

Escape from Transylvania: September-October 1944 From the Diaries of Paul Diósady

Editors' notes: The following is excerpted from chapter 15 of the autobiographical writings of Paul Diósady. The chapter is entitled: "We have to flee again, this time from Marosvásárhely to Budapest, 1944." Diósady was a young chemical engineer at the time who in September 1944 decided to flee the approaching Red Army along with his wife Inci, a teacher of classics, and their infant son Levente. After many adventures and despite great difficulties they made it to Budapest — not long before the Red Army arrived there also. Eventually they ended up in Toronto, Canada, where Levente grew up and became a professor of chemical engineering at the University of Toronto. The translation of this chapter was done by Nándor Dreisziger in consultation with Levente Diósady.

At the end of August and the beginning of September the sound of artillery fire from the southeast intensified. This signified that the Russians were trying to take the mountain passes that were in that direction. This development was made possible all of the sudden by the decision of the Rumanians... not to resist the Red Army but to switch sides in the war.... After this the Russian army absorbed the Romanian forces and arrived at the Carpathian mountain ranges in short order. At this time it became obvious that, no matter how many ties we have to Transylvania, we have to leave and go to Hungary proper, if possible, to Budapest.

At the end of the school year I had taken my family from Marosvásárhely to Koronka to avoid the expected bombings of the city. For the summer, we rented the home of the local superintendent of schools. We owned a one-horse buggy with which I commuted to work — a distance of seven kilometres. A co-worker of mine, Dezső Kádár, and his wife were good friends of ours. They had no children and they stayed in the city. Dezső had a well-built wagon and two strong horses, with which he used to visit nearby

villages to buy raw hides for our [leather-processing] company, and whatever he could re-sell in the city on his own. He was an excellent businessman who could find something to talk about with anybody, a quality that would prove very useful for us later. When the noise of shelling became louder, we and the Kádárs decided that will set out for Budapest, according to a plan we had agreed upon earlier. In the capital there were two large and several small leather-processing plants, where people knew us or at least heard about us, and where we could probably find work....

Actually, to the very last minute we were hoping that we wouldn't have to leave Marosvásárhely, as the few things that had been nice in our lives we experienced here. It was here that we got jobs in line with our training, and it was here that we could get married. We managed to get a nice, large apartment here that we furnished with beautiful furniture hand-crafted my local cabinet makers. And it was here that our son Levente was born who was not yet a year old when we had to pull up roots. As we had to leave ore suddenly than expected, we never worked out detailed plans as to what to take with us and what to do with things we would leave behind. As it often happens with refugees, we left with great hopes and in the end we had to deal with many disappointments....

By the end of the week the situation had deteriorated. This was indicated by the arrival to Marosvásárhely of the first horse-drawn wagons of German settlers from the Ukraine. Our factory closed its doors. We paid the workers and went home to begin our preparations.... Kádár loaded his wagon with fodder for the horses and non-perishable food for ourselves.... We stopped in Marosvásárhely to collect a few things: but aside from a few books, critical documents, and some clothing there was no room for anything more. My buggy had a collapsible roof but no sides. We compensated for this by putting a rug over the top, which made the buggy into a big box. Its front was still open, at least the rain could not come in at the sides. The wagon also had a canvas roof which was important as it kept our belongings as well as the food and fodder dry.

So we started with two carts and, much like a Gypsy caravan, we left Marosvásárhely. The wagons of the Germans fleeing from the Ukraine preceded us in an endless line. They were a terrible sight. I have no idea how many hundreds of kilometres were behind them and for how long more their horses would last, even though these horses were used to heavy work. Our horses had never been used for a long journey.

Interestingly our thee horses seemed to have realised that they belonged to one another. If one cart got ahead in the line, the horses in the other became anxious and tried to catch up. On the way to Szászrég, we had to

go up a steep, winding road. It was here that the two carts got separated for the first time. On one occasion our horse went crazy. My wife Inci had to climb from the back onto the driver's seat and with the baby on her lap, she tried to hold the reins, while I got off and tried to restrain the horse holding its bridle-bit, which was not easy as the horse was a strong, heavy Metlneburg-type horse. Increasing our fright in situation was the fact that in midst of all this Levente slid from Inci's lap. Fortunately, we calmed the horse and no harm came to anyone, aside from the panic we experienced....

We got to Szászrég in the evening. We had covered 40 kilometres that day. On this basis it seemed that we would be able to cover this much each day as we had planned. Since Budapest was 600 kilometres away, we figured on a 15-16 days' journey. Unfortunately, because of the interruptions, our trip lasted more than a month.

