems incomplete and rootless for it has no guarantee in the reasons of the heart which are unknown to reason.[10] It is the umbilical cord linking the musician to music and the bell-ringer to his church, the key to the pouring forth of his dreams in daily life, transforming him into the privileged receptacle of eternal life, if only for an instant. Luckily, a few atoms of this vital force still remained deep down inside me to re-awaken my consciousness, which had been set on making me forget the sacred nature of my mission. The interpreter's role in society is like a keeper's, watching over people's emotions to prevent them from being worn away by a soul-destroying everyday existence.

I was at last getting to the heart of the matter. My virtuosity no longer prevented people seeing the wood for the trees. It was indispensable to a new awareness of the timeless rules governing music.

Since my official reconversion I had been slaving away eight to ten, hours a day but it was only the first step towards my salvation. I was asked to give other concerts and then made some recordings, now that it was possible to attain a high technical standard. Yet strange to say most of them were never issued in Hungary.

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[10] An allusion to the celebrated 'pensée' of Pascal : « Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point. »

It was 1956. There was some question in high places of sending me to the USSR shortly and, at the end of the year, they might even let me go to Paris. There were so many 'ifs' that it was most unlikely and, as far as I was concerned, I had become resigned to the situation long ago. Before that, I had to undergo my trial by fire, figuratively speaking.

As part of the festivities celebrating the anniversary of the Great October Revolution (which workers and intellectuals had been forced to celebrate for the past eleven years) a highly talented colleague of mine was asked to learn by heart Bartók's *Second Piano Concerto*, considered unplayable at the time. Although he had six months to learn it in, he dropped out three months before the day of reckoning, fearing a memory lapse. In desperation, a great Chinese pianist (in those happy times our two countries were on friendly terms) was appealed to. He was reputed to have learnt all Mao's thoughts in a fortnight, not to speak of understanding them. After six weeks he too turned the proposition down. And that was how the astounding piece fell to me – even today it remains one of the most complex contemporary piano works. I did not accept gladly, but I was given to understand that engagements in Moscow, London and, above all, Paris depended to a great extent on my performance.

I got down to the task and it almost drove me mad. But I also realized that if I managed to play this impossibly difficult work within the imposed time limit I would have convinced myself I was truly ready for an international career.

The great day arrived and the concert was a triumph of some portent. The audience was a cross section of a people weary of the excesses of a regime whose victorious army had, after eleven years, still not returned home. Despite its stupefying complexity, the music is perfectly structured and this enabled me to surpass myself so that it seemed like molten lead to the audience. Some two thousand people, normally so disciplined, rushed from the hall singing the National Anthem and ripping down anything bearing emblems other than the national flag as they ran along the nearby streets and avenues. There

was an uprising and the government (responsible for an even worse police state than the one it had copied) fled to a new refuge. The frontier half opened. While people rushed into the breach in their tens of thousands, the revolt was rapidly put down and a new regime did its best to gloss it over as a mere passing error.[11]

Time was running out: the breaches in the demarcation line were being closed. This time I chose exile of my own accord. I was quite ready to assume my status as a free man and artist.

Some ten days after our flight I was giving my first recital in the Austrian capital and was applauded by audience and critics alike for a masterly performance. It came as a surprise when we arrived in Vienna to discover that I was far from unknown to musicians and music lovers. The reason was simple enough: we lived not far from the Conservatory where I went each day to put the final touches to a programme which was more or less improvised. To my great surprise, on going past the glittering window displays of the richly-stocked record shops – the effect was the same when I first strolled along the Champs-Elysées – I saw those records of mine which I had thought sunk without trace on display.

Soon after the first concert in Vienna, I gave a recital in Paris. In comparison with my experience up till then, life in my second fatherland, France, was to be like a bath of holy water.

My story should end here if I had not gone on the warpath, or rather on a pilgrimage, to save a chapel and transform it into a temple of the arts.

[11] By way of homage to the thousands killed by the Soviet forces, Cziffra never played this Bartók concerto again.

