

István Jász

Ripples of Time



Minden jog fenntartva, beleértve bárminemű sokszorosítás, másolás és közlés jogát is.

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Ripples of Time

A novel by István Jász

Translated by Peter Kraus

2011.

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INTRODUCTION

A nine or ten page questionnaire emerged from the huge envelope. The accompanying letter from the Hungarian Jewish Association was a little confusing but seemed to say that there was some new compensation available for those who were still alive and could remember.

The Swiss banks had discovered that an enormous fortune plundered by the Nazis had been deposited there during and after the second World War.

Stories of *Zombor*, (now in Yugoslavia, formerly a county capital in Southern Hungary,) came into my mind as I answered each question.

My forebears, the Jewish doctor so handsome in family photos, his wife, who wrote to their daughter (my mother) signing herself as *Ilona*, my aunt whose name I later took, (she wrote for the local newspaper under the name *Jász*,) all became sources of data with exact time frames just so my mother could get an increase in her pension at ninety one years of age! Apart from improving her own material situation this gave her the satisfaction of extending financial as well as literary help to me, her son. Her nine tenths of a century, my grandparents married in 1900, made her, too, an eyewitness of the times.

I had wanted to spend the winter of 1956-7 familiarising myself with the details of my father's life but he died of leukaemia in May 1957. He had kept a daily diary from childhood but had used a now defunct system of shorthand. I still have the diary although it would be a very old person indeed who could help me decipher it and give substance to what otherwise exists only in my imagination, yet his voice is so fresh in my memory to this day.

Nor have I forgotten my own adventures in the city of Zombor. It was 1982. My wife and I set out for Bulgaria and stopped at Zombor while crossing Yugoslavia. Entering Yugoslavia the Serbian border guard had taken about an hour to inspect my beat up Wartburg car (two stroke, three cylinders.) In Zombor at last, I stopped at the corner of the market square. I wanted to compare the scene with the gipsy artist *Hangya's* painting ("Market Place, Zombor" 80 x 60 cm, paper, mixed media, privately owned).

I also wanted to buy fresh bread and some of the cottage cheese for which Zombor is renowned. I reached into the glove box. Our passports were there, but the money, Swiss francs and German marks which had to last us two

weeks, was nowhere to be found! I immediately thought back to the Yugoslav border and the detailed inspection of the car. Had I accidentally left the money on the counter when I presented my documents? It never occurred to me that it might have been stolen. I was in a Hungarian speaking area, practically still at home!

I cut across the corner of the market square into the *Hunter's Horn* inn, (one of my grandfather's old haunts,) and asked the porter in every European language I know to ring the border post and ask whether I had left the money there. God alone knows why but try as I might I could not get that porter to understand. I shrugged and began to think. Should I turn back or should I use my remaining petrol to go on to the town of Novi Sad and seek help from the consul there?

But when I got back to the car, my wife was waving cheerfully at me. The money had been under the mat all the time! So these are my memories.

Budapest, 1st January 2000

THE APPLICANT

My grandfather, the handsome Jewish doctor, is already completely bald in surviving photographs. My grandmother has passed on the shape of her mouth. Although I don't have her features you could see the resemblance in my mother. Another framed photograph shows Janos, (John,) and Elli, my mother's brother and sister, and Elli's husband Jano, known as Jenő. They are dressed in mourning black complete with ribbons.

My grandfather died in 1939. His son, my uncle, a doctor, tried to jerk him back to life but my grandmother Ilona begged him not to torment him further. So Janos did not give the injection and forever after wondered if he could have saved his father's life.

Maybe later on the thought that in this human life there is nothing of greater value than a dignified death was his consolation. My grandfather had lived a dignified and worthy life. He died the same way.

He was born in 1872 in the Bacs-Bodrog county of St Thomas. His father scrimped and saved on a shepherd's cloak maker's earnings to send his son Joseph, his oldest child, to medical school.

Joseph became a very cultured man. If ever he read anything he could not understand he would say, "Ady must have written this," although Ady was 5 years his junior.¹

"Little auntie" got him a wife from the town of Iglo. (She was "little auntie," not "great auntie," as she was born at the same time as her nephew, indeed he may even have been a trifle older.) Mrs Schlesinger (nee Maria Neuberger) was just suckling her 5th child when they called her to her grand daughter's birth. She didn't go. Indeed she rid herself of Little Auntie soon enough, marrying her off to one Ignaz Kende, a civil engineer at Debrecen, at the age of 16.

