Chapter 1

The journey begins

On a sunny March afternoon in 1944, I did not know that my life was going to be turned upside down within the next couple of months. I was walking through our timber yard, holding my mum's hand. I wasn't even five yet, but keeping my eyes and ears open, I knew that there had been warning signs that things might change. Until recently, I'd felt safe here, since this was my world. Everything I could see around me belonged to us. We were going home from my uncle Sándor's and aunt Anna's villa, where I often played with my cousin Zsuzsi, who was my age. We always got on well. She didn't even cry when I took away her toys. We used to have the same governess, Maria, who was paid by my uncle because my dad didn't have enough money. Then one day Maria stopped coming to take care of us. My mother explained that Aunt Anna could not employ her any longer.

When I asked why, Mum said it was because we were Jewish. She said no more, and I didn't understand why us being Jewish would mean Maria had to leave.

My uncle didn't actually live in the villa anymore. I'd once asked where he was, and Aunt Anna answered that he had been called up to do hard labour on the eastern front in Russia. To stop me asking further questions, Aunt Anna explained that Jewish men could not be regular soldiers, but they were needed to do heavy work on the front, like digging trenches to protect the soldiers. He had gone away a long time ago, and we had not heard from him since. This was the first time I realized that a war was going on, and my country, Hungary, was fighting on Germany's side.

Earlier, I had spent the day playing with Zsuzsi as usual. She was very pretty, with long dark hair and large brown eyes. These she must have inherited from her mother, who was also very beautiful. Aunt Anna had prepared a lovely lunch but apologized that she hadn't been able to get the food she wanted. There was no meat, only *krumpli paprikás* – a dish of sliced potatoes with lots of ground red pepper. My mum called this the "poor man's stew", but it tasted good! Afterwards we were treated to Aunt Anna's stewed quince compote made from the fruit that had been saved over the winter. After lunch, my mother had picked me up to take me home.

Now we were walking through our timber yard, which seemed immense in the dusk of early spring – so large that I could not see its borders, which were marked by a fence. Facing the main street, on either side of the small office building, stood the two villas belonging to my uncles. Next to the bottom of the yard was our more modest house.

In the centre of the yard was the star attraction: an enormous shed which housed the electric saws. I was told never to go in there, since they were dangerous. Of course, I knew this. Mum must have been frightened by the thought that, instead of logs, her son would be sawn into pieces.

From the shed a small-gauge track ran to the bottom of the yard. One side of the track was lined with large piles of logs, which were carried by carts to the electric saws to be cut. The finished products, planks of the same thickness, were deposited on the other side. The piled-up logs and planks were high enough for Zsuzsi and me to play hide-and-seek in. This was good fun but discouraged by our mothers.

The whole yard was dominated by a cooling tower, and I found its dark pool of water rather frightening. Next to it was the most exciting place: the engine room. It was Dad who took me there after my repeated requests and introduced me to a large man with a moustache who wore overalls. He told

me that he was the engineer and tried to explain what the machines did. The machines moved tirelessly and noisily: I was fascinated. And there was a smell there like nowhere else. I thought it must have been the warm machine oil, drops of which had made the floor next to the machine slippery. Dad told me that the wood was bought by building firms, and it was a successful business.

Once, this yard had been filled with workers. Sometimes I would walk through the timber yard on my own and stop and talk with them or listen to their conversations. Their speech was rather different from my parents', and they used some words I didn't understand. I picked up expressions that my mother didn't like, saying that they were not very polite.

One day, this had led to big trouble.

Mum had invited a couple of her friends and Aunt Anna for morning coffee and cake. When I entered the living room and saw them sitting around drinking coffee, I used one of these words just to surprise them. And surprised they were.

Deadly silence followed. Everyone looked at me. I realized that I must have said something I shouldn't, but I didn't know what. Mum jumped up, apologized to her guests and, catching my hand, dragged me into my bedroom. She was angry. Very angry. I have never seen her so angry. She

had hardly shut the door behind her before: "Where did you hear *that* word?"

"What word?" I wasn't sure what she was talking about.

"The word you just said. Do you know what it means?" I thought it was better to remain silent, but my mother did not give up.

"Where did you hear it?"

"I heard it in the timber yard. From the workers."