PILGRIMAGE TO SAINT FRAMBOURG

Whenever I see a young artist in difficulty, I feel like helping him, reminded as I am of my own years of hardship and enforced silence. How many young people suffer from the taboo of being unknown? Just tell them that one's twenties are the finest years of one's life! I secretly vowed to open up to them the temple gates I had been kept away from for so long.

Up until the 1960s, many artists were ignored by agents on the pretext that they had not made any records and were not known to the majority of music lovers. In their turn, the record companies hesitated to invite them to make a first recording because they had not given sufficient concerts.

It took me a long time to find a way to break this vicious circle but in the end I found several solutions. To start with, I selected a number of young players and presented them to the audience at the end of my recitals, concerts and various TV appearances. Once the surprise had worn off, they were given a warm welcome. Rather than the usual encores, I let them take my place at the piano. At the same time I decided to reward future winners of the International Piano Competition which bore my name by altering the nature of the prizes. Instead of obtaining engagements and recordings, which risked only attracting a limited number of music lovers, I intended to share the platform with the prize winners so that they could enjoy the sort of large audience which paid me the honour of attending my recitals.

That's fine, I thought, but not sufficient. It was then that in order to give my project more importance I thought of starting up a Foundation where there would be master classes and a recital hall sufficiently spacious and with the appropriate audio-visual equipment, giving young instrumentalists of all categories the opportunity to complete their training under the best teachers as well as giving recitals or making

recordings at will, without being obliged to spend years in ante-rooms in the hope of being 'discovered'.

As I am not in favour of fire-proofed formica or corrugated iron, which are, alas, used in the construction of virtually every cultural centre which our leisure civilisation is so avid for, I followed the old adage according to which the new should be built from the old. Wit the best intentions, I decided to go and see André Malraux[12] to ask his advice. This time luck was on my side. I met him the next day in a historical district known as Le Marais. I told him of my plans, which he welcomed enthusiastically.

"Your project is all to your honour but it's not possible here in Paris. There's not an inch of land which someone hasn't laid hands on," he said, pointing wearily to the metal beams of the Centre Beaubourg[13] outside, then in the final stages of construction. "No," he said, "it would be better to go to Senlis. It's quite different from other historical towns. Senlis is the birthplace of France. It was formerly the seat of the first Capetian kings. I'm fairly certain its oldest church, the former Chapel Royal of St Frambourg, is in danger of collapse. Since it was pillaged under the Revolution, it has been a Temple of Reason, a forge, fodder suppliers, a riding school, a fireman's barracks and, latterly, a carpark. Yet how beautiful it must once have been! If you were able to restore it, France would be deeply indebted to you, believe you me. But, dear Georges," he said, lowering his voice, "such an undertaking would require a great deal of money. Have you got enough?"

"Frankly, no," I sighed in frustration. "I've just about enough to buy it in its present condition if the owner doesn't ask too much. And from what you say about the place…" "Your savings wouldn't be sufficient, "he acknowledged, "so what do you intend to do?" "I don't know yet but I want to purchase that church and turn it into an auditorium dedicated to Liszt," I ventured. "And you've got some means of doing that?" "Yes," I said, suddenly feeling reassured and placing my

[12] Malraux (1901-1976) was at the time Minister for the Arts. He was also a novelist of repute.
[13] Also known as the Centre Pompidou, it lies on the site of the former vegetable market Les Halles. Boulez's IRCAM lies beneath it.

hands on his, the Royal Way[14], which also happens to be mine." "In short," said Malraux in amazement, "you hope to raise the Chapel Royal from its ashes with your own two hands?" "Yes," I replied. "That's the best way, providing God gives you help and strength. But you must admit," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "that a descendant of Attila returning to France to restore the birthplace of our kings really is the limit!"

And so the great adventure began. Back from a concert tour, I went to Senlis to look round my future purchase. What a desolate sight met my eyes when I went inside. Twenty-odd parked cars were dotted here and there. Walls, pillars and ceiling had all been despoiled. Twenty-four gaping holes nearly ten feet high were all that remained of the stained glass windows. The roof leaked. Malraux had been right: everything would have to be restored.