Within a year the little bride learnt her husband's moods so they always seemed to be of one mind. "I know," she would still say in her eighties, "what suits me."

¹ Ady was the foremost Hungarian poet at that time.

Her niece Ilona on the other hand, strove to learn every language perfectly. At the age of eighteen she asked for and received the 100 volumes of Jokai's² works. A purely gothic Catholic church is to be found at Iglo. The Slovaks, at the time called *tót* (a nickname) were protestant. Their church stands in the circular main plaza. There is no synagogue there.

Ignac Kende was then posted with his wife to Zombor where little aunt had heard that a doctor with a very good reputation had set up practice.

Joseph Wollheimer was twenty eight years old and became known as "the handsome Jewish doctor." He got this lasting nickname when he danced in such a fiery way with his lady partners at a masked ball.

"I don't know who you are," he said as he reached towards the mask covering her eyes.

Ilona laughed. "You would know me soon enough if you saw my stomach!"

Indeed it was only a few days since the doctor had removed the inflamed appendix which had put Ilona into hospital. The handsome doctor shook his head.

"And you're already at the ball?"

"It's worth it." Ilona didn't say just why, but little auntie surely sensed what was afoot as she anxiously watched the budding relationship in the hall at the "Hunter's Horn". It would be no fun if these two found each other without her help.

"Doctor!"

"At your service, my dear little auntie." The doctor was already addressing the engineer's wife thus.

"Didn't you recognise my niece?"

"She has clothes on her stomach."

"My, but you're a cheeky one!"

"Just how am I cheeky, little auntie?"

"Mark well what I'm saying, you impudent young man." "Do you like Ilona?"

² Jokai was the leading Hungarian author of the day. He was aged about 80 at the time.

"You bet!"

"I'll let it be known then, my boy."

"What will you let be known, little auntie? Why?"

"It's not proper otherwise."

"For a doctor? For a doctor everything is proper!"

"Oh but you're spoilt, my boy."

"You all spoil me, little auntie."

"We spoil you?"

"Yes you. I know what the women in town call me."

"Do you know everything?"

"Not everything. For example I don't know Ilonka's surname."

"Then find out, my boy."

"How can I find out, little auntie? Should I ask someone?"

"Just don't ask Naci³, Joe."

"And why not?"

"Because he's neither brilliant nor phenomenal." (As she liked to put on airs and graces Little Auntie actually said this using Latin words.)

"But he's quite uncouth. Then you tell me, little auntie."

"What is she called? Why, the same as I was."

"Lady Kende?"

"Miss Schlesinger. I was Rose Schlesinger my boy, but Julius is known as Sze-go."

"And who is he?"

"Ilonka's older brother. Do you know what they called Jules at high school? Flamingo. Because he always wore red socks"

³ "Naci" is short for "Ignac," her husband.

Joseph Wollheimer took Flamingo's little sister for his bride in 1900. At the time Flamingo was going to law school, majoring in politics. He had decided he wanted to move in upper, although it was more likely to be middle ranking, European diplomatic circles. Lajos Kossuth*⁴ had already died but Görgey* was still alive. I often ponder on just how brief a window of time we have during which history can be our tutor. My mother could have asked my grandmother, who rocked me in my cradle, what it was like to live at the same time as Janos Arany⁵.

The Elfers and the Kraus's⁶ originally hailed from southern Hungary. One of my great grandfathers was a Jewish cantor/teacher in Zombor and taught the Wollheimer children. He nearly burst with pride when little Elli, at the age of three, learnt all that little John filled her head with but he burst into a bout of Old Testament swearing when he heard the squeals of a pig being slaughtered coming from the doctor's house.

(My grandfather's lack of observance filtered down to me so I was unaware that Jews were not meant to eat pork.)

Everything was in its place in Zombor town, from the Hungarian imperial politics to the Serbian youth; from the Jewish cantor to the parish priest. Only the Wollheimers straggled out of line. Paid local thugs murdered Ilona's beloved father, Adolf Schlesinger, a cashier at the sawmill there, for the wood-cutter's pay he was delivering. Neither the money nor the killers have come to light to this day.