"You should never use that word again. Never. Promise."

I nodded my head in agreement and added, for emphasis, "I promise."

"Now come with me and apologize. Then I'll explain to the guests what happened."

I did as she said. When I told this story to Gyuri, my brother, in the evening, he could hardly hold in his laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"Never mind. What other words did you learn from the workers?"

I had quite a list.

"You seem to have quite a good collection of swear words. You should never use any of them. Mum is right, of course; these words are never used in polite society. When you grow up, you'll understand." I expected to hear more about these words and what polite society was, but he didn't say

anything else.

The workers who had "taught" me this word were no longer around. The timber yard was now completely deserted. The machines were silent and only a caretaker was about. Dad had told me that the timber yard was not ours anymore and there would be different people running it. He'd also lost his job as an accountant.

As we arrived home, Dad asked my mum even before she could remove her coat: "Have you heard the news?"

"No. Should I have?"

"The Germans have invaded Hungary. The radio just announced it."

Mum gasped. "I can't believe it! We're their ally."

"If you don't believe it, we can listen to the BBC World Service later."

This is how all the bad things started. I didn't know it then, but within a couple of months, everything we had would be taken away. And that was not even the worst thing that would happen to us.

At the time, I was too young to really understand what was going on outside of my own life, but dramatic events had been unfolding across Europe. We were in the middle of a war. My dad explained that it was a world war. When I asked him what a world war was, instead of answering, he

removed a large book from the bookshelf and opened it.

"This is called an atlas: it's a collection of maps of the countries around the world." He opened it and outlined an odd-shaped blob: "This is Hungary." He then pointed near the top of the blob. "This is Budapest, and this," he said, dragging his finger further down, "is Makó, where we live."

He turned the page. "This is Europe. Each coloured area is a country. For example, this is Germany and this is France. And this is part of the Soviet Union." He pointed at the red-coloured patch, the largest on the map. "The war began some time ago: in 1939, the year you were born. Germany occupied many countries in Europe, but fortunately not Great Britain."

"Why did Germany start the war?"

Dad hesitated for a moment. "They wanted more power, more territory and they wanted to get revenge for the previous war, which they had lost. And their leader, Adolf Hitler, is evil. He wants to murder all the Jews in Europe." I was not sure that I understood all this, but did not dare to ask more questions. Just as well, as Dad had turned the page.

"This is Asia. The war is being fought there." He turned to another page, showing an area which looked like an upside-down pear. "This is Africa, and the war is going on there too. That's why this war is called a world war – it's

taking place all over the world."

Dad explained that, at the beginning, it looked like Germany, joined by Italy and Japan, would win. Now, however, the Allies – America, Great Britain and the Soviet Union – were more likely to be victorious. The war was in its fifth year and had finally reached us: the Germans had invaded our country.

My dad was shorter than my mum, but both were slim. I never knew the colour of my mum's eyes, since they always seemed to change in different lights: sometimes brown, then grey or green. Her hair was quite dark, practically black. She always looked smart, even at home, although her dresses were not as expensive as Aunt Anna's.

Dad didn't have much hair, and the top of his head was completely bald. I don't remember the colour of his eyes, but when he was angry – which was not often – I didn't like to look into them.

When I was a little younger, I asked Gyuri how old our parents were. He told me that Mum was over forty and Dad was even older. I couldn't believe it, so I asked our mother. She confirmed what Gyuri had told me. Being over forty seemed a terribly old age. I told her that Aunt Anna was much younger, to which she answered: "Your aunt doesn't

have a son of eighteen, does she?" This was true, I had to admit. Dad being even older worried me; they might die before having time to bring me up.

I had learned early on, partly from keeping my eyes open and partly from overhearing my parents' occasional arguments, that we were the poorest in Mum's large family of five brothers and three sisters. It was again Gyuri who explained that Dad, as an accountant, did not earn much. To help us out, Grandma occasionally lent us some money.

Our house was modest in size, much smaller than Zsuzsi's, and had only two bedrooms. There was also a large living room, a bathroom and a kitchen: that was all. We had a small garden at the back, surrounded by a wooden fence from which a gate led straight to the timber yard.