My wife Soleilka was to be mainly responsible for the seemingly impossible undertaking. Guided by her fervent intuition, I bought the church just as it was, exposed to the elements. The first thing we did was to have plate glass windows put in so that the dozens of crows, the hundreds of pigeons, thousands of sparrows, and black cats would know they would have to find a home elsewhere. I could do no more for the time being. I would have to be off to make more money. Restoration work advanced with tantalizing slowness and it melted away. Larger and larger sums were required. I worked like a galley slave. Luckily, as Soleilka had predicted, a new miracle occurred. In 1975 the Foundation was officially declared a public utility so we could accept gifts from friends wishing to support our cause. It was a drop in the ocean compared with the budget for the work yet to be done but at least we were not alone.

At the time, we lived in Paris. The windows of my study, where I worked between tours, looked down onto a nearby church. One evening after work, I did not go to evening service as usual but just went there to meditate for a few moments. Back home, a new pile of bills was awaiting me containing so many zeros that I still shudder at the very thought of

[14] An allusion to Malraux's novel « La Voie Royale » (1930).

them. I am a believer and normally never pray for anything other than the health and happiness of my family. That particular day I prayed to Saint François de Sales, patron saint of the church, to give me strength to continue. Unless a miracle occurred, I could not go on assuming the heavy expenses of the undertaking. I needed to reduce the number of concerts I was giving but could not. Back home, Soleilka welcomed me with a strange piece of news. Someone had phoned to say she had two beautiful stained glass windows just the size we required and wanted to donate them to the Chapel Royal. We went to look at them and they were indeed magnificent. One was of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, the other of Saint François de Sales.

"How strange," said Soleilka on our way back, "that we should jus chance on a stained glass portrayal of Saint Elizabeth." "And Saint François de Sales," I murmured pensively. "That makes a fair number of coincidences," she went on. "Saint Elizabeth is the patron saint of Hungary and Saint François de Sales, well we live just by a church dedicated to him. And, strangest of all, Liszt conducted the second performance of his *The Legend of St Elizabeth* in the same church. What do you make of all that?" "I don't know about the coincidences but it certainly makes you wonder," I replied, thinking back to my visit to the church the previous evening when I had felt so discouraged.

The coincidences came together like the arches of Saint Frambourg, its patron saint, who was from the Auvergne where I organized the La Chaise-Dieu Festival each summer. During the war I had seen a chapel where I had just played the organ bombed and had been tempted to believe music could unleash destructive forces. It is a comfort to see another chapel resurrected through and for music.

Events accelerated after that. Members of the Foundation arrived in their hundreds. They now number thousands. An unhoped-for grant enabled restoration work to forge ahead. Generous donators offered to take on financial responsibility for the rebuilding of the faced, including replacement of the great door. In the newly-converted crypt, all objects found during preliminary excavations will be put on show. The great nave

itself will be entirely restored and fitted out by the end of the year. If you come to Senlis for a concert, I will be glad to welcome you. I am sure the Franz Liszt Auditorium will come into being. I shall have to work overtime for it is my life's work and after that the outside will need restoring.

I should like to communicate the invisible thread linking the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest with this new auditorium of the same name on French soil to all young musicians who come to Senlis so as to justify this great adventure of the restoration of the Chapel Royal.

Converting a religious sanctuary that has been pillaged, desecrated and betrayed into the Franz Liszt Auditorium is more than just homage to Liszt: it is an invocation and the achievement of a childhood vow in which I am totally involved. Since the age of ten I have been the bearer of a message which can only be understood after a lifetime's experience and suffering. Before I could pass it on it had to penetrate me and feed on my inner substance. This message was passed on to me by my teacher at the Liszt Academy when he entrusted his secrets to us: the words of Liszt himself, to whom he had in his youth played Chopin's *Fourth Ballade*. No-one better than Liszt could have found words to express Chopin's inexpressible aura. In quoting, with respect and humility, the words engraved in his mind, he was indeed the transmitter of a tradition.