Meanwhile, on more than one occasion, my paternal grandfather Ödön Elfer helped out the workers at the Hungarian State Machinery Factory from his own pocket when they were in a tight spot. The factory's pay clerk, when he attained a reasonably serious salary he married. He took to wife Hermin Pártos, the daughter of the cantor/teacher. They had changed their name to Pár-

⁴ Kossuth was the governor and Görgey the head of the Hungarian Revolutionary army in the war for independence of 1848/49

⁵ János (John) Arany was the most famous Hungarian poet of the time. He died in 1882 as my grandmother was only 2. ...

⁶ The Hungarian spelling is "Krausz"

tos from Pollák. They went to live at 7 Hernád St in Budapest, initially on the 3rd, then on the first floor.⁷

I remember the apartment well: the kitchen opened off a long entrance hall, as did the maid's room, the toilet and the pantry. (The translator remembers being amused, as a small child living there, at the proximity of the toilet and the pantry and hoping they would not be confused by anybody at night in the dark!) The main bedroom had an entrance to the bathroom and a separate exit to the central living room, to the right of which was a third bedroom.

A fearsome piece of machinery stood in the hallway, a mangle. In my boyish imagination this pressed people like a duplicating machine to make newspaper photos. On the neobaroque desk in the main room was a cast iron dog, the retrieved game in its mouth. After Grandfather had put the machinery makers' workers' wages in envelopes for forty years the grateful management surprised him with the hunting dog statue. I inherited it and it ended up in a television company's property store and became an essential accessory on every television costume drama.

Grandfather lived somewhat beyond the end of the Second World War.

Those workers who had evacuated their families to Kőbánya, (an outer suburb of Budapest,) leapt into action with the battlecry "ne gatyazzunk!" which means, more or less, "we're not mucking around!" How the remaining family members rewarded the bold worker's heroic deeds was sorted out later after much debate.

I still remember the lively exchange of ideas, which lasted until nightfall. I think it was on one of those nights I said, "Don't talk, don't confuse me, because then I'll get all mixed up what I want to dream about and I'll have nightmares about witches."

⁷ For American readers this would be initially on the 4th, then the 2nd, floor.

...EACH SUCH PERSON...

My father would have been 100 years old next year had he not died when he was fifty-five. He had worn glasses since childhood and never could manage his time. I remember once when he decided, at 3 in the afternoon, to take the sidecar equipped DKW motorcycle around the Balaton.⁸ (“Das Kleine Wunder” or “Des Knaben Wunsch,” “The Little Wonder” or “The Lad’s Dream as the factory brochures would have it.) I would have been seven; the bike was a recent acquisition and he wanted to show it off. It was battle scarred and at least ten years old. My mother wasn’t so keen but I was very enthusiastic. I hoped to meet Mr . Macko⁹, whom I had always managed to miss although according to the story books he lived at the Wave Hotel.

Apart from Mr Macko there were a lot of well-known people at the hotel on the shores of the Balaton. There was Martin Keleti, a film director and his daughter, about three or four years old, who constantly chased me yelling, “I love you, I love you!” Then there was a doctor with whom my parents formed a soda water drinking cartel; he and my mother and father took it in turns to buy. I didn’t realise this and rather maliciously thought it would surely lead to no good if the doctor man was always drinking our soda water. He also had a daughter. I asked after her and it turned out that up till then the poor child had never heard any stories. So I took it upon myself to tell her all kinds of stories but she didn’t believe any of them. Women are like that.

Then there was a strange man, surrounded by even stranger men. He introduced himself to my mother in the middle of a dance. He had an inconsequential name, I think it was Biro. I wondered even more at what a rather incredulous girl said about him and I didn’t believe, namely that the gentleman would be uncle to us all, he was Rakosi’s¹⁰ brother, little brother to all

⁸ “The Balaton” refers to the district around Lake Balaton, Europe’s largest lake and a popular holiday destination.

⁹ Mr Macko, i.e. Mr Teddy Bear, was the hero of a series of children’s books who travelled Hungary teaching history to kids.