We had already developed a routine for our nightly stops. We would first look for accommodation for the ladies and the baby so that at least they would spend the night under cover. While they took care of the baby and prepared some food for us, we took the horses, preferably some place under cover, gave them fodder and water.... We obtained hay and water on location while the oats came from our wagon. With the horses satiated by pales of water and food, they settled down to rest. We brought a lot of fodder with us so that we wouldn't have to stop and spend time procuring this on our journey.

Levente was a good baby. He didn't cry a lot and slept well. The adults discussed what had to be done next morning and tried to lock out their concerns from their minds and tiredness soon made them sleep. Dezső and I slept beside our horses.

The next morning we ate early, took care of the horses, and with heavy hearts set out on the day's journey. We soon discovered that the breasts of our horses became blistered... The problem wasn't visible yet, but it was obviously bothering them. We had some medication which seems to have relieved their pain. Still they didn't want to get going, usually we had to push the wagons at first till they got used to their harness. After another day of a 40 km journey we looked after ourselves and the horses and everyone slept like a log till the morning.

At least, for the first part of our trip, we had good weather. When the rains first came, we decided that, for the sake of the horses, we wait. We looked for better accommodation so that we could rest as well. Soon it became obvious what we didn't bring with us that was needed and what we brought needlessly. Nearly all documents that didn't seem necessary, including school reports and photographs, we had left behind... while I brought with me some German and French-language technical books and Inci a few of her favourite

volumes including one by Homer. These weighed more than 50 kilos. On the back of the wagon I had tied up our bicycle, which proved very useful when we stopped in a village to do a few errands to get some supplies.

The flood of refugees resulted in prices going up, everything was ten times more expensive than before. Hay cost us 40 *pengős* a day — 5 *pengős* used to buy a dollar in those days. People took advantage of us as they pleased, but without hay we wouldn't have been able to go on.

In the villages we passed through we didn't get the impression that people were panicking, but those official who had been posted there from elsewhere had already fled westward. In one village we knew the notary public and his family, the Rápoltis. We stayed with them. They also decided to come along. In the evening they called together all their trustworthy neighbours and acquaintances and distributed among them the belongings they were not planning to take with them. This was a much better way of handling this than we had done: this way possessions went to people more worthy of them....

One larger community we went through was Dés, a county seat with some 6-7000 residents. By the time we reached this place warplanes appeared in the sky above. There were air-raid shelters built into the hills opposite the railway station. All of us took refuge there except me — someone had to stay with the horses.

At the station there were huge piles of firewood arranged in rows about two meters apart. I positioned the two wagons in between two rows and could do nothing but wait for the bombing of the station. Those in the shelter didn't know what was going on outside. When someone took a peak, on closing the shelter's iron doors these made a sound similar to an explosion — causing panic inside every time. In the end the station was not bombed, it was probably not an important military target....

We continued our journey toward Nagykároly. One night, from a village near this city we witnessed the awesome sight of a city being bombed. This was Szatmárnémety and we saw it from 20-25 kilometres. It was like a beautiful but horrific star-burst: from the ground the planes were being shot at and from the sky fell the bombs....

On the second of October we stopped outside a village in the Nyírség and, on blankets spread under a roadside tree, we celebrated Levente's first birthday. Instead of a birthday cake we had a watermelon.... The horses enjoyed the unexpected rest.

We took lodging in the village and in the morning we set out for Debrecen. Kádár owned an estate near Debrecen, complete with farm buildings and close to 100 acres of fine cultivable land. It was leased by a reliable

family. They received us very warmly. Here we were supplied with everything we needed and we rested for four days, almost forgetting about the war.

Then the artillery fire again became audible in the distance. The Russians had been stopped for a while but soon after they had penetrated the passes of the Carpathians... they reached the borders of pre-1940 Hungary.... The country became a war-zone.

On hearing the gunfire, we resumed our journey. We first stopped in a village in the sandy, north-eastern part of the Hortobágy. The carts sank into the sand almost to their axle, the horses couldn't pull them and we got stuck. Some local peasants brought a couple of oxen. These managed to pull the wagons, along with the horses, out of the sand. We were lucky that the Russians did not catch up with us, as the Axis Powers decided to make a stand at the eastern border of the Hortobágy. Both sides assembled powerful tank forces on the two sides of the *puszta*. It was here that one of the remarkable battles of the war, the tank battle of the Hortobágy took place. It lasted two weeks. Though the Axis Powers suffered heavy losses, they managed to hold up the Russians for a long time till they replaced their [even greater – ed.] losses. Both sides lost many men and hundreds of tanks. The remains of these lay scattered throughout the sandy soil for many years after the war. While this battle raged the Russians crossed the Tisza River at Szeged and opened another front in the south of the country.