Here is what Liszt said: "My hands no longer obey me and I fear that certain composers may see in my works nothing more than circus acrobatics. Let them talk: my time will come. But, as regards Chopin, watch out: his art has nothing to do with excessive emotional displays that so many think of as passion. Naturally, they think his music should be able to speak for itself and portray its essence, but under no circumstances should the interpreter give way to an affected or uncontrolled confession. Such music is a struggle with the powers of darkness in which there is no room for intellectual well-being. It meticulously lays bare a heart beyond time and space listening without complacency to its own beat."

Liszt's genius consisted in praising Chopin's. Acknowledging Chopin's exceptional powers revealed his own destiny to him. "Chopin is all that and more. I'm more grateful to him than to anyone else for my contact with him has enriched and ennobled my own playing. Beware of aesthetes who delve into the inexpressible charm of his music as if it were a Vale of Tears. They are fake seraphim: ignore them."

"Follow his true friends, of whom I had the privilege to be one. Make the various shapes and patterns of this richest of souls a part of you. I learnt from him a special form of perception enabling me to discern and transmit the ever-changing inner light emanating from his every work. The purity of the kaleidoscopic aura of his music is a miraculous, unique alliance of youthfulness and gloom. He spiritualizes the human condition, which was a burden to him. Early on he realized his days were numbered. As a consequence, his love of life became a shadowy, almost cult-like love of death. The intensity of his work with its candid, innocent language brings to all he wrote a tear-like purity. The idealist in him was more prolific than his dreadful suffering."

"No, Chopin was far more than just a poet. He was the only metaphysician who could analyse the slightest tremor of his soul."

"Much new music will be forgotten before another soul appears with such divining powers."

"Like his gods Bach and Mozart, Chopin passed like a meteor. He went off in search of himself as only those predestined to do so know how, someone who has always born the laws of harmony within himself. Contrary to appearances, the outside world scarcely interested him. He was a vast membrane capturing the least movement of his inner universe – the only source of his creative impulse – which his genius at once transformed into emotion. The ever-growing rapidity of the process was a miracle. He was only too aware that he would have to hurry if he was to reach the summit and profit from it. In fact, Chopin only came back down to earth to consign the sum of what had been revealed to him in the course of his previous incarnations. Others might have written the astonishing *Funeral March Sonata*, but the fantastic murmur of the wind

among the tombstones in the Epilogue could only have been evoked by someone for whom the mystery of death was a daily routine."

"Like Mozart, Chopin was accorded only a brief spell in which to speak of Eternity, and even then he had to use some of his precious time to perfect a form of expression whose range and precision are no more than an invisible medium for his nirvana. Lamartine's "L'harmonieux éther dans ses vagues d'azur"[15] merges with the breath of a soul imprisoned in a body undermined by tuberculosis for which life is only a passing phase slowing down its journey towards immortality. The only interest the Parisian salons held for him was to act as a resonator by which to measure the purity of an inspiration even more volatile than the dewdrops he put in the eyes of his ever-captive audiences. Chopin's piano was merely a means of bringing his visions to life in an endless search for transfiguration: the keyboard had become the instrument of his divine ecstasy."

"Yes, hearing Chopin improvising or playing his compositions on his favourite piano was a rare pleasure. The glory and bondage of the interpreter all disappeared, leaving him his place as a legend for all eternity. The relation between his music and you must be the same."

That was how I first heard about Chopin's art – by way of the inspiration of Liszt. And I repeat the recommendation of our teacher at the Franz Liszt Academy for today's young players: "Draw the necessary conclusions."

[15] « the silver waves of the harmonious sky »

DAWN

Many readers expect an artist's autobiography to be a succession of thrills and miracles in the course of a variety of episodes which help establish the mood. My life started – or rather re-started – just when the reader was expecting an edifying ending to the story.

These fragments of my life have in common a single, obsessive theme: imminent spiritual death which, when all seems lost, becomes a new stage in artistic resurrection.

I only ever felt truly alive and free when passing from darkness to light or on taking flight from a dingy prison cell like a firebird.

I believe I have reached the beginning.

Senlis, September 1977