¹⁰ Rakosi considered himself the best protege of Stalin in Hungary; a communist dictator.

our fathers. The “uncle”¹¹ particularly wanted to make my mother his niece. She was drop dead gorgeous in those days. However she spent the entire week learning Russian on her own. The “uncle” tried in vain to elude his clinging friends and be alone with her to enlighten her about the irregular verbs with promises that would make everything alright.

About this time my father was running hither and yon in Budapest busily attending to mysterious affairs. I, for my part, partly following his example and partly my own ambition, was preparing busily for the watchmaking and electrical engineering fields. I managed to make a pendulum clock out of a cast off pair of his braces. I just drew the face but it had a real pendulum. It didn’t show the time but my father showed it to everyone. At any rate he didn’t need a watch as he was quite capable of turning up late for everything without one. As my mother used to say, “He was half an hour late coming into the world and hasn’t been able to make it up ever since.”

Would he have come into the world one year earlier, and been the same age as the century, he would have been called up in 1918 and who knows on which battlefield he may have bled and died?

He completed high school in 1919. These were most uncertain times, in the Stephen Rd (Istvan ut,) grammar school district and everywhere. He published the youth newspaper, “Youth.” A few editions survived intact to my high school days. My history teacher borrowed them for an exhibition and never gave them back. That is how I developed my interest in history. The exhibition was meant to commemorate the glorious 133 days of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. It was in this newspaper that my father had written of “Anatole Franc,” (sic.) for which Little Aunt dubbed him “the famous French writer.”

But in 1919, although everybody would have liked to know, nobody knew for sure how many days there were in the 133.

“I’m going away, Dad,” my father might have said to my paternal grandfather. “Where are you off to, Les?” his mother may have asked.

“To America.”

¹¹ To a Hungarian child a man acquaintance or friend is usually referred to as an “uncle,” and a lady as an “aunt.” These terms can also be used by an adult as a mark of affection and respect for an older person.

“And what will you do there?”

“What will I do here?”

“I could get you into the Hungarian State Machinery Factory,” Ödön Elfer may have pondered, “although you have no particular talent; but maybe, out of respect for me...”

“I won the maths competition in middle school, Dad!”

“You can’t add up!”

“What should I add up?”

“The family situation and your dreams, my son!” Hermin Pártos¹² could express herself quite concisely when she was angry.

“Are you angry, Mummy?”

“Yes. When you have finally considered something...”

“I can’t even add up, Daddy just said so.”

“...then you’re simply going away.”

“Simply? Have I got the wherewithal? And on what? The trains aren’t running and God knows what patrols I might run into, there are Lenin-youth, there are (darutollasok) feathered people, there are even all Greys¹³ all over the place. I could even be mistaken for a military deserter.”

“You’re not eligible for call-up.”

“I will be next year. If I wait that long.”

“Little Clara is only 5 years old.”

“Can I help that?”

“We’re going to send your brother Andy to Uncle Ziggy. You could go with him.”

“That old wood crate? I don’t much fancy it.”

“You can hide in a wooden crate.”

¹² The author refers to our grandmother by her maiden name here.

¹³ The Greys were the Austro-Hungarian soldiers, the feathered people the terrorists of extreme right.

“Andy can hide in Uncle Ziggy. I can’t stand him.”

“There’s always been money in wood, Les.”

“Worms gather in wood, Mummy. America is the home of boundless opportunity. There are even more forests there than in Besztercebanya¹⁴ and the trees are bigger. If I throw my lot in there then I can roar even louder.”

“Does Ibi know of this?”

“Yes. Anyway, Mummy was right about Ibi.”

“You see.”

At this little Clara pricked up her ears.

“What about Ibi?”

“She’s not ready for a bridal gown just yet.”

“No way! Lesey¹⁵ can wait until I grow up and he can marry me.” replied 5 year old Clara.

“We have lots of time to play between now and then.” said Pártos Hermin in her succinct way.

“You’re going to come back from America with that famous trade logo ‘TM’?”

“Teaching Master!” yelled little Clara, who caught on quickly.

“Behave yourself my little girl; ‘Temple Mouse.’ But, so you won’t starve until then; Ödön, give him a napoleon.”

“Maybe napoleons?”

“No. You only had one napoleon when we first met and you gave it to me. The rest grew out of that.”