In the meantime we managed to make our way all the way to Tiszafüred where we got lodging that appeared to be very good. Nevertheless, Kádár and I again slept with the horses to make sure nothing was stolen.... In villages it was common for small animals and fowl to sleep in the barns... and these were full of flees. Thus during the whole night we were trying to get rid of flees, slept little and continued our journey the next day tired. The horses were also tired and didn't greet the morning preparations with enthusiasm....

The bridge on the Tisza here had been bombed and had been replaced by a pontoon bridge the military had constructed. On one side of this the road went down steeply, on the other, it went up on a steep incline. This was not the main problem. The real problem was that our horses, by the time we have arrived to Tiszafüred, were full of blisters. We were caring for them much as the injured are treated in hospitals. But the three horses had decided not to go any further. They didn't want to get started. The locals surrounded us looking on as we struggled with the horses. None of them offered to help.

In the meantime the officers from the troops guarding the bridge came over and told us that every able-bodied man was needed for the war-effort and no such person would be allowed to proceed further west from here. It was

here that Kádár's diplomatic skills became obvious. He managed to convince the officers that he would be able to get each of them a pair of fancy high boots... the kind German officers were wearing. Kádár told the officer that he would ship each of them these boots from his warehouses in Debrecen or Budapest, and they believed him, even though we didn't have single sample of leather in our possession.

Kádár also managed to convince the peasants standing nearby to help push our wagons to the bridge. They eventually did, but as soon as they stopped pushing, the horses stopped. We pleaded, and they pushed some more. They asked, "how far should we push? to Budapest?" ... At last we made it on to the bridge. The next problem was how we would get off the bridge. Kádár once again got together those milling around on the shore, onlookers, soldiers, etc., and got them to pull us off the bridge. This went a bit easier, after all we had to be moved from here as at any moment the bridge could have been needed for military purposes....

After this we proceeded as fast as possible toward Budapest, avoiding any big cities on the way. We reached Fót. We got very good accommodation here and began thinking that we'll stay here and commute to Budapest where we were hoping to find jobs. Alas, on the first night it was announced that everyone had to partake in the digging of ditches as part of defence-works. Upon this we harnessed the horses and left Fót, and that same night we arrived in Pest. I left my wife and child with the family of József Csóka, a relative of Inci, who was luckily at home when we arrived. Kádár also left his family with acquaintances and by next afternoon we were in the factory district of Újpest, just to orient ourselves for the time being.

Kádár's trade didn't tie him to a place. He soon purchased a quantity of finished leather and took it to the nearby countryside to trade it for raw hide and while there he bought food. Within a day he was continuing the work he had been doing in Marosvásárhely. For me matters seemed more difficult because I didn't want to get trapped in an insignificant job. So I prepared myself for doing several interviews so that I get a suitable position and my salary would not be worse than what I had in Vásárhely. I was not aware of the fact that in general large firms and positions with a wide scope of responsibilities required more experience than I had been able to obtain in the past....

First I talked to one of the managers of the Wolfner firm who told me that the nearby Mauther leather-making factory was looking for a technical director. I went there and at once I was able to speak to the chief director, János Lengyel, who immediately offered me an excellent contract with the customary one month probation time. This had been made possible by the

resignation and departure of the company's technical director. Thus, without much further stressful job-search, I managed land a position with one of Hungary's, indeed Europe's biggest leather manufacturers.... Lengyel outlined the tasks that awaited me and described my compensation package. The latter we discussed in detail the following day and put on paper. It was obvious that I had assumed heavy responsibilities, but I always prefer climbing uphill to walking on plain ground.

I asked Lengyel to give parking place for my buggy and horse, let me start work the next day, and have someone take me home and bring back the buggy. He immediately arranged everything so I could take the good news home.

After this the most important thing for us was for Inci to get a transfer from the Ministry of Education to teach in Budapest — and to find out what happened to our relatives while we were on our journey. The newspapers were full of ads by people looking for their friends and relations. We joined these people, although we were not hopeful that we would get news soon as much of Hungary east of Budapest was either cut off or was occupied by the Soviet army....