I shared my bedroom with Gyuri. He was fourteen years older than me and not a child anymore. When he undressed, I could see that he had hair over his body: on his legs, between his legs and under his arms. I hoped I was going to be like him when I grew up. He was tall, or anyway he seemed tall to me; he had brown wavy hair and deeply set brown eyes. He wore glasses, and I thought that reading so much must have weakened his sight. I couldn't imagine him without a book.

We got on well with the unspoken rule that he bore my

boisterous presence with patience. Whenever I interrupted his reading, he answered my questions as if he had all the time in the world and in a way that meant I could understand his explanations. He was shy, and when I asked him whether he had a girlfriend, he pretended not to hear me, but he blushed. I didn't ask a second time, but I thought that he did.

Mum told me that Gyuri was very bright, and he finished the local high school with a baccalaureate with distinction: he got the highest marks in all subjects. I should follow his example, she said. Yet when he applied to the Faculty of Humanities (whatever they were) of the university, he was not admitted. My mother explained the reason was because he was Jewish. I realized at this early age that to be Jewish in Hungary was not a good thing.

It was soon after the Germans invaded the country that Gyuri was called up to do hard labour. He had to follow my uncle's example. My parents were very upset, particularly my mother. One time I caught her crying. Over the next couple of days, the house became very quiet and I didn't even feel like going to play with Zsuzsi.

Our mother helped Gyuri to prepare his luggage. It didn't take very long. Once the suitcase was ready, I saw Gyuri

cramming a couple of books in under his shirts.

I remember the day of his departure. I was playing with one of my toys: a grey mouse which, when wound up, criss-crossed the table without ever falling off. As I was watching and putting small obstacles in its way, suddenly a hand lifted the mouse from its run before I could protest; it was Gyuri, who had come to say goodbye. He had already said farewell to my parents, who were standing behind him. I could see that Mum had been crying. He lifted me from the ground, held me in his arms, kissed me and said, "Be good."

And then he left.

It was so unexpected that I failed to say anything. We never saw him again.

On the first evening after Gyuri left, I realized that I had become sole master of the bedroom. Yet I missed his company very much. He had answered questions I was too scared to ask my parents. He occasionally read a couple of paragraphs from his books when I asked what he was reading and explained things to me. He gently woke me up in the mornings; now Mum had to do it. In the evenings there was nobody in the next bed, no one who would whisper to me in the dark when he came in late. "Are you awake? You should be asleep," he would say when he heard me moving, and come over to my bed to adjust

the blanket.

Without him, I felt less protected. It was not the darkness of the bedroom that bothered me – I never felt afraid of the dark – but when I was woken in the middle of the night by a bad dream, his even breathing was reassuring.

It was then that I realized I loved him and regretted not telling him this before he left. When I asked Mum whether I could sleep in his bed, she said, "No," and I knew I shouldn't ask a second time.

I started to notice that our meals were not as good as they used to be. My mother explained that Hungary had been in the war for three years, and now, with the German invasion, some food had become scarce. In the past, we had often had chickens and ducks, occasionally a goose, but now even a chicken on our table was a rare thing.

Although our kitchen, unlike my grandparents', was not kosher, we never ate pork or bacon. I learned early that kosher meant not eating pork and shellfish, never mixing meat and milk, and many other rules as Jewish law ordered. More frequently, we were having dishes without meat. My favourite was pancakes filled with cottage cheese, which I liked even more than meat. I could have

eaten dozens, particularly when my mum put raisins in the filling.

One morning I noticed her sitting by the living room window sewing. It was not often that she sewed, so I was curious to see what she was doing. I was surprised to see that, from a yellow velvety material, she was cutting out a large Star of David, a symbol of the Jewish community.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't you see?" she said, quite upset.

I didn't understand why I had upset her. "You're making Stars of David. But what for?"

"For us to wear." Seeing my confusion, she added, "There's a new law: Jews have to wear a Star of David."

"But why? We know we're Jewish."

"It's so that other people know we're Jewish."

"Do I have to wear one too?"

"No, you're too young."

"But I want to wear one."

"Don't be difficult; you can't wear one. Only children older than you can wear one."

"Will Zsuzsi have one?"

"Of course not. She's your age."

That settled the matter. If Zsuzsi wasn't going to wear one, perhaps I shouldn't.