¹⁴ Besztercebanya is the Hungarian name of the town which became Banska Bystrica in Czechoslovakia after the post WW1 rearrangement of boundaries consequent on the treaty of Versailles. The translator’s father was born there and in his teens also lived with Uncle Ziggy and Aunt Yanka, who were childless themselves and who subsequently perished in Auschwitz. Little sister Clara, (Klari,) later became the translator’s mother after marrying her cousin, Imre Kraus(z).

¹⁵ The translator has rendered “Laci,” the Hungarian diminutive of Laszlo, as “Les.” Here Clara actually refers to her brother with the even more diminutive “Lacko.” Hungarian is rich in these forms of intimate address. See also the next footnote.

Now Andy felt he should take sides with his brother. “But Mummy, to breed anything you’ve got to start with at least two. Give him at least two.”

Hermin Pártos dug her heels in. “This one will breed by cell division. You can go, Les.”¹⁶

Of course there were all the farewells to make before he left. Farewell to his old classmates, to Vavrinecz, to Balázs Nesztel, who himself was preparing to leave,¹⁷ to Balázs’ younger sister Ibi, on whom in truth any bridal gown would have been a bit big. These days she would be considered a “senior girl,” i.e. student at a senior girls’ school. A lot must have gone round and round in my father’s head in this strange topsy-turvy school year, but the other girls, the Irma’s, the Ida’s, the Magda’s who in peacetime would have wanted a lawyer, were all pleased to say farewell and make a new start.

The lawyers were either getting into politics, or were lousy; some were making their way back from Russian prisoner of war camps and some, like Les Elfer, hoped to make their fortune in foreign lands.

“Don’t go away, my sweet Les.” Why did he feel he was suffocating in Ibi’s arms?

Because she saw him with someone else? She’s still a child! She’ll jump into anyone’s arms for a boiled lolly. Ibi was just fourteen. Then, as if she read his thoughts:

“Juliet was fourteen.”

“Shakespeare wrote whatever he liked.”

“And I do whatever I like.”

Les really did get a fright from this. Balázs had often told him how his little sister always got what she had set her mind on.

Thirty-two years later the Balaton trip had gone very well. True, it was midnight when we got back home, but I got some kudos from swimming in the

¹⁶ She actually said this in a kind way, literally “my little Les.” There is no comparable English expression for what is an everyday form of kindly familiar address in Hungarian.

¹⁷ Balázs Nesztel, (Nestel,) emigrated to Australia. The translator and his family stayed at his farmlet in Canley Vale, Sydney, on arrival themselves. His older son Paul became a highly respected cardiologist.

lake. My father was in such a good mood that he kept throwing me up in the air while we were playing in the water and when I got the chance I knocked his glasses off his nose with my foot. Then I cleverly dived down into what I really felt was very deep water and fished them out. Without them he would not have been able to drive us home. He probably wouldn't even have found his way to bed.

...OR OTHER ENTITLED PERSONS...

At Uncle Ziggy Eisler's old place at Besztercebanya, on the banks of the Garam, the dead trees stood like woodpiles in the vacant lots at Pal Street in Ferenc Molnar's famous children's novel.

I met Aunt Lilly there, after she had saved up enough for the visit back home to Europe, which seemed obligatory for emigrants to Australia. I had last seen Aunt Lilly when I was nine years old, when she was waiting for her passport to leave Hungary and join her surviving brothers, one of whom was a fashionable architect, in Australia. At least they could give her some material help.

The passport arrived but without a "window," (exit visa) Happier generations may not realize it, but the passport wasn't valid without an exit visa. There was a four-cornered stamp, in which emigrants needed one endorsement; visitors had two, one for coming in, one for going out. This is where the immigration authorities put their multi-coloured stamps which determined dates and places. The whole thing looked like a two-winged window on the open pages of the passport and that's how it got its common nickname.

When I asked her, Aunt Lilly wasn't able to show me that old passport. She had a fresh new Australian one on which she had come to Besztercebanya, where she, with her family, had spent her youth in slave labour.

"Some of us children were our parents' pets and some just the opposite." she related.

"There were seven of us, like the family Wordsworth wrote about, but I was rather awkward. You're not awkward are you, Daddy?"

This was pure Aunt Lilly. She had called me "Daddy" when I was nine years old, when she was sitting there beside her packed suitcases waiting for the outstanding visa. I well remember her addressing me thus as she sat there in her brown formal dress with the little green lizard brooch on the lapel. She wore that twice a week when she went to the Ministry for the Interior to see if she could speed up the missing visa.

It was an effort to migrate, an effort with the children. Aunt Lilly's son John had a heart valve damaged by rheumatic disease and Anne, her daughter, had

been born with congenital dislocation of the hip. To add to Anne's problems she had inherited her uncle's weak eyes.

Aunt Lilly went on to explain to me how they eventually let the three of them out of the country. With my now adult understanding I suspect there was more to it. A boarder moved into the apartment during her final months there. In due course the entire apartment became his: master bedroom, lounge room, mangle and all. He wasn't a bad sort of fellow. He even gave me a ride in his car, a large Hudson of the type only used by senior public servants.

But in Besztercebanya I didn't ask Aunt Lilly about the senior public servant or about his chauffeur, I answered her questions instead.

"I'm afraid I am awkward, Aunt Lilly."

"Why, my boy?" On this occasion I wasn't her Daddy.

"Because here I am wandering about on the banks of the Garam..." I swallowed the rest of the sentence. An entire women's handball team would have been waiting for me at the hotel, Besztercebanya's only high rise building, had I not been awkward.

"This is where I met my Andy," Aunt Lilly reminisced.

"What was Uncle Andy doing here?"

"Learning his trade."

"The timber trade?"

"Not the timber trade."

"He became spongy?"

"How are you speaking of my prosperous Andy?"

"Oh! Don't be angry Aunt Lilly; this is such a stupid reflex of mine. You know, I am constantly learning English and I am never satisfied."

"With what?"

"Not with myself, nor the end result, but I can't seem to get a good tutor. The last one was English born and I drove him nuts asking him how I would say, 'I won't buy that kohlrabi because it's woody, but I'll have that radish because it's spongy.'"

"That I don't know either."

"You don't go shopping in Sydney?"

"Of course we do! But we don't go explaining. If I don't buy something the greengrocer knows what it is and why." Aunt Lilly had hit the nail on the head. "Why my dear Andy married me, that I don't know."

"Why? Why? Because he loved you of course!"

"Maybe he felt sorry for me as the whole family depended on me."

"You were the one who held it all together?"

"Yes, me for sure," Aunt Lilly sighed, as if she were a child doing homework, "Our Charlie died young, God rest his soul,¹⁸ then came Imre, then me, I was the oldest girl. Then Theo, (the building he designed is in the main street,) then Elli, Nusi and Sarah. Our little Nusi was an actress in Prague but when the Germans came she had to get married."

"To Fritzo?"

"Yes. Fritzo Frommer. Then he made it to Casablanca."

"OK, but what's this got to do with Uncle Andy being on the banks of the Garam?"

"Andy, he was like a movie star."

My father had spoken about his younger brother in just the same way.

"And a movie star couldn't marry a Kraus daughter?"

"Look, I was a pretty enough little thing but Andy was beautiful, if you can say such a thing about a man. Nusi and Elli would have been more suitable for him. Tell me, my little son,¹⁹ have you got a car here?"

"Yes."

"Then let's sit in it as my legs are aching badly. In those days we didn't use the car even to visit the toilet, as you do now."

Then, I asked her when we were in the car:

¹⁸ During the Nazi regime Charles was staying in the apartment at Budapest, knowing it was unsafe to be on the streets. He went stir crazy enough to try going for a short walk and was never seen again.

¹⁹ A common Hungarian turn of phrase.

“Yes, but what was here on the banks of the Garam?”

“What wasn’t here? Understand that I wanted to be careful. There were all kinds of stories going around about what happened to girls on the Eisler tree plantation.

“If we only knew how long things would last we would do things differently. The Eisler firm didn’t last very long either. How strange, how it all came together, how my Andy came back to this very spot when he was on forced labour. By then the Eisler premises were A.G. Holzindustrie.²⁰ I could have somehow arranged to see the poor man once more. But you know, your grandmother, God rest her soul, said, “You’ll have plenty of time to see him later on, but you can buy three towels for the cost of the fare.”

²⁰ See footnote 7 in the previous chapter. The Eislers had been deported to Auschwitz.